

Child Support Report

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New Fact Sheet



Learn about child support agency collaboration with federal criminal justice agencies in the new OCSE fact sheet



Building Assets for Fathers and Families Seven grantees achieving success in grant projects' final year

By David Johnson, OCSE Region X

In fall 2010, seven states received three-year demonstration grants from OCSE called Building Assets for Fathers and Families (BAFF). The goals of BAFF prompted the grantees to learn how they could best provide asset-building services to noncustodial parents and to understand how asset-building organizations and child support programs can work together effectively.

Since child support plays an important role in the finances of many families, both for custodial and noncustodial parents, building partnerships like those in the BAFF projects can lead to an important resource for promoting financial stability. Both parents can benefit from financial education, hands-on assistance with all of their debt issues, including child support, and access to asset-building tools such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). When families understand how to manage their money and tools to help them meet their financial responsibility, they can more reliably support their children and help them get ahead.

Positive numbers so far

Data from the seven sites through July 2012 indicate that more than 1,750 individuals have enrolled in the BAFF programs underway in Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas and Washington State. Over 880 of these individuals (about 50 percent) have completed the financial training modules, which vary in length and scope from site to site. Providing child support education and proactively addressing child support debt are important components of the BAFF partnerships.

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Learn more about OCSE grant projects when you visit the [Grants page on the OCSE website](#).

It also appears that these BAFF pilot sites are effectively zeroing-in on a population most in need of this kind of assistance. Across all sites through July, about 78 percent of the BAFF participants report a monthly income of less than \$1,000, about 80 percent are either unemployed or working less than full-time, and the average child support debt is about \$11,700.

Thirty-seven individuals successfully opened Individual Development (savings) Accounts. Often “matched,” these accounts build savings for a particular purchase that can help their family, like starting a small business or buying a home. Six individuals have already used their IDA for its intended purpose.

Emerging pattern

A triad pattern is emerging that seems to be leading to the best chance of success for three aspects of the project: a committed parent willing to invest time in financial education classes and use the coaching and guidance; an asset-building organization that acts as a trustworthy “front door” for the parent who is well cared for and supported through the financial training and learning; and a child support program that invests specialized, focused time to help the BAFF participants resolve barriers to reliable child support payment and shows flexibility in processes that can create longer-term, win-win situations for all parties, especially the children.

A BAFF Toolkit is under construction, and OCSE expects a more comprehensive analysis of BAFF implementation next year. Stay tuned and keep thinking about the many possibilities for asset-building partnerships and opportunities in your area.

These BAFF pilot sites are effectively zeroing-in on a population most in need of this kind of assistance.

Success stories

Within the seven BAFF pilot sites, many success stories and “spin-off” ideas are surfacing:

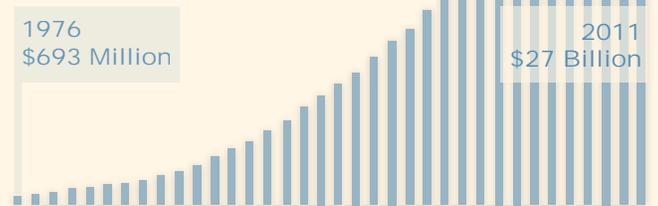
- Texas uniquely targets new and expecting parents by collaborating with the Baylor Teen Health Clinic in Houston and Covenant Community Capital Corporation (a grantee of the Assets for Independence program), engaging both parents in financial education that includes child support awareness before a child support case might ever exist.
- Ohio’s BAFF project actively engages local fatherhood organizations as partners and co-hosted a statewide conference and four regional conferences to broadly encourage more BAFF partnerships in communities other than the two targeted with the BAFF grant itself—Columbus and Cincinnati.

