

Child Support Report



OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Child Support Enforcement

Domestic Violence Awareness Month Texas Collaboration Helping Victims 'Get Child Support Safely'



By **Adrienne Noti**
OCSE



Many of us are familiar with October as a time of raising awareness about domestic violence and posting the purple ribbons. But how did this originate? Anecdotes reveal that the first *Domestic Violence Awareness Month* was held in October 1987; in 1989, the first commemorative federal legislation was passed, with the tradition continuing yearly. As for the [purple ribbons](#), their origin is unclear, but they are now a popular image to commemorate lives lost to domestic violence and to show that domestic violence is not to be tolerated.

In 1995, several national domestic violence organizations launched a collaborative effort that became the *Domestic Violence Awareness Project*. Today, the Project is a partnership of local, tribal, state and national domestic violence organizations and networks that produce resources about domestic violence for October and throughout the year. For more information about *Domestic Violence Awareness Month* activities in your area, check out the [calendar](#).

Domestic Violence Awareness Month is one moment in the history of a significant social movement to end intimate partner violence. Other landmark moments include the opening of the first shelters for battered women in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More recently, the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994 is considered an important victory in the campaign to end violence. VAWA provides extensive federal funding for domestic violence victims, including services to improve criminal justice responses, enhance community responses, and improve enforcement of protection orders.

Based on subsequent reauthorization, VAWA now includes a focus on battered immigrants, sexual assault survivors, victims of dating violence, communities of color, and tribal and Native communities. VAWA funds are administered by the Office on Violence Against Women, a component of the Department of Justice.

Domestic Violence Awareness Month grew out of concern for the prevalence of domestic violence: it is widely reported that 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence in their lifetimes. Many of these victims are also parents. As parents, many domestic violence victims and their families have natural ties to the child support system. Child support can be an effective component in assisting domestic violence victims and their families. The vast majority of custodial parents who have experienced domestic violence indicate an interest in pursuing child support if they could do so safely. In fact, 90 percent of victims would do so.

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Texas Pulls Together for Victims

To recognize the importance of economic stability to victims of domestic violence, the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) recently partnered with the Texas Council on Family Violence. This collaboration led to the development of many materials for parents, including domestic violence victims who are seeking child support or otherwise involved in the child support system.

The team developed a website called www.get-child-support-safely.org, with links and information to: 1) applying for child support through the OAG; 2) applying for child support as a requirement of a government benefits program; 3) going through the child support process as the respondent; 4) preparing for court and the court process; and 5) following or modifying a child support order.

Among other things, the website provides information about the “good cause” waiver for TANF recipients and the Family Violence Indicator. The “preparing for court” section provides information on safety precautions that can be taken before a court date, such as talking to the child support caseworker about safety concerns, and trying to minimize contact with the other parent on

the court date.

In addition to the website, the team created a “bench card” for judges, which describes the link between child support and domestic violence. They created several posters, some focusing on TANF recipients. They’re even working on a video—all ways to provide outreach to domestic violence victims with child support issues and to the communities and officials that serve them.

Ruth Anne Thornton in the OAG, Child Support Division, worked extensively on this project. Thornton credits the success of the project to open lines of communication with domestic violence advocates and leadership within the Texas child support program that has placed domestic violence at the forefront of the agency’s mission.

October offers an opportunity to raise awareness of intimate partner violence, and the Texas partnership shows how child support can help domestic violence victims throughout the entire year.

Read more about the Texas collaboration and other efforts to help domestic violence victims in the OCSE [Family Violence Collaboration fact sheet](#).

WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE? The U.S. Center for Disease Control defines “intimate partner violence” as four types of behavior: physical violence; sexual violence; threats of physical or sexual violence; and emotional abuse. See the definitions on the [CDC fact sheet called “Understanding Intimate Partner Violence.”](#) Learn more on the [CDC website for Intimate Partner Violence](#).



Ten Ways to Enhance Services to Domestic Violence Victims

OCSE is committed to ensuring that domestic violence is an integral part of its mission and that state and local offices provide the opportunity for domestic violence victims to pursue child support safely and confidentially. Here are 10 ways that child support programs can continue to enhance assistance to domestic violence victims.

