

COMMISSIONER'S VOICE

Serving Families During COVID-19



These past months have been a challenging and stressful time for all Americans. Our lives have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to thank you for your hard work and dedication in delivering services to our children, families, and communities across the child support program. We're in this together. We're doing our best to adapt and operate quickly and efficiently to this evolving situation. Many of us are working from home for the first time, kids are home from school, and we're trying to juggle work and life like never before. The health and well-being of you and your family is important. I encourage you to make sure that you take time for yourself, take a walk, do some yoga, read a book, or reach out to an old friend. We can be tempted to work longer hours when our home is also our office. Not having to commute is nice, but that was my time to decompress.

Coordinated response

Last fall, I accepted the position of principal deputy assistant secretary for the Administration for Children and Families. We have many initiatives taking place across the agency to identify short- and long-term needs, promising strategies, and solutions for a coordinated response to support the overall health, safety, and social and emotional well-being of children and families affected by COVID-19.

I continue to serve as the acting commissioner of OCSE, working closely with Deputy Commissioner Linda Boyer on child support program operations. As you'll see below, we've communicated with state and tribal directors about the operational, administrative, programmatic, and other challenges facing child support programs affected by COVID-19.

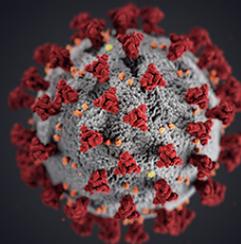
As we go forward, we appreciate your patience and want you to know that getting prompt, accurate, official communication to our grantees is imperative and a top priority.

I want to assure you that we're working hard to help in any way we can. I will leave you with the words of President Theodore Roosevelt, *"In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."*

Scott Lekan

Key COVID-19 Communications for States and Tribes

- April 1, 2020: ACF issued guidance, [IM-ACF-OA-2020-01](#), providing flexibility for certain grant administration requirements during the pandemic. These flexibilities are time-limited and applicable to ACF applicants and grantees/recipients where the entity is conducting human service activities related to or affected by COVID-19.
- April 13, 2020: [DCL-20-02](#) discusses eligibility of CARES Act economic impact payments for federal tax refund offset
- April 22, 2020: [New OCSE webpage on frequently asked questions](#) related to COVID-19 and child support programs



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Grant Applications Being Accepted

OCSE is accepting applications for its newest grant, [Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting](#). These grant projects will leverage the child support program's responsible parenting expertise to educate and motivate teens and young adults to postpone parenthood until after they complete their education, start a career, and have a committed relationship. Applications must be submitted through [grants.gov](#) by June 29, 2020.

Subscribe to *Child Support Report*. Sign up on the newsletter homepage 

PARENTING TIME

Family Center Supports Cooperative Parenting

Sheila Murphy-Russell, Director, *DuPage County Family Center, Illinois*

Families go through the Child Support Program to establish support for their children, but they often need more than just a court order. That's where the [DuPage County Family Center](#) steps in. At our Wheaton offices, 25 miles west of Chicago, we provide valuable court-ordered services to parents who live apart.

Our mission is to help families achieve cooperative parenting that focuses on the needs of their children. We strive to establish, maintain, and enhance familial relationships because children are entitled to the love and involvement of both parents. The center's services include mediation, supervised parenting time, neutral exchange, parent education, and conflict management.

We realized we were neglecting the non-financial issues of the families.

In 1998, we used funds from the [OCSE Access and Visitation Grant](#) to develop on-the-spot mediation, supervised parenting time, and a parent education class specifically designed for never-married parents. These services arose from an obvious need in our parentage courtroom — the number of never-married families was increasing.

Giving parents a voice

Parents were present in parentage court for child support but were unrepresented on parenting time and decision-making issues. We realized we were neglecting the non-financial issues of the families. Frequently, parents asked the court to address

parenting time because they didn't have the resources to use private mediation services within the county.

On-the-spot mediation proved pivotal in increasing non-residential parents' court-ordered access to their children. Mothers and fathers were delighted with the structure and formalization of their agreements. Supervised parenting time was particularly useful for parents who had never met, or were estranged from, their children. The parent education program addressed how parents could transform their once intimate relationship to one that was more like a good business relationship so they could provide the best environment for their children.

Since the beginning of the program, we've added services, and the number of parents we've served has increased. DuPage County has supplemented the center's funding to increase services, and has allowed us to accept all families with minor children, including those never married, divorcing, with domestic violence history, and guardianship cases.

Core services and more

The Family Center continues to provide the three services that got us started, and we also offer neutral exchange services and a psycho-educational group series for high-conflict parents. Our close working relationship with the judiciary and family law attorneys allows us to be flexible and creative while providing a variety of services that fit the individual needs of families.