- Texas also encourages custodial parents due to receive lump-sum arrears payments to participate in financial education training and invest those dollars in child savings accounts for college (often referred to as 529 accounts).
- Florida looks closely at the population of noncustodial parents whose licenses are suspended and reaches out to them to participate in financial education training through the asset-building partner to get their child support issues addressed and their licenses restored.
- Colorado, Florida and Michigan leverage their arrears forgiveness procedures when possible in particular cases to “incentivize” participation in financial education programs and affirm positive efforts by noncustodial parents to address their current support obligations and start IDA savings accounts.
- Colorado focuses its BAFF outreach efforts early in the order establishment phase of a case to identify parents most likely to benefit from the services of the asset-building, financial education partner.

We are excited to see how this final year unfolds. We hope to hear more success stories and promising practice ideas rising to the top as we enter the evaluation phase of these demonstration grants.

For more information about asset-building opportunities in a child support program context, please see the [IDA resources web page](#) on the Assets for Independence website, or call David Johnson at 206-615-2570.

**The child support program
DISTRIBUTED \$27 BILLION
in support payments in
fiscal year 2011**



The OCSE FY 2011 Preliminary Report highlights program achievements based on quarterly and annual data. [See the report on the OCSE website.](#)

Model Tribal System readying for launch



Commissioner's
Voice

Today 58 tribes operate start-up or comprehensive child support programs—10 more than a year ago. These tribal programs are reaching custodial and noncustodial parents in their communities, helping them support their children financially and enrich their children's lives emotionally, in a culturally appropriate manner.

As partners in the national child support program, OCSE and tribal child support programs will cross a much-anticipated milestone early next year when OCSE launches the Model Tribal System (MTS). The MTS is an award-winning, state-of-the-art computer system designed to recognize the importance and benefits of integrating automation in the daily operations of comprehensive tribal child support programs. The MTS will serve as a key tool for programs to improve efficiency in case management and develop other areas of the program, offering tribal agencies and consortia direct access to similar technologies and automated systems that state child support agencies have had for years. The MTS uses open software to support organizations with up to 25 offices and 100 concurrent users, handling workloads of up to 25,000 cases.

By improving the level of automation in tribal child support programs, the MTS can increase program capacity to work more cases. The MTS will automate distribution, reporting, referrals—all aspects of casework. The MTS also will allow tribes to tailor their automated systems to their needs, for example, even something as simple as putting their logos on letters to custodial and noncustodial parents. And, the MTS will help will free up more time for workers to talk face-to-face with clients, an approach that characterizes tribal programs.

The launch will follow several years of tribal consultation, research, design and development in OCSE—using tribal requirements—as well as testing the system in two tribal child support programs: the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma and Forest County Potawatomi Community. I appreciate the hard work, time, and resources provided by these two tribal programs to test the MTS. Other tribal programs, too, had a chance to explore and experiment with the MTS in a national “sandbox,” an operational version of the system.

OCSE will make the MTS available to all interested tribes and continue to collaborate with tribes on the launch plans and technical assistance requests, respectful of tribal sovereignty and the beliefs and traditions of all people in Indian Country.

Earlier this month, I reached out to tribal leaders operating child support programs about MTS implementation issues such as timing, schedule, and funding resources. Based on the leaders' feedback, we will gauge interest in installing and using the MTS, and then customize the launch plan, considering our available resources. You can find information about funding for tribal automated systems and the Model Tribal System on the OCSE web page for Tribal Systems.

As this year ends and we welcome 2013, we will continue to work in partnership with tribes operating child support programs. We hope you will share ideas with us on improvements and opportunities you foresee in your agency as the MTS becomes available. I appreciate your comments on this [Commissioner's Voice blog](#).



Vicki Turetsky



The MTS logo story

The four concentric circles, one in another, represent the MTS and its support of the tribal child support program. Together they show that all activities in it are separate, and yet connected.

The four bold colors represent tribal culture and tradition, and the bright future of the tribal child support program.

The logo expresses the foundation of the MTS; both a comprehensive operational system, and one that can alternatively be used on only a module-by-module basis. Secure and comprehensive, flexible and modern, the MTS supports the sovereignty and individuality of the tribal child support program.

