

Child Support Report

OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT

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Inside This Issue

- Earned Income Tax Credit 2
- Passport Denial success for two families 2
- Commissioner's Voice: Statistics are critical to our program 3
- Large-screen monitors improve efficiency in San Diego courtrooms 4
- Raising awareness about teen dating violence 5
- Latino Resource Center offers lessons for teens 6
- New York City OCSE responds to Hurricane Sandy—and is stronger for it 7
- New Report: Status of the responsible fatherhood field 8



Changing our approach takes persistence, patience, consistency—and communication

By Frances Pardus-Abbadessa
Executive Deputy Commissioner
New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement

Frances Pardus-Abbadessa continues our series on change management in the child support program

Managing change is rarely easy, and that's no different in the child support program. It is a gradual process. Teaching staff to change their approach to how they perceive and react to noncustodial parents who owe child support is not an easy task. Some of our staff have been handling child support cases for the past 20, 30, and, in some cases, 40 years. They processed cases when the delinquent noncustodial parent was unceremoniously referred to as a "deadbeat," whether he or she could afford to pay child support or not. It didn't matter whether the child support order was one issued on default.

In the New York City Office of Child Support, similar to the philosophy adopted by other states and the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, we are dedicated to teaching staff that our mission is child-focused and involves helping both parents support their children. What this means is that we expect our staff to treat both the noncustodial and custodial parents as our clients.

All too often we hear the phrase "because we have always done it that way." To achieve our desired cultural change, our staff has to learn from the example set by our program leadership and management team. It is a message that begins at the top of our organization and is delivered to each and every staff person in the child support organization's chain, and it is often a hard message to sell. Old habits die hard when they are ingrained in the way the agency has operated for years. Even though our agency has been implementing many new programs and initiatives designed to assist noncustodial parents and increase compliance with child support, some staff are naturally reluctant to accept the concept.

It is encouraging, however, that over time our veteran staff are coming around and accepting the new philosophy that if you work with—and not against—the noncustodial parent, you will bring them into the process and likely see an increase in collections.

continued ▶



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How are New York City child support staff coping in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy? See page 7.

Giving parents another chance

One program that we implemented nearly two years ago is our Violation Petition Initiative. This initiative gives noncustodial parents another chance to comply with their child support order, even while in the process of sending their case to court on a violation petition.

Through the program, we give them a chance to avoid the consequences of a possible willfulness finding and the sanctions associated with such a finding. Our court referral staff provide these noncustodial parents with a flyer containing the criteria or eligibility requirements for our programs, allowing the parents to avoid court and possibly reduce their arrears. Parents can take advantage of these programs practically up to the moment of the violation petition hearing. We will withdraw the violation petition at the hearing if they comply.

Our Case Management Initiative instructs staff to take a proactive approach with the noncustodial parent very shortly after the issuance of his or her order, based on a predictive model that certain of these individuals will fail to comply with that order within months. The activities associated with this project require that our caseworkers communicate with the noncustodial parents and convince them that we're here to help them in every way we can.

The caseworkers own or manage these cases from the inception of the order. Of course, the caseworker needs to feel connected, involved, and interested in each of her or his cases. They no longer have only a brief involvement to resolve one issue; the case is theirs.

Getting buy-in from staff

Again, it requires a different mindset or buy-in to achieve the result we are seeking, i.e., getting noncustodial parents to pay or keep paying their child support. If the caseworker feels connected, so too might the parent, who is told that he or she will deal with one caseworker who is familiar with his or her case and circumstances. The noncustodial parent will not have to “start all over again” with a different caseworker each time a problem arises.

While our staff has been adopting our philosophy toward noncustodial parents, the techniques to make these programs a success are persistence, patience and consistency—beginning at the top of our organizational chart. Properly communicating our initiatives, the reasons for the changes, our successes, and continuously encouraging staff when the job is well done have helped us achieve success with our change management.

For further information, please contact Linda Lagreca, Assistant Deputy Commissioner Administrative Enforcement & Special Investigation, at linda.lagreca@dca.state.ny.us.

Earned Income Tax Credit

Each year during tax season, the child support program promotes the IRS [Earned Income Tax Credit](#) (EITC). Based on the latest data from the U.S. Census (2009), most custodial parents with earned income could qualify for EITC. The mean total income for custodial parents is \$31,991, and the IRS recommends that anyone making less than \$50,000 should see if they qualify. Many state and local employees may be eligible as well.