1. Get to know your local domestic violence service providers. Use the IRG ([Intergovernmental Referral Guide](#)) to find out who they are.
2. Look for training opportunities with domestic violence organizations.
3. Have referral resources for domestic violence victims, such as brochures and posters in public areas. Keep in mind the National Domestic Violence Hotline number at 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE).
4. Provide safe opportunity to disclose domestic violence.
5. Screen for history of domestic violence.
6. Collaborate with programs that address fatherhood, domestic violence and child welfare.
7. Provide information to victims about the child support process and services so that they can make informed decisions.
8. Discuss ways to safely increase father involvement, such as supervised visitation and safe exchange services.
9. Explain your locality’s “good cause” waiver.
10. Use the Family Violence Indicator where appropriate (place the FVI on people needing protection, not on the perpetrator, to ensure that the victim’s information is not shared) and explain what it does.

—Adrienne Noti, OCSE



Helping Domestic Violence Survivors Pursue Child Support Safely and Confidentially



Economic dependence is one of the main reasons that women remain with or return to an abusive partner. The research says that more than 90 percent of custodial mothers who face the risk of domestic violence want and need to pursue child support if they can do so safely and confidentially. Nonetheless, a parent may hesitate

to seek child support services if she is afraid for her safety, and especially if she is worried about the safety of her child. What can we, as child support professionals, do to help domestic violence survivors in this situation?

Our opportunities to help parents who experience domestic violence have been expanding over the past few years. More than ever before, the child support program is committed to collaboration with other agencies that can help, and connecting vulnerable families to organizations that provide domestic violence services, including safety planning.

Why now? We are taking a greater role in collaboration with other government agencies and national and community organizations as we provide services to both parents—custodial and noncustodial. And because the child support program is in a unique position to offer services to both parents (and is making more efforts to engage fathers in the lives of their children), we also have a responsibility to reduce the risk of domestic violence and help domestic violence survivors pursue child support in safety.

Two points in a relationship are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence—around the birth of a child, and when a couple separates. Those are precisely the points when a custodial parent may initiate a child support case. How we do our work in the center of the Bubble Chart—our core mission of establishing and enforcing support—can mean the difference between economic independence and heightened risk for survivors of domestic violence.

For example, consultation with parents who face a known risk of domestic violence, tailoring enforcement strategies, and confidentiality safeguards are essential for safely collecting support.

The Federal Parent Locator Service assists domestic violence survivors by protecting their information through use of the Family Violence Indicator.

And, the first rule is to do no harm. There are situations when it may not be safe to collect child support. Defer to the custodial parent's judgment about whether child support services may be too dangerous to pursue. A series of studies conducted by the [Center for Policy Research](#) identified a number of factors to help predict whether a domestic violence survivor receiving TANF cash assistance wanted to claim good cause from child support cooperation. The best predictor is whether the father threatened to harm the children. Additional factors include whether the father threatened to harm the mother; tried to isolate her; hit or beat her up; monitored her telephone calls; prevented her from working; abused her within the past six months; or caused her to call the police.

As part of our commitment to safely enforcing child support, OCSE has dedicated one of the domains (or "bubbles") in the Bubble Chart to Family Violence Collaboration. Take a look at our [fact sheet](#) that corresponds with that domain. It highlights opportunities for collaboration with other agencies, including your state's or county's TANF program, that address domestic violence.

In honor of Domestic Violence Awareness Month, several articles in this newsletter specify ways your child support agency can help parents with cases that involve vulnerable families. The articles mention websites and phone numbers for organizations where you can learn more, as well as OCSE resources such as the Intergovernmental Referral Guide that lists contact persons who handle domestic violence issues in each state.

Do you, or the child support agency where you work, offer services for one or both parents who may be involved in a domestic violence situation? Do you collaborate with other agencies in any of the Bubble Chart domains that can help to address domestic violence? Please let me know by submitting a comment on this [blog](#).