Oklahoma's WIN-ning project helps noncustodial parents find employment

By Laurel Eaton, Director
Office of Planning, Evaluation and Learning
Oklahoma Child Support Services

Project WIN is a grant project in Oklahoma Child Support Services (OCSS) to help noncustodial parents find employment—and it's winning the hearts of all involved. "Workforce Innovation NOW: A Blueprint for Healthy Families" (the project's full name) officially began in March 2012, but unofficially started before we even wrote the grant. During the pre-grant writing phase, OCSS reached out to state agencies, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations to ask for support of OCSS's grant application. Just the idea of the grant enticed them to form partnerships to help unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents.

When OCSS received the grant, these dedicated partners officially came together as Team WIN—a statewide group of OCSS staff, government workforce agencies, educational institutions, private and public employers, and community organizations. The team first drafted a strategic plan to address ways to enhance employment opportunities for OCSS's unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents, and then designed pilot programs in Oklahoma and Tulsa counties.

The Project WIN strategy starts with the OCSS overarching goal of "healthy families." Healthy families work together, whether or not they choose to be intact families, to provide an environment where their children are physically, emotionally, and financially secure. As Director Gary Dart explained (in the [October 2012 Child Support Report](#)), "healthy families" is a viewpoint in making choices about what we do for our customers.

Pilots take off

The pilot programs feature a multi-faceted approach to helping unemployed and under-employed noncustodial parents—first a resource day and time for training; a few weeks later, a traditional job fair; outreach to employers ready to hire; and developing a statewide employment resource to be featured on the OCSS Parent Resource web page.

We pulled the pilots' target population from Oklahoma's Court Liaison Program, which works with noncustodial parents who are facing jail time for failure to pay child support. Oklahoma provides 17 court liaisons to cover 44



counties (of the state's 77 counties) through 31 child support offices. When we began Project WIN in March, Oklahoma County had 775 customers in the Court Liaison Program and Tulsa County had 238. Statewide, OCSS now has 1,751 customers in the Court Liaison Program, which accounts for 1 percent of our noncustodial parent population.

Resource fairs well received

The Project WIN resource fairs expand the workforce concept to look at the whole person along with his or her family needs. In other words, in trying to help sustain healthy family relationships, we looked beyond the résumé to needs such as:

- Financial planning
- Behavior modification
- Physical and mental health needs
- Child care
- Job mentors
- Personal appearance
- Transportation needs
- Interpersonal skills
- Support groups

The fairs are going well on all fronts. One noncustodial parent who was leaving the Oklahoma County resource fair at the end of the day, said, "When I came in this morning, I almost didn't stay. I had given up and didn't think anyone cared about helping me in my situation. I'm so glad I stayed because this whole experience proves that someone does care enough to help and encourage me to get more training and a job I can live with."

One of the vendors at the same fair reflected, "Having the one-on-one contact with the people we need to help was the best part of this resource fair."

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And, a court liaison said, “This resource fair has been a definite success for my customers because of the variety of resources we were able to bring together in one place. The fair offered one-on-one discussions and classes or presentations in resume writing, and financial literacy, on how to find and keep a job, and other subjects. And, we can’t forget the way our Team WIN partners’ time and resources were given so freely to assist us and our customers.”

A healthy outlook

We designed Project WIN to reflect Oklahoma’s commitment to healthy families and family-centered child support services. While OCSS has been working to break through employment barriers for several years through its

Court Liaison Program, Project WIN expands workforce opportunities and elevates the issue of underemployment on both a national and state level.

