

Child Support Participation in Stand Down Events

This fact sheet describes how the child support program's participation in veteran Stand Down events can help parents who have served our country manage their financial responsibilities to their children.

What is a Stand Down event?

In times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover were removed from the battlefields to a place of relative safety. At these secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy fellowship in a safe environment.¹

Today Stand Downs are part of the Department of Veterans Affairs' efforts to provide services to the nation's estimated 107,000 homeless veterans. The first Stand Down was organized in 1988 by a group of Vietnam Veterans in San Diego to help homeless veterans "combat" life on the streets. They are now collaborative events coordinated by local VAs, other government agencies, community agencies, and service providers who serve the homeless.²

Homeless veterans are brought together in a single location for one to three days and are provided access to community resources needed to begin addressing their individual problems and rebuilding their lives. Typical services include food, shelter, clothing, health screening, dental hygiene, VA and Social Security benefits counseling, legal counseling, and referrals to a variety of other necessary services such as housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment.

What do we know about veterans in the child support caseload?

The child support program³ touches the lives of many veteran families as it works to help parents meet their financial obligations to their children. About half the states have more than 10,000 veterans in their child support caseload.⁴



Cases involving veteran parents have unique characteristics when compared to cases of other noncustodial parents.

- **Veteran parents are older.** Almost 50 percent of veterans in the child support caseload are over age 50, while for the caseload as a whole, only 14 percent of noncustodial parents are over 50.
- **Cases involving veterans are more likely to be interstate cases.** About 44 percent of noncustodial parents receiving VA compensation/pension or education benefits have a child support case in a different state than where they currently reside.
- **Veterans are likely to have higher child support arrears.** The per capita child support debt owed by veterans with child support arrears averages 27 percent higher than the per capita debt owed by all noncustodial parents. The average debt owed by veterans with debt is about \$24,500 and the comparable per capita debt for all noncustodial parents with debt is \$19,200. Much of this debt is in arrears-only cases, where there is no longer a current support obligation.

As the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans increase, child support programs are likely to see younger veterans in their caseloads. Unlike older veterans, these veterans may owe support for young children still living at home. At the same time, they may be struggling with serious issues and disabilities that may impact family relationships and employment.

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How can child support initiatives help homeless veterans who owe child support?

A high child support debt can negatively impact a veteran's ability to obtain housing. It can be a disincentive to obtaining employment. There is also a demoralizing aspect to carrying thousands of dollars in child support debt, with little ability to pay it down. This may be especially true when the debt is owed to the state and the veteran's children are now adults. Research suggests a relationship between child support debt and subsequent non-payment of current support.⁵ Child support debt can also be a psychological barrier to reestablishing family relationships. Indeed, homeless veterans have identified the need to resolve child support issues as one of their major concerns.⁶ By reaching out to homeless veterans, child support programs can (1) help remove child support barriers that might make it difficult for homeless veterans to reintegrate into the community, and (2) increase the veterans' ability to provide financial and emotional support to their children.⁷

How are child support programs participating in Stand Down events?

Across the country, child support agencies participate in and even co-host Veteran Stand Down events. The goal is to provide outreach to veterans who might not otherwise visit the child support office, to address individual veteran's child support concerns as part of a larger effort to connect veterans with a range of services, and to ensure that veteran organizations and service providers have general information about child support services so that appropriate referrals can be made. How child support programs participate in Stand Down events varies depending on the format of the event.

General Child Support Information

The Los Angeles County Child Support Office and the Texas Attorney General's HEROES Project have participated in one-day Stand Down events where homeless veterans file past a row of tables and booths manned by government agencies and service providers. The child support representatives provided general child support information, but not individual case processing.

Case Management

Veterans register in advance for San Diego's three-day Stand Down event. The San Diego County Child Support Office is able to match the list of registrants against its child support caseload, identify veteran cases, and review the cases to

determine whether services are needed to assist the veteran to better manage his child support obligation. Such services may include review and adjustment, arrears management, or reactivation of a driver's license. Where appropriate, the office provides the veteran with notice of a hearing before a veterans child support court, which is held on a racquetball court in conjunction with the Stand Down event. The San Diego office has agreed with Veteran's Village, the coordinator of the Stand Down event, that it will not serve Summons and Complaints or show cause orders without the agreement of the veteran, and it will not take enforcement action that would alienate the veteran.

