

Military Services and Child Support Partnerships

The Promoting Child Well-Being & Family Self-Sufficiency Fact Sheet Series discusses how and why the child support program provides innovative services to families across six interrelated areas to assure that parents have the tools and resources they need to support their children and be positively involved in raising them.

This fact sheet focuses on how the child support program and military and veterans organizations can work together to help parents who serve our country meet their responsibilities to their children and be the parents they want to be.



The child support program¹ touches the lives of many military and veteran families as it works to enhance the well-being of children by assuring that they can count on reliable support from their parents. The Pentagon reported in 2009 that 50 percent of active duty members and 70 percent of Reserve and National Guard members are parents – and in the past 10 years the divorce rate among the military has increased. An estimated 30,000 soldiers will become unwed fathers each year. Unwed, separated and divorced parents—whether mothers or fathers—may owe support when they no longer live with their children. Many veterans face child support issues that complicate parent-child reunification.

Why should military services and the child support program work together?

Military services and the child support program are two of the largest systems that have extensive contact with fathers. To assure that child support responsibilities fit with the Family Care Plan, meet families' needs, and do not cause service members or their families' unnecessary stress or hardship during what is already a difficult time, the child support program is working hard to be flexible and responsive to military and veteran parents.

Military services and the child support program share the common goal of strengthening military families, and are invested in the economic stability of military fathers and mothers, and their children. Each emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility and financial readiness.

How can military services and the child support program mutually support responsible fatherhood and connect children with their parents?

All parents who live apart from their children face parenting challenges. Military families face unique challenges because of deployments or other lengthy separations. Noncustodial parents, whether they are fathers or mothers, have a legal responsibility to support their children. Military services, fatherhood groups, and child support programs provide noncustodial parents with information about successfully navigating a parent-child reunification that may be complicated by custody, access and visitation issues. Helping parents develop jointly informed Family Care Plans that take into account court orders for custody and parenting time can collectively increase the involvement of noncustodial fathers and mothers with their children as well as increase the likelihood of responsibly managing child support obligations. Studies have also shown that increasing father involvement is linked to more financial support of children.²

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What are the complexities in working with military families in the child support program?

The child support program and military services are far-reaching systems that have a presence in every state and internationally. Improving the child support process and experience for military families means taking their unique circumstances and sacrifices into account. Some examples:

- Paternity establishment and custody are complicated by deployment or other lengthy separation and a sense of urgency about setting up military benefits.
- Pay changes related to beginning military service, changes in assignment, deployment, or a release from active military service do not result in automatic changes in child support order amounts. Service members must make a request to review and modify their support order(s) to assure that their obligations match their ability to pay support.
- Frequent moves between states or countries mean changes in the agencies or courts involved, and changes in the applicable state child support law. There can be considerable variation across state and tribal child support programs, and when parents live in different jurisdictions things are more complex.
- In the absence of a child support order, military regulations specify what is considered “adequate support” that a soldier may provide his or her child through a voluntary allotment when the parents are separated or not married. When obtaining an order for child support, however, there is no uniform treatment of voluntary allotments. Some courts may consider the voluntary allotments a gift, since there is nothing in writing indicating its purpose as child support, and may not credit the allotment amount against any retroactive support award.

How are states implementing policies to improve the child support process and experience for service members?

State child support programs are intervening earlier and responding more quickly to the changing circumstances of both parents so that orders remain reasonable and fair. Some examples:

- Some states allow an unmarried military member to sign a paternity acknowledgment prior to the child’s birth if the member is on active duty and can produce military orders showing that he cannot be present at the child’s birth. By signing the acknowledgment, which constitutes a legal determination of parentage, the father qualifies the child for military dependent benefits, including TRICARE (military healthcare).
- Many state child support agencies provide the opportunity for a recently activated National Guard Member or Military Reservist with a child support order to request an expedited review and possible modification of his or her order prior to deployment.³
- Many states encourage service members to complete an authorization for release of information form, which provides the child support agency the authority to speak with a person designated to act in the member’s absence.
- Some states have flexibility with regard to debt-forgiveness options, particularly as related to state-owed arrears, in order to leverage assistance for homeless veterans.

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How are child support programs and military services partnering to improve outcomes for service members and veterans?