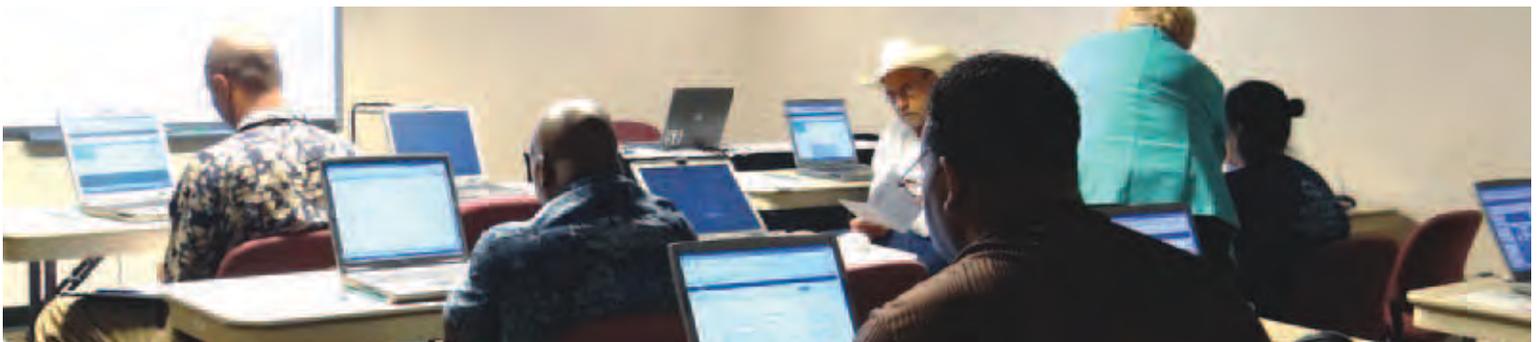
Project WIN is a testing ground for economic recovery efforts. The project gives our workforce partners a better understanding of the child support system and noncustodial parent responsibilities and improves employment prospects for the noncustodial parents. It also gives nonpaying or underpaying parents a chance to engage in their children’s lives while working to build healthy families through compliance with their child support orders.

For further information about the Project WIN grant, please contact Jeff Wagner at jeff.wagner@okdhs.org or Jennifer Shubert at jennifer.ctr.shubert@okdhs.org.



(Clockwise, from top left) Noncustodial mother seeks help at an Oklahoma resource fair; Team WIN members learn about child support’s effect on unemployment; noncustodial parents learn to write resumes and look for a job; WIN partners plan pilot programs

Photos courtesy of Project WIN



Research: Debt compromise programs improving child support outcomes

By Jessica Pearson and Nancy Thoennes
Center for Policy Research
Denver, CO

In 2007, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) found that at least 20 states operate child support debt compromise programs statewide or as pilot programs, and 23 states use debt compromise on a case-by-case basis. (See the [OIG report](#).)

The OIG survey also found that 17 of 31 states with informal or no programs were “considering implementing debt compromise programs and are in the process of weighing the costs and benefits.” In other words, there is considerable evidence that local and state child support agencies want more information about debt compromise programs.

Background, data for CPR research

In June 2009, the Center for Policy Research (CPR) spearheaded a meeting to discuss issues that state and local child support agencies must address to design and implement debt compromise programs. Representatives of debt compromise programs attended from California (Los Angeles County, Merced County, and the state); Illinois; Maryland; Minnesota (Hennepin County, Ramsey County, and the state); New Mexico; North Dakota; Vermont; and Washington, D.C.

Following the conference, five of the eight sites (California, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, and DC) agreed with a decision to collect empirical data on cases exposed to debt compromise programs. All the programs target obligors with current support due and those with arrears-only cases, and accept lump-sum payments as well as monthly arrears payments.

Programs that consciously key forgiveness to regular payment behavior experience the greatest benefits in payment.

CPR collected information on 688 cases enrolled in the five programs, 19 to 33 months after enrollment. Except for Minnesota, the programs extend write-offs of state-owed arrears to obligors in exchange for complying with monthly payment agreements over a 6- to 36-month period.