The average EITC payment is more than \$2,000. However, 20 percent of those eligible never file. Last year, EITC lifted 6.6 million people (half of them children) out of poverty. In 2012, more than 26 million people received more than \$60 billion dollars from EITC. ([See specific state statistics on EITC.](#))

[New information on the OCSE website](#) can help child support agencies increase participation in EITC. You can also find information about the IRS Voluntary Income Tax Assistance Centers located across the country that can help people prepare their tax returns free of charge.



Cheers! Passport Denial success for two families

New York and California welcomed the New Year with a cheer when they collected lump-sum payments of over \$250,000 and \$235,000 from two noncustodial parents who needed passports for vacation. The entire collection amounts went to two custodial parents, one of whom responded that she thinks the Passport Denial program is “fabulous.” Stories like this are a testimony to the success of the program, which is responsible for \$28 million in voluntarily reported collections in 2012—\$274 million since its inception in 1998. Child support agencies can send passport denial stories to sollections@acf.hhs.gov.

Statistics are critical to our program



**Commissioner's
Voice**

I recently learned (via the [U.S. Census Bureau](#)) that 2013 is [International Year of Statistics](#). A page full of statistics can be scary to some, but *statistics* is one of my favorite words. In OCSE, we have a division of dedicated staff members who collect and analyze statistics—a critical component of our

program. Because we audit program data (through another OCSE office of dedicated auditors), we have program data that we trust.

Why do I like statistics? Well, first of all, child support statistics have given us the tools we need for measuring and presenting the efficiency and effectiveness of our national program to the public. The fact that we can measure our performance, and do so with audited, accurate data, has helped us demonstrate program accountability, identify program trends, and correct course when those data identify performance problems.

Statistics are critical, too, as we train our own staffs. In the article on page 1, New York City child support director Frances Pardus-Abbadessa describes the need to get buy-in from every staff member to understand the culture of change in our program, including the importance of treating both custodial and noncustodial parents fairly in every case.

We pay attention to statistics published at various times of the year to understand trends in our caseload and improve our outreach services. For example, see the articles in this issue on Teen Dating Violence Prevention and Awareness Month, the Latino Resource Center, and the IRS Earned Income Tax Credit; they all contain pertinent statistics.

But most importantly, statistics gives us a window on the families we serve. What does our caseload look like? What are the demographic factors we need to understand? And what does data tell us about effective strategies for reaching our goal: obtaining consistent child support payments for families? An example of how data changed the way we thought about arrears management is the series of state studies conducted several years ago by the Urban Institute that found that 70 percent of noncustodial parents who owe child support arrears had reported incomes below \$10,000 per year. (You can find the [report](#) on the HHS website.)

Here are some statistics that are worth repeating because they play an important part in the program's success:

- Child support provides about 40 percent of family income for the poor families who receive it, and 10 percent of income for all poor custodial families.
- Child support is a critical program for poor families; about half of families in the program are below 150 percent of the poverty level, while 90 percent are below 400 percent of poverty. The child support program is one of the “big three” income support programs (along with Earned Income Tax Credit and SNAP) that provides a safety net for poor families.
- The child support program demonstrates a high return on investment. In FY 2011, the program collected \$5.12 for every dollar it spent.

I look forward to two new OCSE reports this year that will give us a deeper understanding of those and other statistics in our program. The first is a “Story Behind the Numbers” fact sheet that analyzes the Census Bureau’s “Child Support Supplement to the Current Population Survey.” We expect to publish the fact sheet soon.

The second report will delve into data analytics. Over the last year, we have been collaborating with a contractor to assess our various data sources so we can use them more easily and effectively. We are developing a conceptual design document and requirement specifications to build an internal child support dashboard framework that will allow us to analyze our data in more robust ways. As many state and local child support programs know, dashboards are great tools for tracking outcomes visually through devices such as bar charts, time series trends and pie charts. They help us to tell the “story behind the numbers.” In addition, users will be able to quickly aggregate data from our data sources and drill down for further analysis. We expect to complete this project in late spring, and we’ll keep you posted.

I hope that many of you will share my focus on statistics this year, as we use data to help us improve ways we manage our program and provide services to all parents and families we serve.

Vicki Turetsky





Large-screen monitors improve efficiency in San Diego courtrooms

A child support courtroom in the San Diego Superior Court

By John Rosenthal, Erik Welton, Lupe Giraldo
County of San Diego Department of Child Support Services

San Diego County is giving families a more efficient courtroom experience. Last July, the San Diego County Department of Child Support Services (SDDCSS) and the San Diego Superior Court completed a project to install document cameras and large screen monitors in its child support courtrooms. The project goals were to use modern technology to have more efficient court hearings and support the department's move to paperless litigation files in early 2013.

