

Child Support XML Standards:

General Overview and Background

DRAFT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Electronic filing is the term used by courts to refer to the use of electronic rather than paper documents in the judicial process. It encompasses not only the delivery of documents to the court in electronic form, but their use by judges, court staff, lawyers, other participants in the case, the public, and ultimately their electronic archival storage.

The courts' movement toward electronic filing promises great benefits to Child Support Enforcement (CSE) agencies, in that this medium allows caseworkers to submit petitions and pleadings to courts and to receive court orders in electronic format. However, the proliferation of electronic filing applications poses a major potential problem for CSE agencies and other users who must communicate with multiple court systems that use disparate electronic filing applications. The process is further complicated by the fact that courts and CSE agencies use differing, and often incompatible operating systems, software, and database structures for storing and retrieving information.

A technology that has been developed for the World Wide Web called eXtensible Markup Language (XML) offers significant promise for addressing the issues presented by the migration to electronic filings and lack of interoperability among systems. XML provides a data structure that allows communication of data across diverse platforms that otherwise are unable to communicate with one another. In its ultimate form, XML would allow CSE agencies to send and receive both the documents and the data to populate their databases. If an agreed upon XML standard were established for data needed for electronic transactions between courts and CSE agencies, and all electronic filing systems used that standard, then each CSE agency could easily interact with courts and other CSE agencies.

LegalXML, a legal community consortium that sought to promote standards for interoperability between their community and Web products by producing specifications, developed a standard to serve that purpose. The proposed Electronic Court Filing Standard (ECFS) 1.0, developed by the CourtFiling sub-group of LegalXML, was intended to define all the data needed for electronic filing applications.

A work group of representatives from CSE agencies and courts was convened by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to analyze the proposed standard. The purpose of this effort was to determine if the proposed standard could support the data needed for submission of court filings by CSE agencies. The work group determined that the ECFS could generally support the needs of CSE agencies, with the addition of some specific elements needed to fully transmit child support orders. The elements identified by the work group are contained in the *Draft Child Support XML Specification for IV-D Agency Review*, which accompanies this document.

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the work completed by the Courts/Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Work Group, whose charter was to examine the use of eXtensible Markup Language (XML) as a means to exchange information between IV-D CSE agencies and the courts. This work group was jointly sponsored by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) and was funded by an OCSE Special Improvement Project grant.

This document presents a brief overview of XML and background on the formation of the work group, including its objectives and process. It also contains information on the Electronic Court Filing Standard (ECFS), which was used as a starting point for the work group's efforts, and the relationship between the ECFS and the child support specifications that were proposed by the Courts/CSE Work Group.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This section provides a brief overview of eXtensible Markup Language (XML), which has been recommended as a method for use by Child Support Enforcement (CSE) agencies to electronically communicate with court systems. It also contains background on the appointment of the Courts/CSE Work Group to study the applicability of this technology to support child support endeavors.

1.1 Overview of XML

XML provides a common language with which data can be transmitted to and from systems with differing hardware and software. It has been developed cooperatively by the computer and communications industries in association with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), which seeks to promote interoperability between Web products by establishing standards. These standards are developed by work groups that focus on areas of specialized application for XML, such as the judicial system.

Using XML requires defining the data elements to be transmitted and the “tags” by which they are to be identified. For example, Address is a data element that comprises sub-elements like AddressLine, AddressCity, and AddressState. An example of a tag for the AddressLine sub-element is <AddressLine>3405 Grove Avenue</AddressLine>.

XML is implemented by creating a document type definition (DTD), similar to a data dictionary, that contains the elements and tags that have been agreed upon for use throughout the user community – in this case courts. A DTD is a highly stylized document designed to be processed by computers, not users, to recognize and utilize the information being submitted.

For a CSE or court system to recognize the contents of a DTD, the fields in the system’s database must be mapped to the relevant tags in the XML DTD. For example, if a CSE’s database uses the field name PhoneNum for telephone number and the DTD uses the tag <Telephone>, the XML tag must be mapped to the field name to ensure that the data is placed in the proper database field. Once the mapping is completed, the sending computer translates the data from its unique structure into the XML structure for transmission, and the receiving computer accepts the data in the XML structure and translates it to its respective software format.