Vicki Turetsky

Register here for a free Webinar on Domestic Violence Training October 18, 2:00-3:30 p.m. ET

Title: "Safely Pursuing Child Support: Helping Child Support Workers Address Domestic Violence Issues Through Enhanced Training"

Sponsors: OCSE, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and the Family and Youth Services Bureau/HHS

Leaders: Anne Menard, Director of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence; specialists from OCSE, Texas and Massachusetts

Federal Access and Visitation Program: Ensuring the Safety of Parents and Children

By Debra Pontisso and Adrienne Noti
OCSE

Now in its 15th year of operation, the federal government's Access and Visitation (AV) Grant Program distributes \$10 million annually among the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The federal AV funds pay for services that enable noncustodial parents to gain access to and visit with their children. OCSE manages the AV grant program.

Among the range of services a state may choose to provide to noncustodial parents, in FY 2008, 47 states used all or part of their grant to fund supervised visitation services to parents who might not otherwise have been able to visit their children—due to a court-based finding or allegation of child maltreatment or domestic violence, or because the parents were engaged in a high-conflict parenting dispute, or both.

In FY 2009, nearly 19,000 noncustodial parents nationwide gained access to their children through AV supervised visitation services. Supervised visitation services enable noncustodial parents and their children to renew or maintain contact in a safe environment that includes a “third-party” presence of (usually) a trained mental health professional.

According to Dr. Jessica Pearson at the Center for Policy Research:

“Supervised visitation is typically ordered by judges in highly conflicted separation and divorce cases, particularly when there is a history of or allegation of domestic violence, child sexual abuse, visitation denial, and other form of parental misconduct and/or safety concerns. Supervised visitation is also a way to teach inexperienced, nonmarital parents how to care for their children or to introduce them into the lives of their children, although it is used less frequently for these purposes.” (*Child Access and Visitation Programs: Participant Outcomes, 2006, page 21*)

Under the federal AV grant program, state access and visitation programs, including supervised visitation, must contain safeguards to insure the safety of parents and children. In recent years, and as part of the states' application for AV grant funds, OCSE has required each applicant to describe how it will ensure the safety of parents and children who are served through these AV programs, particularly with supervised visitation and neutral drop-off and pick-up services. This requirement is especially important since not all states have statutes or judicial policies that specify the minimum domestic violence and safety standards for providing supervised visitation services.



U.S. Census Bureau photo

To further strengthen the personal safety protocols of supervised visitation programs funded with AV grant dollars, two resources are especially important to help guide states in developing and institutionalizing standards.

Guiding Principles – Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program

The Office of Violence Against Women in the Department of Justice operates the Safe Havens Grant Program, which provides funding for supervised visitation and safe exchange of children by and between parents in situations involving domestic violence, dating violence, child abuse, sexual assault or stalking. All grantees must demonstrate expertise in the area of family violence and prescribe standards by which supervised visitation or safe visitation exchange will occur.

Standards for Supervised Visitation Practice

The Supervised Visitation Network is an international membership network comprised of attorneys, judges, lawmakers and government employees, private and nonprofit providers of child access, and domestic violence or family support services. It establishes standards, promotes education, and advances professionalism in the field of supervised visitation.

These Standards for Supervised Visitation Practice describes minimum standards for professional supervised visitation and exchange services. These standards also serve as a resource to courts, educators, funding sources and others interested in this field.

OCSE remains committed to building the capacity of state AV-funded programs to ensure the safety and well-being of family participants.

For further information, see the [Access and Visitation](#) section on the OCSE website.

The Story of Domestic Violence and Tribal Child Support

By Tami Lorbecke
Technical Specialist

Forest County Potawatomi Tribal Child Support Agency

Tribal child support agencies, like state agencies, must by law establish paternity and child support orders, modify and enforce orders, and locate parents and their assets. However, for families living in domestic violence situations, the process can be dangerous for the client, as well as for the child support staff.

Tribal child support clients are Native American women, men and children of all ages and varying economic status from both rural and urban areas. Native American and Alaskan Native women experience the highest rate of violence in the United States—three and a half times greater than the national average. Thirty-three percent of the perpetrators are intimate partners, family members or acquaintances (*Intimate Partner Violence in the United States, 2007, U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics*).

Three-quarters of American Indian and Alaskan Native women have experienced some type of sexual assault in their lifetime.

The families served by tribal child support programs are no longer intact, and more often than not, the parties no longer like each other. This is a formula for confrontations, anger and sometimes retaliation by one or both of the parents involved.