At the heart of all of our services are the children. So often, parents in crisis struggle to remain focused on their children, and they let their feelings toward each other become negative and all consuming. Our staff reminds these stressed parents that their children are the priority. A relationship with both parents is important to their children's development, self-esteem, and comfort in their world. Parents learn that figuring out a way to successfully co-parent is truly a gift to their children.

For more information, contact Sheila Murphy-Russell at sheila.murphy-russell@dupageco.org.

Help for Domestic Violence Survivors

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) is a 24/7 confidential service that supports victims and survivors of domestic violence.

- By phone: 1-800-799-7233(SAFE)
- By text: text LOVEIS to 22522
- Online chat: <https://www.thehotline.org/> and select "Chat Now"

Highly trained, experienced advocates offer support, crisis intervention information, educational services and referral services in more than 200 languages. The website provides information about domestic violence, online instructional materials, safety planning, and local resources.

[StrongHearts Native Helpline](#) is a culturally-appropriate domestic violence and dating violence helpline for Native Americans, available every day from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. CT.

- By phone: 1-844-7NATIVE (1-844-762-8483)

Services include peer support and advocacy; information and education about domestic and dating violence; safety planning; crisis intervention; and referrals to Native or Tribal-based domestic violence service providers.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Crawford County Collaboration Provides a Boost

Carla Smith, Director, *Domestic Relations Section, Crawford County, Pennsylvania*

The Domestic Relations Section and the Center for Family Services have collaborated for years to improve the lives of children in Crawford County, Pennsylvania. Together, their Work Search and Disability Monitoring units assist local families experiencing financial crises by providing budgeting help, parenting classes, credit counseling, and much more.

In December 2019, Family Services implemented Assisted Re-Entry for Maximum Success (ARMS), a grant-funded program that helps individuals recently released from incarceration. It starts by paying 100% of a participant's rent and utilities. As the individual learns to budget and pay bills through the [Your Money Your Goals curriculum](#), ARMS reduces the assistance in stages. Staff guide program participants through the process of applying for medical assistance, SNAP benefits, birth certificates, and Social Security and Pennsylvania ID cards.

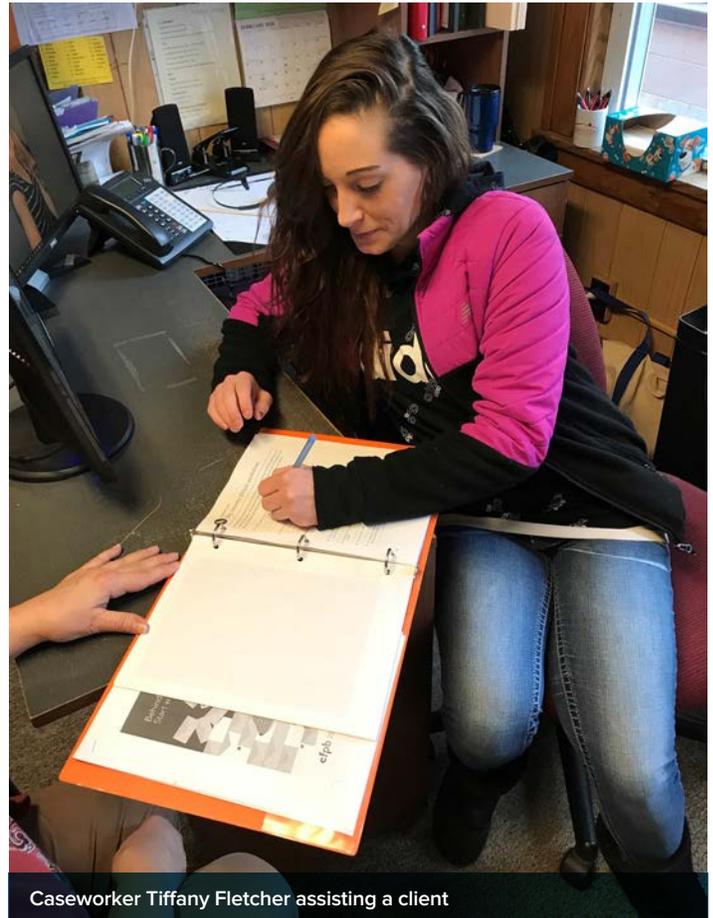
Even though it's only four months old, ARMS has been successful.

The Domestic Relations staff also provides child support information to individuals enrolled in the ARMS program and participates in re-entry fairs at two state correctional institutions. Incarcerated parents receive instruction on methods for avoiding delinquency upon release and ways to reapply for support.

Even though it's only four months old, ARMS has been successful. The agencies work together to ensure clients enroll and comply with the Domestic Relations Work Search Program. Then they guide individuals during their job search so they can become self-reliant and begin supporting their children.

In addition, Family Services and Domestic Relations staff assist all their clients by using child support materials and Your Money Your Goals tools during outreach events, such as our large annual community fair. This event showcases agencies, government, education, industry, businesses, and organizations that affect everyone's daily life.