Each of the three child support courtrooms now contains new hardware—a document camera on the commissioner's bench and a large, flat-panel monitor on the courtroom wall. In addition to projecting any document in high resolution, the technology allows the commissioner, the SDDCSS attorney or a private attorney to display his or her individual PC desktop onto the large monitor during the hearing for all parties to see. Case participants and attorneys can review a document at the same time, eliminating the need to pass documents between the parties and commissioner during the hearing.

“By partnering with Superior Court, we were able to leverage technology and provide a more efficient way of sharing information during a hearing,” said Jeff Grissom, SDDCSS Director. “It establishes a foundation in our efforts to become paperless in the courtroom and enhances customers' understanding and participation in the legal process. Our staff has been extremely creative in identifying opportunities to increase efficiency and provide better service to our case participants.”

Since its debut, the equipment gets regular use in the courtroom. Projecting the online Guideline Calculator on the screen for all to view lets the commissioner better explain the ongoing support calculation. The screen has displayed a variety of documents including audits, payment records, court rules and sections of the Family Code. One courtroom recently used the system to show a noncustodial parent's business website, which helped to evaluate whether that individual had additional self-employment income. San Diego also is exploring the idea of having Skype video hearings as an alternative to telephonic hearings.

Commissioner Adam Wertheimer was a leading proponent of establishing the system and using it during hearings. “This is an important step towards keeping San Diego on the cutting edge of technology and courtroom efficiency,” said Wertheimer. “We now have a modern and versatile courtroom that will be better equipped to serve the parties, attorneys and commissioners into the future.”

With the system still in its early phases, SDDCSS and the courts are exploring the possibilities, as well as the challenges, to further applying technology in the coming months.

For more information, contact the author at John.Rosenthal@sdcounty.ca.gov or 619-578-6660.



Nationwide campaign

February is [National Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month](#), a time to raise awareness about abuse in teen and 20-something relationships and promote programs to prevent it. Organizations and individuals nationwide are coming together to highlight the need to educate young people about relationships, teach healthy relationship skills, and prevent the devastating cycle of abuse.

This year, the [Family Violence Prevention and Services Program](#) at the HHS Administration for Children and Families is honoring Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month by reaching out to young people, advocates, service providers and community partners to promote healthy communication, relationship building, and peer support. For information about activities, please see a [list of events](#).



Visit www.teendvmonth.org and www.loveisrespect.org to learn about this month's events.



Interactive tool

The [Power and Control Wheel](#) demonstrates ways to handle various forms of abuse. The wheel was created by the Office on Violence Against Women, Department of Justice.



Learn more in the [Texting & Sexting](#) section at loveisrespect.org.

Personal chats

If you or someone you know has been the victim of dating violence, the National Dating Abuse Helpline offers free and confidential help 24 hours a day.

- Call 1-866-331-9474 or TTY 1-866-331-8453.
- Seek online support at www.loveisrespect.org through the live chat feature.
- Text 'loveis' directly to 77054 to begin a text chat with an advocate.

Latino Resource Center offers lessons for teens

By Ja-Na Bordes
OCSE



Screenshots from the [Latino Resource Center](#) home page (left) and the video “Demasiado Joven” (Too Young) (above)

A third of all Hispanic teens say they are sexually active, according to the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy](#). Hispanic teens are more likely than other teens to report not using protection during their last sexual encounter.

Despite disturbing statistics about Hispanic teens (see sidebar), teen pregnancy rates are declining, including those of Hispanic teens. More good news: Teens can now readily find information in Spanish, such as from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s [Latino Resource Center](#).

In a bilingual video at the Center website titled “[Demasiado Joven](#),” (Too Young), Latino teen parents describe their struggles. Another video (in the Faith Leaders section of the website), “[Latino Youth and Faith](#),” shows Latino youth discussing the importance of the church’s involvement in preventing teen pregnancy. In addition, two recent blogs on the National Campaign’s website feature prominent Latinas: [Estelle Raboni](#) and [Jennifer Lopez](#).

In OCSE and other government agencies, we are learning more about how to respond to the needs of the Hispanic community. Many Hispanics are aware of child support programs but lack specific information. We recognize fear of government as a major barrier for our Hispanic customers. A National Campaign report called “[Freeze Frame: A Snapshot of American Teens](#)” reports that 55 percent of Hispanic teens are influenced by their parents about decisions about sex, and 64 percent desire more information on birth control and abstinence. When given access to targeted and bilingual materials, trusted community advocates can educate Hispanic teens and parents on a broader scale.