According to the National Coalition of Domestic Violence website:

“Domestic violence is the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior perpetrated by an intimate partner against another. It is an epidemic affecting individuals in every community, regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, nationality or educational background. Violence against women is often accompanied by emotionally abusive and controlling behavior, and thus is part of a systematic pattern of dominance and control. Domestic violence results in physical injury, psychological trauma, and sometimes death. The consequences of domestic violence can cross generations and truly last a lifetime.” (*Domestic Violence Facts, 2007, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*)

With the alarmingly high incidence of domestic violence and sexual assault, it is important for child support staff to understand the dynamics. Forcing an abuser to be accountable and responsible for child support may trigger irrational anger toward his or her former partner, children or the child support caseworker.

Thousands of domestic violence victims in Indian Country experience non-physical abuse related to child support. Often an abuser will use child support as a way to maintain or regain



control over the victim with threats of: “I’ll get custody of the kids if you leave me and you’ll pay me child support!” or “You’ll never get a penny from me for those kids if you leave me!”

Some abusers use their children as a way to continue the abuse by demanding visitation rights during child support establishment hearings. Visitation often gives the abuser the opportunity to further intimidate, harass or assault the victim.

Many victims will stay in an abusive relationship out of fear of what their abuser will do to them or their children if they leave. Many victims will avoid applying for child support or cooperating with the child support program out of fear of what their abuser will do when they are “served papers” for child support or paternity establishment.

These victims need the financial resources that regular child support can provide. In addition, they need physical security, legal protection and resources, and support from their families, friends and communities.

How Can Tribal Child Support Workers Help?

Tribal child support staff must:

- Understand the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault;
- Understand their “good cause” policies;
- Understand and abide by all confidentiality policies and procedures;
- Be sensitive to domestic violence behavior in victims and perpetrators; and
- Be familiar with their program’s safety plans.

If your clients believe that cooperating with the child support agency may result in harm to them or their children, they may have “good cause” not to cooperate. If they feel safe enough to

express their fears to their child support caseworker, the worker may be able to assist them.

The safety of the victim should always be a priority during court hearings.

- Child support and court personnel should ensure that the victim's home address, work address, phone numbers and the child's school information remain completely confidential.
- The victim should not be required to appear in person if the victim fears for her or his life.
- The victim should never be expected to meet with the abuser.
- Law enforcement or tribal security should be present during the hearing.
- The victim should seek an order of protection.

Tribal staff can ensure safe, quality customer service by:

- Coordinating child support services with their local domestic violence program.
- Coordinating transportation for the victim to and from the child support appointments and hearings.
- Meeting the victim at a safe and convenient location if she or he is unable or afraid to attend appointments in the

child support office.

- Making referrals to other programs for additional assistance and resources.

Creating a safe environment to provide services should be the number one priority of child support offices. All child support staff should have adequate training in the basic dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault to protect their clients and themselves.

Resources on Domestic Violence



You can find more information and obtain training on domestic violence and sexual assault from your local domestic violence program or these organizations:

Mending the Sacred Hoop, 1-888-305-1650

National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-7233

National Sexual Assault Hotline, 1-800-656-4673

Five Ways Pennsylvania Protects Against Domestic Violence

How can a state child support office work with families to develop and enforce a child support order while protecting potential or actual victims of domestic violence? Pennsylvania has developed five strategies to meet this goal.

- 1. Outreach materials:** The [Pennsylvania Child Support Handbook](#), given to new customers, details four methods of abuse (physical, mental, sexual and property/economic). The handbook refers readers to the [Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#).
- 2. Training:** Pennsylvania offers all child support workers six courses that cover domestic violence issues. They are based on discussions between the Bureau of Child Support Enforcement and domestic violence advocacy groups.
- 3. Physical protection during the paternity/support hearing:** Most local offices provide various protections. These include staff not placing the parties in the same room, allowing for telephone conferences, and generally taking steps to ensure the parties have no contact.

4. Protecting personal information: This could include listing the custodial parent's local child support office address as the contact for the custodial parent on interstate cases. (Local agency procedures for protecting personal information are described in the [March 2009](#) issue of the Child Support Report.)