For information, visit the [Crawford County Human Services](#) and [Center for Family Services](#) websites, or contact Carla Smith at 814-373-2560.



Caseworker Tiffany Fletcher assisting a client

New Resource for Youth about the \$1200 economic impact payments

Visit [Youth Engaged 4 Change](#) to find out what the economic impact payment is, who gets it, and how to get it. The page has information on the IRS Get My Payment tool, how to file your taxes for free (and what to do if you don't need to file your taxes), as well as how to avoid phishing scams right now. The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs is working with youth to hear more about their concerns send your input through these channels:

Twitter – [@youthdotgov](#)

Instagram – [YouthEngaged4Change](#)

Facebook – [Youth Engaged 4 Change](#)

Email – youthgov@air.org.

To find more about resources to support youth right now, visit [youth.gov's coronavirus content](#).

How Extra Paydays Affect Child Support Withholding

Michael Bateman, CPP, Payroll Manager, *Vail Resorts*

Employers who pay employees weekly normally have 52 pay periods a year, while employers who pay bi-weekly have 26. But since our weeks do not divide evenly into a 365-day year, employers must occasionally deal with an extra pay period. It happens approximately every seven years for weekly payors and every 11 years for those doing payroll every two weeks.

2020 has more paydays

Both Wednesday and Thursday will occur 53 times in 2020. In 2021, Friday will happen 53 times. Approximately three-quarters of the workforce receive their pay on one of those three days. With New Year's Day 2021 falling on a Friday, many employers will pay their employees Thursday, Dec. 31, 2020, creating an extra payday in 2020. Employers who don't push the payday back into 2020 will have an extra Friday payday in 2021.

During these years, this extra payday may have more impact than employers realize. They have to decide whether to prorate the salaries of their employees, how to handle benefit contributions to 401(k) plans, health savings accounts (HSAs) and flexible savings accounts (FSAs), and what they should do with special wage garnishments that are based on 26/52 payroll periods.

Adjusting special payments

Special wage garnishments that are based on 26/52 payroll periods, such as child support payments, can be especially challenging as those orders come from different agencies in various states, and the language used is not uniform. Some orders may state a specified amount they want the employer to withhold based on the employee's pay frequency, while others may instruct the employer to withhold a monthly amount.

OCSE states in [AT-16-04](#), "An acceptable method of determining the amount to be paid on a weekly or biweekly basis is to multiply the monthly amount of support due by 12 and divide that result by the number of pay periods in a year."

In the end, without clear guidance it is up to the employer to interpret the rules for these wage garnishments and determine whether to recalculate the amount to be withheld based on 27 pay periods, suppress the payment in the additional pay period, or to simply take the additional deduction.

Whichever method they choose, it's important for employers to apply that methodology uniformly across all the wage garnishments that are based on 26/52 payroll periods, to avoid any confusion.

Virtual Case Management Considerations and Resources for Human Services Programs

Annette Waters, Pamela Winston, and Robin Ghertner, *HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*

Many human services agencies are closing their offices and providing services in other ways—online, videoconferencing, and over the telephone—in response to social distancing recommendations from public health officials.

[This brief discusses key considerations and offers resources for virtual case management in human services programs.](#)

Among key considerations, it stresses the need for agencies to identify appropriate technology, identifying which approaches—including telephone, videoconferencing, or other web-based platforms—are most suitable given their needs and resources.

Training users is another essential consideration. Caseworkers and clients are likely to need training on how to use technology that may be new to them, from both a technological and a practical standpoint. Finally, agencies will need to consider privacy concerns and information sharing between systems. When managing cases virtually, practitioners will need to be mindful of federal or state rules and other guidelines for protecting personal information about clients and addressing other privacy concerns.

For more resources and guidance, visit the [HHS COVID-19 guidance and information for human services programs.](#)

Vaccinate today – Protect their tomorrow

Keep kids healthy with the vaccines and booster shots they need. Medicaid and CHIP offer free or low-cost health insurance for kids and teens up to age 19. Children can get regular check-ups, immunizations, doctor and dentist visits, hospital care, mental health services, prescriptions and more. Families of four earning up to \$50,000 may qualify (or even higher in some states).

Go to [InsureKidsNow.gov](#) or call 1-877-KIDS-NOW (543-7669) to learn more about affordable health coverage for your family.

GRANTS

Increasing Awareness of Services through Digital Marketing

OCSE awarded \$2.2 million to 14 grantees through a two-year demonstration called [Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program](#). The following article continues our series featuring grantees testing approaches and analyzing data to see if digital marketing can help child support programs reach and serve families more effectively.

For general information, contact OCSE project officers Michelle Jadczyk at Michelle.Jadczyk@acf.hhs.gov or Melody Morales at Melody.Morales@acf.hhs.gov.