1.2 Courts/Child Support Enforcement Work Group Background

Recognizing the need for efficient and timely communication between CSE agencies and courts, OCSE joined with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) and the LegalXML CourtFiling Work Group to establish standards for exchanging child support information electronically between state IV-D agencies and their respective court systems. The project was funded by OCSE through a Special Improvement Project (SIP) grant.

A Courts/Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Work Group was formed to recommend these standards. The objectives of this work group were to:

- Develop XML documents to request and receive court information such as hearing dates, docket, and court orders;
- Develop XML documents to initiate court actions, e.g., establishment of a new child support order, modification of a current order, or enforcement of an existing court order;
- Establish general guidelines for electronic filing of judicial documents, recognizing that other groups are working on electronic filing standards; and
- Generate and reach a consensus on a set of standard CSE data elements.

2.0 THE COURTS/CSE WORK GROUP PROCESS

The Courts/CSE Work Group worked in tandem with the LegalXML CourtFiling Work Group to assess the applicability of the proposed Electronic Court Filing Standard (ECFS), developed by the CourtFiling group, for the exchange of child support information with courts. The Courts/CSE Work Group was composed of 32 members from 13 states, 20 of whom were from CSE agencies and 6 of whom were from court systems. Other work group members were from OCSE, NCSC, and Lockheed Martin Corporation, which maintains the OCSE Network. (See Appendix A for a list of the work group members.)

The group's work on the project spanned a 6-month period, from August 2001 to February 2002. Work group participants were asked to contribute documents, offer information on local practices, discuss data exchange processes, review related standards development efforts and XML applications, and help formulate draft standards for data exchange using XML.

The following outlines the steps in the work group's process:

- Collected and distributed states' documentation;
- Studied and reviewed the proposed ECFS for its utility and applicability to child support requirements;

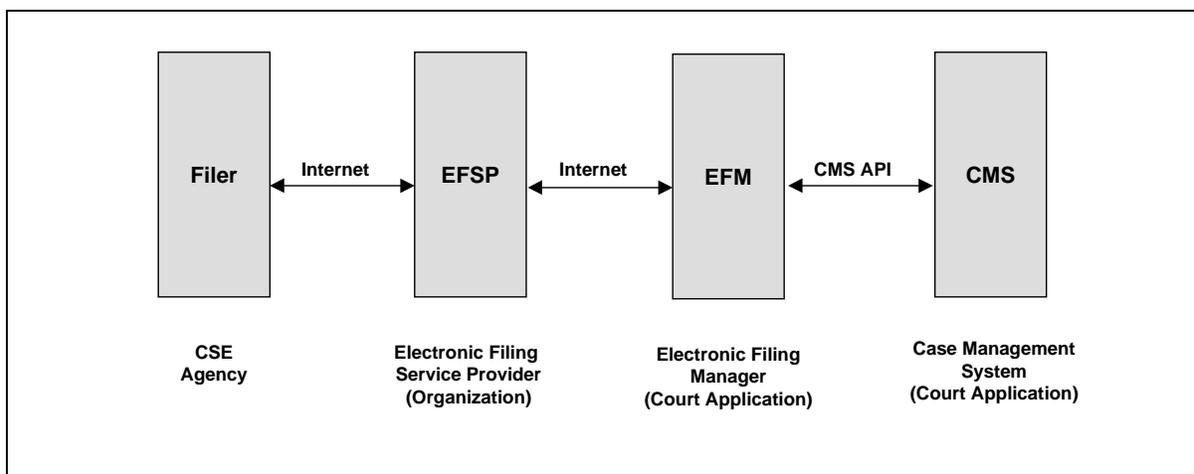
- Generated and reviewed a draft of additional child support requirements and data elements;
- Reviewed and discussed the draft, agreed on scope and the remaining project schedule, planned for a review by IV-D Directors;
- Reviewed and agreed upon proposed modifications to ECFS requirements and data elements;
- Reviewed and concurred upon a draft child support DTD and specifications;
- Prepared and delivered the final DTD and specifications (see *Draft Child Support XML Specification for IV-D Agency Review*);

2.1 The Electronic Court Filing Standard

The proposed court filing standard enables CSE agencies to file documents with the court and to receive confirmation of the filing. A second standard, the Query and Response Standard, which is under development, will provide CSE agencies the capability to receive orders and order information from the court.