5. Assistance and referral: Allegheny County, for example, helps domestic violence victims navigate the child support system. The child support office also offers information to all potential domestic violence victims about the Protection from Violence Unit in Family Court (located in the same building as the child support office) and about the process to obtain a "Protection from Abuse" order. In the Protection from Violence Unit, the custodial parent can file for a Protection from Abuse order and get it that day (and meet with a domestic violence advocate for safety planning). The process works both ways. If a person requests child support as part of the petition, there is a same-day referral process to the child support intake department. A children's playroom is available for families while the custodial parent applies for child support and protection from abuse.

For further information, contact Thomas Sheaffer at thsheaffer@state.pa.us.

'Federal Case Registry' – What's in it for Me?

By Linda Hudson
 State Technical Support, OCSE
 Melissa Mau
 Iowa Bureau of Collections



The process of locating income and assets of noncustodial parents became much more automated when the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) expanded to include the Federal Case Registry (FCR) and the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). The FCR stores child support and non-child support cases and constantly matches with the NDNH to identify new hire reports, quarterly wages and unemployment benefits. Together the FCR and NDNH provide up-to-date information for locating noncustodial parents and their assets.

The FPLS also matches with other agencies to give caseworkers information about Social Security benefits, military service, insurance claims, bank accounts and more. In fact, last fiscal year, the FPLS helped to locate over 7.7 million parents.

To gain access to this wealth of data, child support workers must report cases correctly to the FCR. Last fiscal year, more than 200,000 cases on state systems were not reported to the FCR. Because those cases and the “case participants” were not on the FCR, the FPLS did not report income, benefit or other key information to the caseworker. States may have missed out on as much as \$6.9 million in collections in FY 2010 from the new hire data not received from the NDNH.

To make sure all of your cases are on the FCR, you can request an FCR Reconciliation file from your [Technical Support Liaison](#). You can get information for all of your participants stored on the FCR. Using the file, you can quickly identify those who are not on the FCR, as well as participants on the FCR who are not on your statewide system.

Iowa Assessment Successful

Iowa assessed its cases and found that the state system did not accurately reflect information on the FCR. To remedy the situation, the state processed the FCR reconciliation in two phases. The first phase focused on removing closed cases from the FCR and assessing how staff apply the family violence indicators. The second phase focused on adding missing cases and case participants to the FCR, along with deleting case participants no longer on Iowa cases from the state system.

Iowa compared the locate information received during the 30-day period after the reconciliation to the locate information received 30 days before the reconciliation for each phase. After the reconciliations, Iowa found 1,311 more noncustodial parents receiving SSA benefits, 2,239 more employers of parents, and 6,429 more addresses for parents.

Iowa was able to delete 11,083 family violence indicators for noncustodial parents who were no longer at risk or who were marked “at risk” in error on the FCR. Also significant, after the reconciliations, Iowa loaded other states’ case information from the FCR, resulting in 8,567 matched participants, compared to just 188 prior to reconciliation.

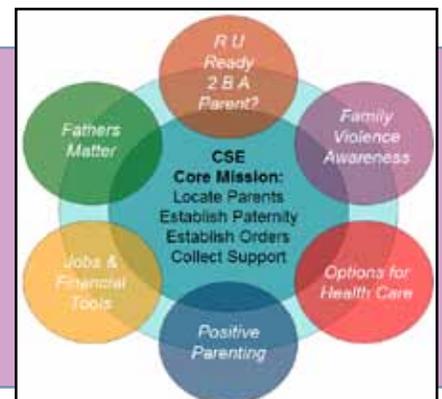
Interstate case processing is now a lot easier for Iowa case managers. While the focus was on getting access to more noncustodial parent match data, Iowa found that it also receives more information on payees and children after the FCR reconciliation.

Contact your FCR [State Technical Support Liaison](#) for help in getting the Reconciliation report and ideas for how you, too, can benefit from an FCR Reconciliation. For more information about Iowa’s success, contact Melissa Mau at mmau@dhs.state.ia.us.

Iowa was able to delete 11,083 family violence indicators for noncustodial parents who were no longer at risk or who were marked “at risk” in error on the FCR.