The average project case involved a never-married, older obligor (average age 45 to 49) who had original orders established in the 1980s or 1990s. In Illinois, Maryland and Minnesota, half of the obligors had been incarcerated and over half of Maryland project participants were recipients of disability benefits. Original monthly order amounts ranged from \$161 in DC to \$297 in California. Average state-owed arrears balances ranged from \$11,500 in Illinois to over \$31,000 in California. On average, obligors owed an additional \$10,000 to custodial parents. Younger obligors in Minnesota with newer child support cases had the lowest mean state-owed arrears balances: \$7,197.

Support increases

Twenty-four months post-enrollment, the percentage of child support paid relative to the amount due increased 32 percent in D.C., 27 percent in Maryland, 23 percent in California, and 14 percent in Illinois. Payments in Minnesota improved by only 7 percentage points. Unlike the other sites, Minnesota selected obligors who had high debt levels due to interest charges and other factors that impeded their ability to pay and staff performed debt compromise without their knowledge. Programs that consciously key forgiveness to regular payment behavior experience the greatest benefits in payment.

The noncustodial parents in this study had between 26 and 83 percent of their state-owed debt forgiven when the follow-up data were collected, with many obligors who were still engaged in the program expected to realize further forgiveness or debt reinstatement actions.

During the 24 months following enrollment, the 688 participants in the study generated \$1.5 million in child support collections, money that would not otherwise have been realized. Although they were a small fraction of project cases, obligors with current monthly support obligations had better payment patterns than those with arrears-only cases.

Other promising case types were newer cases and cases with lower debt levels. Thus, states should consider extending debt compromise opportunities to these previously untargeted groups. The primary reason obligors were dropped from the programs were missing a payment or making a partial payment. This suggests that combining debt compromise incentives with employment programs may maximize the benefits of both.

You can find the report on the [Center for Policy Research website](#).



Magistrate's review: Paternity disestablishment can be 'messy'

By Andrea Koppenhofer, Magistrate
19th Judicial District, Colorado

Every decision I make from the bench is important since it affects the lives of the parties before the court and their families. Admittedly, though, the paternity establishment decisions have been the most judicially challenging since I became a magistrate more than year ago. Recognizing this, I attended the “Disestablishment: My 2 Dads” session at the National Child Support Enforcement Association conference, in August, with great enthusiasm. I thought, “Finally, I will learn the secret to deciding ‘who should be Dad’ and ‘when to permit genetic testing.’”

I found the presenters on the panel excellent—Mark Ponsolle, Assistant Attorney General with the Ramsey County Attorney General’s Office in Minnesota, who has prosecuted a wide variety of cases involving children over many years; and Diane Potts, the Deputy Attorney General in the appellate division of the Child Support Unit of the Illinois Attorney General’s Office.

The panel’s common theme: “Life is messy.” Both speakers used statutory and case law to support their positions. Both echoed that the laws of their states can be inconsistent and, therefore, legislative history and appellate cases are important. Both asserted that while the legal community would like everything to be very neat, this area is not; life is messy. The conclusion was that such flexibility in the law is good.

The speakers presented their views on genetic testing in all cases. Positions in favor of not permitting genetic testing after legal parentage has been established:

- If an affirmative waiver of genetic testing was given, permitting genetic testing would seem to render the waiver pointless.
- The father is more than just a sperm donor.
- The legislature wants to promote finality in judgments, especially where children are involved.

- Flexibility for facts of the case.
- Best interests of the child: disestablishing paternity based on testing is potentially devastating to a child.

Positions in favor of permitting genetic testing after legal parentage has been established:

- Valuable knowledge of medical history for preventing and curing diseases and for settling inheritance rights.
- Removes all doubt, which may help ensure financial support and a father-child relationship.
- Original reasons for not testing (promote marriage and prevent bastardization of children) are outdated. Genetic testing is readily available, inexpensive and very accurate.
- If the establishment is based on misleading information from Respondent Mother to Respondent Father, should the law reward the Respondent Mother?
- Best interests of the child: children should not be lied to or kept in the dark.