Across the country, important work is underway to improve child support services for military families and veterans. For example:

Delaware – National Guard Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

The Delaware child support program, through a military liaison, provides case management and child support services to military service personnel, including participation at Yellow Ribbon events held for deploying or returning National Guard or Reservist members and their families. By having a child support presence at the Yellow Ribbon pre-deployment and the 30-day reintegration briefing events, the liaison can respond to specific needs of military parents by answering questions about paternity establishment, access and visitation, and support obligations. The liaison can then conduct one-on-one follow up with military service members in the child support program.

Texas – HEROES (Help Establishing Responsive Orders to Ensure Support) for Children in Military Families

The Texas Child Support Division, through project attorneys and staff, conducts paternity, child support, and parenting time legal clinics on military installations across the state; staffs veteran's legal clinics; provides legal briefings and assistance to National Guard Yellow Ribbon events and deployment academies on military installations; and conducts paternity and child support training to JAG Corps legal assistance attorneys and staff. The project attorneys provide specialized casework for service members, veterans, and dependents including review and development of modifications, deferment of enforcement actions, and case closure when appropriate. Project staff also conduct joint case work with Department of Veterans Affairs' Mental Health Veterans Justice outreach workers, or workforce staff from the Texas Veterans Leadership Program. The leadership program targets three Texas cities with large military bases (El Paso, Killeen, and San Antonio), but also provides services statewide.

Veterans Stand Down Events

Numerous local child support agencies participate in and even co-host Veterans Stand Down events to provide outreach and address individual veteran's child support issues as part of a larger effort to connect veterans with a range of services. These occasions, created by the Department of Veterans Affairs, offer a community-wide venue for child support staff to reach out to veterans who are homeless and who might not otherwise visit the child support office, and to help the broader community of veterans understand child support services.⁴ For example, at the 2010 Stand Down in San Diego, the court set new child support orders for 51 cases, released 30 driver's licenses that had been suspended for support nonpayment, and resolved over \$800,000 in child support debt.⁵

Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement/ Department of Veterans Affairs/American Bar Association – Ending Homelessness Among Veterans Collaboration Project

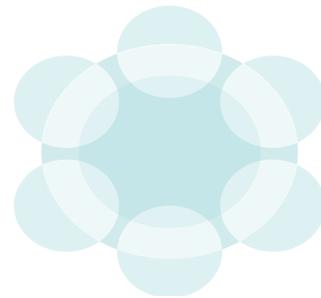
Many homeless veterans find that their ability to move into permanent housing is compromised by old fines, debts, and other legal judgments – including child support. In January 2010, the Department of Health and Human Services through the Office of Child Support Enforcement, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the American Bar Association launched a project to work with homeless veterans and their families to address unresolved child support issues and other challenges to stable residence. The project launched in nine pilot sites: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Diego, Seattle, and the District of Columbia. While the mix of services and volunteer resources available at each site may be different, many vulnerable veterans have had their licenses restored, criminal processing averted, child support payments restarted and arrearages renegotiated.

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In addition, some states have developed publications specifically geared toward military and veteran families, which are accessible through the child support agency website. In Washington, the brochure was jointly created in partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs and provides general information about the child support program and its services.

What are the opportunities for more partnerships?

Partnerships happen because one organization sees a need and reaches out. It doesn't matter whether a military organization reaches out to child support or child support reaches out to the military, just as long as it happens. Each state child support program has a website with information about its program and ways they can be contacted. The Office of Child Support Enforcement's homepage (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse) has fact sheets, resources, publications and other useful information to help create partnerships that promote child well-being and family self-sufficiency. Reach out now with your ideas!



References

1. The Child Support Program is funded under title IV-D of the Social Security Act. The program's mission is to enhance the well-being of children by assuring that assistance in obtaining support, including financial and medical, is available to children through locating parents, establishing paternity, establishing support obligations, and monitoring and enforcing those obligations. For more information, see www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse.
2. Jose Y. Diaz and Richard Chase. *Return on Investment to the FATHER Project*. Saint Paul, MN: Wilder Research. November 2010.
3. See, e.g., California Family Code section 3651, Connecticut, Delaware, and Missouri (state law).
4. For more information, see www.nchv.org/standdown.cfm.
5. Welton, Shannon. "San Diego 'Stand Down' Brings Court to Hundreds of Homeless Veterans" *Child Support Report, Office of Child Support Enforcement*, Vol. 32 No. 11 November 2010. www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2010/csr/csr1011.pdf