California Tailors ‘Bubbles’ for Families

The [website for the California Department of Child Support Services](#) displays its own version of the OCSE Bubble Chart. While the OCSE bubbles connect child support workers with resources, the California version connects families to the state’s family-centered resources. The bubble for “Family Violence Awareness” links to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.



Coordination Points

New Partnership Matches with 'Thrift Savings Plan'

By **Matthew Marsolais**
OCSE

This January, OCSE partnered with the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board (FRTIB) to match individuals who owe past-due child support with Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) accounts. The TSP is a tax-deferred retirement savings and investment plan for federal civilian employees and members of the military. The TSP is the largest contribution plan in the world. It is much like a 401(k) plan offered by private corporations. With more than 4.3 million participants, TSP holds over \$215 billion in assets.

Each quarter OCSE sends the FRTIB a file containing individuals who owe past-due support. FRTIB compares the file with TSP accounts and returns matches to OCSE. Then OCSE sends the matches to states in the same format used for the Multistate Financial Institution Data Match.

States have been working closely with OCSE and FRTIB to issue notices to TSP to collect past-due support. Several states voluntarily reported these collections from the TSP match:

Texas: \$945,000
Oklahoma: \$110,000
New York: \$73,000
California: \$59,000
Virginia: \$56,000
New Mexico: \$35,000



The FRTIB recognizes that this new source of information results in collections for families, but asks states to consider it a “last resort” for enforcement due to penalty and tax implications associated with seizing TSP accounts.

For more information about the TSP match or to report success stories or collections, contact matthew.marsolais@acf.hhs.gov.

Community Connections

Louisiana: Fatherhood Programs Show Improved Child Well-Being

By **Gail Bonhomme**
University of Louisiana

Numerous studies have shown that when noncustodial parents pay child support, children fare better in many ways. Recently, a Louisiana partnership delved deeper into this area by examining the state’s capacity to tie fatherhood support services to the well-being outcomes of children.

An OCSE-funded “strengthening families” grant, from October 2009 through June 2011, allowed Louisiana’s Child Support Enforcement and TANF offices to conduct research with help from a university partner, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The team was able to assess the outcomes of a fatherhood program that operated for three years using TANF funds and served mostly low-income fathers who were at risk of losing contact with their children.

Findings from the first of two studies showed overall improved child support payments. The second study examined data from 16 state databases to determine the well-being status in seven domains on the children whose dads participated in the fatherhood program. That study showed that despite the

multiple layers or risk factors that these children faced, there was a distinct connection between children with fewer risk factors having fathers who paid child support and children with more risk factors having fathers who didn’t pay child support.

The study on the children also showed Louisiana’s capacity to tie services to adults and families, including child support payments and parental involvement, by monitoring the school performance outcomes of children. Looking at school testing data the year before, during and after their noncustodial fathers participated in the fatherhood program, the overall percentage of children who were not performing at grade level or who failed their state language tests decreased significantly.

The failure rates decreased from 68.4 percent the year before participation to 52.6 percent during the year of participation, and to 47.4 percent the year after participation. This implies that, had the program been structured in a certain way, the impact of services could have been tied to the overall improved outcomes of children’s school performance.

This research collaboration has shown that Louisiana has the capacity to monitor children’s progress over time to define the long-term impact of all services as well as children’s outcomes.



These monitoring approaches are examples of the ultimate intended purposes of all government-supported interventions and services—to help children with vulnerable backgrounds

become self-sufficient adults despite the fact that they are growing up in fragile family environments.

View the [full reports](#) or contact gail.bonhomme@louisiana.edu for further information.

In Focus

Illinois: Well Worth Listening to Hearing-Impaired Staff



Connie Norris



Yenetta McClain



Catherine Friday

By Dawn Defraties
Illinois Division of Child Support Services

In the Illinois Division of Child Support Services, we value autonomy, empowerment and self-direction as means to improve employee engagement and workplace morale. This year we had an opportunity to enhance the workplace for our hearing-impaired employees. By obtaining a video relay service (VRS) videophone, hearing-impaired employees in our Central Operations group now can participate fully in customer service and interstate processes. Hearing employees also benefit from this service as they can readily gain access to their hearing-impaired colleagues' insights and talents.