The ECFS 1.0¹ was the starting point for the Courts/CSE Work Group to develop a child support standard. In developing this standard, the work group's objective was to include all information a court would need to create a new case and docket number on its case management information system.

The diagram below illustrates a conceptual model of the electronic filing architecture.

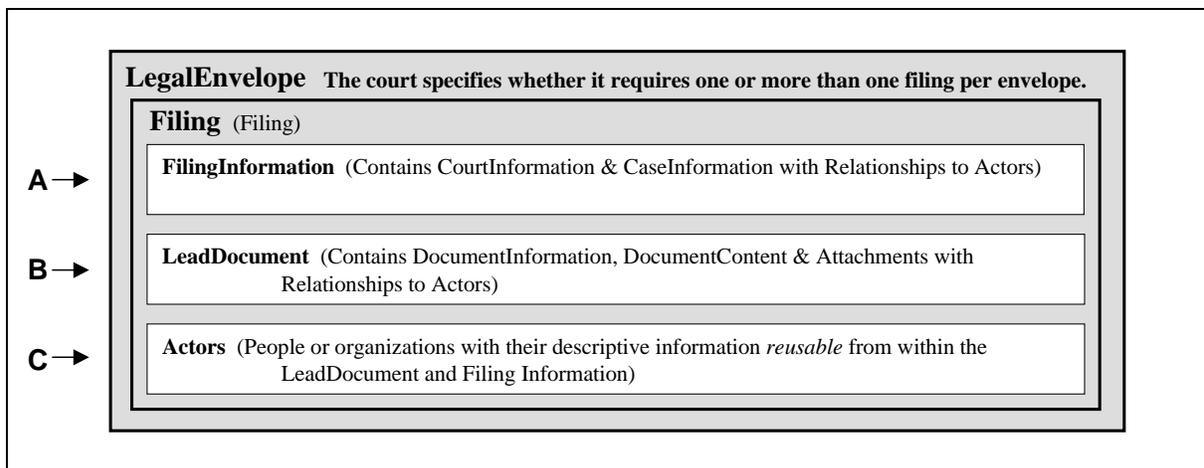


¹ The current version (1.1) is available on the LegalXML CourtFiling web page at <http://www.oasis-open.org/committees/legalxml-courtfiling/>

- The CSE agency develops a package of information in XML (referred to as a LegalEnvelope) for submission to the court.
- The CSE agency sends the LegalEnvelope via the Internet to an Electronic Filing Service Provider (EFSP).
- The EFSP electronically forwards the filing to the court via the Internet.
- At the court, an Electronic Filing Manager accepts the XML filing from the EFSP, analyzes (parses) the XML data structure, and passes the data to the court's Case Management System (CMS) via a CMS Application Program Interface (API), which translates the XML data structure (and the data it contains) into one that is "understandable" to the CMS.

3.0 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECFS AND THE DRAFT CHILD SUPPORT XML SPECIFICATION

The basic umbrella structure for ECFS is the LegalEnvelope. This is essentially an electronic envelope that contains information sent by the CSE agency to the court. The LegalEnvelope contains information about who is submitting the filing and to whom responses should be returned. The diagram below shows the general structure of the LegalEnvelope and describes the information to be included for child support filings.



Section A: FilingInformation

This section contains basic data about the filing, including the court to which the filing is directed and the actors (specific people or organizations) involved in the filing. It also includes data that will allow the case to be identified, such as the CSE agency case number. This data is normally included on forms submitted by CSE agencies.

Section B: LeadDocument

This section includes the CSE agency cover sheet, its petition, affidavits, and any actual documents it files with the court. It also contains specific data describing the court action requested, details of the order request, payees, duration of the order, etc., about the child support filings as detailed in the attached *Draft Child Support XML Specification for IV-D Agency Review*.