The presenters raised more questions than they answered, not due to lack of knowledge, but to the nature of this area of the law. Some of the questions that stuck with me:

- Should biology trump a marital presumption of parentage, or should the marital presumption trump biology?
- Aren’t acknowledgements really just circumventing the requirements of adoption law? Aren’t there inherent reliability concerns with acknowledgements (dad is the biological father, dad is not the biological father, both know, mom knows and dad doesn’t, both mom and dad are unsure)? Are there ethical concerns for the attorneys using the acknowledgement forms?
- What about the rise of same sex couples and genetic testing?
- Should a determination of parentage be based on the “split-second” signing of an acknowledgement at the hospital? Binding the child to that father until emancipation and that father to child even if he is not the biological father?

Ultimately, the speakers’ leanings were that we should request and obtain genetic testing in all cases, sooner rather than later, which seemed consistent with the policies in their respective states. What I came away with is that there are no consistent answers, even within a single state. There is discretionary work to be done in each case from the bench. After applying the statutory guidance available, the legislature included the best interests of the child standard to provide the flexibility needed when life is “messy.”

Abuse survivors' experiences with child support

By Jane K. Stoeber, Assistant Professor of Law
Seattle University School of Law

Financial constraints often make it difficult, if not impossible, to escape domestic violence. Research shows that when a survivor leaves her abusive partner, her standard of living has a 50 percent likelihood of falling below the poverty line. The lack of shelters available for abuse survivors and their children, especially teenage boys, limits escape routes.

Economic dependence is the greatest predictor of a survivor's inability to end an abusive relationship, and child support through civil protection orders and paternity and child support cases can provide the financial independence so crucial to achieving freedom from violence.

Over the years, I have represented many clients who are truly in crisis in the midst of escaping severe violence, and I have seen the life-changing effect of child support. After many years of suffering abuse, one client experienced a particularly harrowing incident in which her husband threatened their infant. She and her baby were able to escape to a friend's apartment, but she worried about the burden on her friend's family. Once she began receiving child support and temporary maintenance, she was able to rent an apartment, and she reported feeling free for the first time in years. She was able to laugh with her daughter, feel at ease, and be the mother she wanted to be.

I will also never forget another client's multi-year battle to receive child support. Years after having a child, the result of a date rape, the biological father received visitation and my client came to our office seeking current and back child support payments. I was astounded by her capacity for forgiveness and strength in persisting through the trial and many enforcement actions. While my client struggled financially, the respondent was wealthy and willfully sought to avoid paying support. Although money could not erase my client's memory, the eventual payments made a world of difference to my client and her child's financial security.

At the same time, involvement with the child support system (and other legal systems) can present additional opportunities for physical and psychological abuse. Domestic violence survivors who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families must be informed of the "good cause" waiver and Family Violence Option, which allow survivors to opt out of mandatory child support cooperation if it would pose a danger to their safety. This is particularly true where child support cases are automatically initiated, as is the case in some jurisdictions.

Given the many economic barriers to ending violence, child support can provide the means for safety. Care must be taken, however, to avoid creating greater risks for domestic violence survivors by providing safety measures for those seeking support and the option of the waivers.

See more stories about the child support program's work to help families affected by domestic violence in the [previous issue of the *Child Support Report*](#).

Brochures for victims of domestic violence
The Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice, published a series of brochures for victims of crime. Topics are assault, child abuse, domestic violence, impaired driving, homicide, robbery, sexual violence, and stalking, and another titled "What Adults Need to Know about Child Abuse." You can download the [Help Brochure Series](#) from the DOJ website.

Child Support Report

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VA health care for veterans

Veterans who served in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars are eligible for VA health care for five years. Yet, according to [VA data](#), more than a quarter of these veterans have no health insurance and are not part of the VA health system. Child support agencies can help ensure that veterans in their caseload are aware of VA health benefits. See the [Veterans Health Benefits Handbook](#).