The division achieved this improvement through no-cost equipment and technology—with no budget impact whatsoever.

VRS is a form of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) that enables persons with hearing disabilities who use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with voice telephone users through video equipment instead of by typed text.

Video relay calls use a high-speed or broadband Internet connection (i.e., DSL, cable, or T1 line) and a videophone connected to a TV, or through a personal computer equipped with a web camera and video relay software. The hearing-impaired person signs to a video interpreter who then communicates with a hearing person via a standard phone line by relaying the conversation between the two parties.

A voice telephone user can also initiate a VRS call by calling a VRS. The VRS video interpreter can be reached through

the VRS provider's Internet site, or through video equipment attached to a television. (Around 10 providers offer VRS.) Like all TRS calls, VRS is free to the caller. The Interstate TRS Fund (under the Federal Communications Commission) compensates VRS providers for their costs.

Illinois Division of Child Support Services employees Connie Norris, Catherine Friday and Yenetta McClain said that they “as individuals wanted to help and do our part. We were trained on ordering [requesting] case information, however, because we are deaf we previously could not call other states or make status calls on information we ordered. All follow-up calls were left to one staff person. However, when given the right tools for communication, we now have equal ability to perform all of our job duties effectively.” With VRS, the division's Data Gathering Unit eliminated a backlog and performs current work more timely than ever before.

Hearing-impaired workers in the Data Gathering Unit are now able to contact other state agencies for case information and have either shared or obtained interstate information with Virginia, Colorado, New York and Texas.

According to the FCC, VRS has quickly become a popular service that offers several features not available with the text-based forms of TRS:

- VRS allows those persons whose primary language is ASL to communicate in ASL, instead of having to type what they want to say.

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Partners Plan for Improvements at Employer Symposium

Payroll professionals, members of the judiciary, state child support staff and OCSE convened in Atlanta in August to work through issues of mutual interest: new hire reporting, the newly revised federal income withholding order, electronic income withholding orders (e-IWO), lump-sum payments, remitting payments to state disbursement units, and improving communication with the judiciary.

The Employer Symposium highlighted the new processes that OCSE and child support program stakeholders have partnered to implement: the e-IWO portal, Electronic Funds Transfer, and the Debt Inquiry Service.

The group of 88 identified areas for improvement. The e-IWO process is working well for employers and states, but more states need to implement it. The new Debt Inquiry Service allows employers to submit information on individuals who will receive lump-sum bonus payments, but some states require employers to follow specific processes, according to law.

And because completing many different employment

verification forms can be burdensome to busy employers, OCSE has developed a "Standard Response to a Verification of Employment" form.

OCSE plans to distribute a summary of the symposium to attendees and state child support agencies. (You can find the [report from the symposium in 2005](#) on the OCSE website.)

To learn more, contact lynnetta.thompson@acf.hhs.gov.

Attendees at the Employer Symposium in Atlanta



continued from previous page

- Because consumers using VRS communicate in sign language, they are able to more fully express themselves through facial expressions and body language, which cannot be expressed in text.
- A VRS call flows back and forth just like a telephone conversation between two hearing persons. For example, the parties can interrupt each other, which they cannot do with a TRS call using a TTY (where the parties have to take turns communicating with the video interpreter).
- Because the conversation flows more naturally back and forth between the parties, the conversation can take place much more quickly than with text-based TRS. As a result, the same conversation is much shorter through VRS than it would be through other forms of text-based TRS.
- VRS calls may be made between ASL users and hearing persons speaking either English or Spanish.

Norris, Friday and McClain came to their leadership with a request for no-cost equipment that would enhance accessibility in their workplace. They identified a barrier, researched a solution, and worked with their managers to obtain and implement the solution. Once implemented, they asked that their experience be shared so that other hearing-impaired child support program workers and their leadership might benefit.

We hope our story will encourage others to seek innovative, low-cost ways to expand accessibility for hearing-impaired child support workers around the nation. Norris, Friday and McClain are champions of their message that hearing-impaired workers are productive, and given communication access, they can do anything!

For further information, contact Dawn.Defraties@Illinois.gov, 217-557-0249.

Child Support Report



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