Using Digital Communication to Reach Parents

Jorji Knickrehm, Grants Project Manager,
Washington State Division of Child Support

Many Americans have changed the way they consume news and information in the past few years. If that includes you, you're not alone. The [Pew Research Center](#) reports that the percentage of Americans who prefer online news sources increased from 28% to 34% between 2016 and 2018. It stands to reason that the Washington State Division of Child Support (DCS) would turn to online methods to share the benefits of child support. That's where the eyes are.

We know that we need to learn how to marshal digital communication strategies in order to stay relevant to parents. For our OCSE digital marketing grant project, we're working with a communications company and the Center for Policy Research to develop, launch, and evaluate three time-bound digital advertising campaigns. Those campaigns are Facebook sponsored ads, email flyers, and streaming audio ads. We're trying three popular yet distinct platforms in order to learn as much as possible during the two-year grant period.

Working smarter

We've learned that the social media platform most used by women ages 30-45 is Facebook. We're using Google Analytics to find out how people are clicking on our ads to get to our DCS webpage. And we know that 77% of visitors to our [Enroll for Child Support Services](#) page are using a mobile device. We've made our website more user- and mobile-friendly and used Facebook ad targeting tools to reach potential custodial parents. Posting ads on Facebook seems to have had an effect; DCS website visits tripled during the first campaign period.

Phase 2 — emailing parents

We sent flyers through a commercial digital management platform that school districts use to send flyers to students' parents. As we complete the evaluation of our second online campaign, we continue to learn which messages, photos, and digital platforms reach parents best. Our school campaign tested two messages about the

benefits of child support and one message encouraging parents to consider requesting a modification when their life situations change. Our third digital campaign, taking place in late spring 2020, will give us another chance to hone our digital messaging, this time through audio ads on a streaming radio service.

While increasing awareness and participation in the child support program remains our primary focus, we are also excited to "build the marketing bench" in our division. Several of our staff members are now working towards a certificate in digital marketing. One of the biggest benefits of this project may be that it will help prepare agency staff to meet future marketing challenges.

To learn more about Washington State's digital marketing campaigns, contact Jorji Knickrehm at jorji.knickrehm@dshs.wa.gov.



Story Behind the Numbers: Millennials in the Child Support Program

Millennials are now the largest generation of custodial parents in the child support program. What can we expect from this generation? How different are they from other generations? If you're interested in learning more, read our latest Story Behind the Numbers — [Millennials in the Child Support Program](#).



Unsung Child Support Heroes

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has brought our country disruption, uncertainty, and anxiety, it has also shown us heroes. Below are several child support heroes who have gone above their call of duty to help their community during this crisis.

Tulasi Long is a child support worker for Kansas Child Support Services in Topeka Central Office. She's also giving back to the community during the pandemic. Tulasi made and donated fabric masks, ear saver bands, and vinyl car decals for our health care heroes.



Amy Boughter is the operations manager for the Pennsylvania Bureau of Child Support Enforcement. Amy is helping her community stay safe during COVID-19 by making masks for her church members, family, and colleagues. She's teamed up with a few friends to assist with the bee design and embroidery. Thank you to all frontline heroes for your bravery, dedication, and the sacrifices you make every day for all of us.



continued



Roxanne Mudd is the lead specialist for the Ho-Chunk Nation Child Support Agency (CSA). In February Roxanne became the acting director of the CSA. Her director had to take family medical leave for an extended period, and shortly thereafter, COVID-19 struck the country. There were no emergency plans in place for this type of emergency. Roxanne had to work fast and closely with IT and the Executive Director of Social Services to protect the health of the employees and continue performing the CSA functions. One critical function was to continue disbursing child support payments in the midst of “stay-at-home” orders.

Ms. Mudd had to get everyone that could to work from home. That meant purchasing lock boxes for files, borrowing laptops from IT, and writing a procedure and schedule for when people would be in the office. Roxanne stepped in when her colleagues and the child support program needed her the most. When the director returned from leave, the procedures were in place, staff was safe and working from home, child support was being disbursed without problems, and everyone was complying with all of the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to recognize Roxanne as a child support hero because she took on the responsibilities of the director and maintained calm in the face of panic.



Mary Squally is the child support director for the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. Since the program has a non-automated system, Mary personally comes into the office to distribute child support payments to families. It has meant risking her own health to ensure children get the support they need. After processing payments, she leaves home cooked meals on the porch for her grandchildren – the family is separated by the quarantine.

*Do you know an unsung hero?
Send us their story so we can share
it in our next issue.*

Child Support Report

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Meals 4 Kids mapping tool to find sites near them where they can pick up free nutritious meals and snacks. To maintain social distancing, kids and teens may take their meal home to eat. Simply type in your address and find results.'"/>