Section C: Actors

The CSE agency will submit data describing and relating all persons, organizations, and businesses related to the case. This area will include children, custodial parents, attorneys, the CSE agency, employers, and other general information that is now provided on forms when a child support action is filed. The relationships of the people and organizations to the case are identified, so it is possible to indicate that a particular request for an order modification applies only to one child, all children, or specific payees.

3.1 Generic Data Elements

The ECFS is designed to contain generic data elements to minimize the necessity of numerous specific coded values and terminologies. The specific values required by a court or CSE are addressed in other portions of the electronic filing architecture so that the standard DTD can be used by many courts and CSE agencies.

An excellent example of the value of using a generic data element rather than extensive lists of elements is the generic “actor” element. A person’s (or organization’s) name appears in this data element. It can be used in conjunction with the “role” data element, which contains identifying criteria, to indicate whether the named actor is a custodial parent, noncustodial parent (NCP), defendant, plaintiff, etc. Because the generic data element allows for a wide range of identifying criteria needed for child support information, it provides a high degree of flexibility not currently possible with other data structures for communication among disparate applications and entities.

4.0 REVIEW PROCESS FOR RECOMMENDED STANDARDS

The proposed child support standard for court filing is first being distributed to IV-D agencies for review before submission to the LegalXML CourtFiling Work Group². After vetting and consensus within this group, the XML standards are submitted for formal review through the court community. A portion of the review process includes test sites and interoperability testing between actual courts and involved agencies. The standard proceeds through a series of formal comment and revision periods prior to acceptance as a “Recommended Standard.” However, throughout the review and comment process, CSE agencies and courts may choose to experiment with using the emerging standards, understanding that changes may be needed as the standards change.

² Since this paper was originally drafted, LegalXML’s structure has changed. The organizational framework for formal agreement on standards is in flux. The information set forth here should be understood as the general steps necessary for acceptance of an XML standard.

5.0 IMPLEMENTATION REQUIREMENTS FOR CHILD SUPPORT AGENCIES

To ensure that multiple CSE agencies and courts can effectively use the child support XML DTD for exchanging information, it will be necessary to undertake further analysis to develop standard codes to ensure compatibility. This work will be conducted by the LegalXML CourtFiling Work Group, the Courts/CSE Work Group, and OCSE.

APPENDIX A: COURTS/CSE WORK GROUP MEMBERSHIP

COURTS/CSE WORK GROUP		
Member	Courts/CSE	State
Greg Arnold	Courts	Georgia
Howard Baldwin	CSE	Texas
Maurice Bedford	Lockheed Martin	Contractor to OCSE
Terrie Bousquin	Consultant	New Mexico
Pauline Burton	CSE	Colorado
Jeffrey Cohen	CSE	Vermont
John Davenport	Courts	Pennsylvania
Judge David T. Emerson	Courts	Georgia
Jerry Garland	Courts	Georgia
Robin Gibson	Courts	Missouri
Woody Gill	CSE	Texas
Amy B. Gober	OCSE	Office of Child Support Enforcement
Craig Goellner	CSE	Colorado
Alisha A. Griffin	CSE	New Jersey
Sharon Grose	CSE	Minnesota
Phil Herndon	CSE	New Mexico
Theresa Kaiser	CSE	Maryland
Dale Kasparek	NCSC	National Center for State Courts
George Laufert	OCSE	Office of Child Support Enforcement
Janis Mahaney	CSE	Texas
Cindy Moss	CSE	Georgia
Frank Murray	CSE	New Mexico
Debra Nesbit	CSE	Georgia
Daniel Richard	CSE	Pennsylvania
Robert Roper	Courts	Colorado
Ben Silva	CSE	New Mexico
Helen Smith	OCSE	Office of Child Support Enforcement
Nancy Smith	CSE	Texas
Meg Sollenberger	CSE	Washington
Marie Thiesen	CSE	Iowa
Carl Tiller	CSE	Washington
Diana Williamson	CSE	Texas