Veterans Court

The veterans child support court was established through the efforts of the San Diego County child support liaison with the court, a Family Law facilitator, and the Veteran's Clinic Law Professor from the Thomas Jefferson Law School Clinic; the Law School clinic provides legal representation for the veterans. Court participants from the San Diego County Child Support Office include three paralegals, four attorneys who meet and conference with the veterans and their attorneys prior to court, one attorney who handles the court hearings, a clerk who prepares wage assignments, and a technical staff person. The child support staff have everything they need to connect to the San Diego office by e-mail or phone with on-site computers, fax machine, copier and printer. They do not have a connection to the statewide system due to confidentiality concerns; however, designated staff "on call" at the child support office are available by phone to provide system information. From the court side, in addition to the Family Law Facilitator and the court commissioner, there are two bailiffs, a court reporter, and a court clerk. Students from the Thomas Jefferson Law School Clinic assist the homeless veterans with child support matters both prior to, and during, the Stand Down event.

Results from San Diego County

In conjunction with the 2012 Stand Down in San Diego, the child support agency reviewed 127 cases. Of those, 57 cases resulted in court hearings during the Stand Down event. There were 25 modifications of ongoing support, 33 modifications of arrears payments, 36 license releases, and 13 set asides of default orders. The agency resolved hundreds of thousands of dollars of child support debt. In the month following the Stand Down, the agency received 19 payments totaling approximately \$3,500.⁸

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What factors contribute to a successful collaboration between the child support program and a Stand Down event?

- A strong event coordinator who organizes the participating community providers and facilitates communication with the veterans.
- Advance information about veterans attending the Stand Down event and identification of the veterans in a program's child support caseload, so that cases can be reviewed for needed services prior to the event.
- A format that allows time for a one-on-one discussion with the veteran.
- "Then and there" child support service that does not require follow-up with the veteran. Such service may include the operation of a veteran child support court in conjunction with the Stand Down event. It also means physical resources that allow on-site access to case information; for example, a power supply, telephones or cell phones, laptops with access to a secured network.
- A fact sheet on child support that not only explains the child support program, but also points out the impact that unresolved child support issues can have on someone who is trying to rebuild his or her life. Such information can be shared with veteran service providers, as well as with veterans.
- Booth "take-aways" such as child support help-line business cards and "survival" items such as socks, hand sanitizers, or toothbrushes.
- Attention to the "veteran-friendly" message conveyed by the child support booth such as avoiding logos that emphasize a connection to law enforcement or tax enforcement.
- A data collection tool to measure the impact of the collaboration, such as the number of veterans served, and the numbers of order modifications, licenses released, cases closed, arrearages resolved, payment plans established, and orders established.

REFERENCES

1. For more information, see www.nchv.org/standdown.cfm.
2. A calendar of Stand Down events can be found at www.va.gov/HOMELESS/StandDown.asp.
3. 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/css.
4. To learn more about veterans in the child support caseload, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) conducted a data match in December 2010. See *Veterans in the Child Support Caseload*, Child Support Fact Sheet Series, Number 1, November 2011. www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/veterans_in_the_caseload.pdf
5. Carolyn J. Heinrich, Brett Burkhardt, and Hilary Shager. *Reducing Child Support Debt and Its Consequences: Can Forgiveness Benefit All?*, University of Wisconsin, Madison, October 2009.
6. The most recent CHALENG report for FY 2010 (The Seventeenth Annual Progress Report on Public Law 105-114: Services for Homeless Veterans Assessment and Coordination) is available. www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/chaleng/CHALENG_Report_Seventeenth_Annual.pdf
See also www.va.gov/HOMELESS/about_the_initiative.asp and www.va.gov/HOMELESS/for_the_community.asp.
7. For information about a collaboration between HHS, VA and the American Bar Association to address child support issues of homeless veterans, see *Ending Homelessness Among Veterans*, Child Support Fact Sheet Series, Number 9, November 2011. www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocse/ending_homelessness_among_veterans.pdf
8. Information reported July 31, 2012, by Shannon Welton. See also Shannon Welton, 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/sites/default/files/ocse/csr1011.pdf