What we know about Hispanic teens

- Latina teen birth rates are at an all-time low having decreased 47 percent between 1991 and 2010. Yet, Latina teens currently have the highest birth rate among all teens—more than one and a half times higher than the overall teen birth rate.
- 44 percent of Latina teens became pregnant before the age of 20. This group has the highest teen birth rate in the country.
- Latinas [reported](#) having an older first male partner significantly more than non-Hispanic Black or White girls. ([See the report.](#))
- Between 2009 and 2010, 60 percent of Hispanic teen mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 lived below the poverty level.
- 51 percent had a teen birth and a child under age 1.
- 69 percent had a teen birth and a child age 3.

Learn more from the National Campaign’s reports “[Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing Among Latina Teens](#),” “[Teen Childbearing, Education, and Economic Wellbeing](#),” and a CDC “[National Vital Statistics Report](#).”



NYC staff members pause for a photo. All staff have pulled together to move their operations so they could continue services after Sandy.

New York City OCSE responds to Hurricane Sandy—and is stronger for it

By Frances Pardus-Abbadessa
Executive Deputy Commissioner
New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement

This article was adapted from one published by the National Child Support Enforcement Association.

Hurricane Sandy was expected to impact New York City like no other storm in recent memory, with large sections of NYC under mandatory evacuation and the public transportation system shut down. Even with all of the preparation, no one imagined the devastation it would impose on the lives, property, and livelihood of thousands.

The storm left the Human Resources Administration's headquarters, the Office of Child Support Enforcement's main office, and several other HRA buildings uninhabitable. Led by Commissioner Robert Doar, HRA provides services to thousands of clients in need of cash assistance, food stamps, medical assistance, homecare, AIDS services, protective services for adults, child support enforcement, and domestic violence. The challenge of figuring out where to place several thousand staff while mobilizing the agency to meet the needs of individuals and families impacted by the storm and continuing to serve those in its care was no small task. Some OCSE staff also suffered losses from Hurricane Sandy and were living without electricity or running water.

I was charged with getting our program up and running, ensuring services continued as quickly (and as normally) as possible—a challenge given the dislocation of 400 child support staff. I saw my responsibility as ensuring our critical functions, such as addressing financial inquiries, processing enforcement challenges, and processing court orders.

The first step was to find a work site for the displaced staff. With OCSE being part of HRA, we had the opportunity to use its many locations throughout the city. OCSE also had 10 offices to provide some relief. We needed computers, and our systems team immediately became very creative. We began to remove supervisors from computers and requested

that they review work manually to allow program staff to use their computers. We analyzed every possible space available and squeezed each to capacity. Training and conference rooms were converted to work stations. We needed to ensure that the OCSE mailroom, also displaced, was fully operational and that mail was redirected to the new locations in a timely manner.

We also had to focus on the services we provide to our noncustodial parents. We suspended some enforcement measures, such as property execution (FIDM) and the freezing and seizure of personal property. While the suspension of enforcement actions was helpful in avoiding immediate adverse actions on those impacted by the storm, it did not address those where an enforcement action already took place and the noncustodial parent may have submitted a challenge prior to the storm. This problem was compounded by closing OCSE's main office.

So, we assembled a team to climb 22 flights of stairs at our main office to retrieve documents and other mission-critical work located at our main office. In addition, we suspended sanctions on families receiving cash assistance who failed to report to the child support office for an interview or follow-up appointment. Fortunately, many of our operations are highly automated, and we were able to complete mission-critical work from remote locations.

Staff personally hand-delivered account statements and other documents to the courts to ensure hearings proceeded without delay. Many staff continued to report to work despite their own hardships from Hurricane Sandy. The strain of the storm doubled when displaced staff began to report to new work sites. Some sites were two or three times their normal commuting distance and in smaller spaces that required sharing of computers and telephones.

The resilience and dedication of government workers who continued to work on behalf of the parents and children we serve was invaluable during this difficult time. Because staff have been challenged in so many ways and have had to rely on each other more and pull together across divisions, OCSE has become stronger as a result of Hurricane Sandy. OCSE functions are organized into discrete divisions. With staff located across the city, it allowed them to interact and see the work performed by other divisions of the program. It has given them an increased appreciation for the work performed by staff in other areas and has fostered new friendships and stronger ties across the agency.

We are hopeful that we will be able to return to our main office soon, but during this time, I am happy to see my staff continue to work together for the sake of children in New York City. I admire their ability to normalize in these new conditions, and appreciate their dedication to continue helping these families during a very challenging time.

New Report: Status of the responsible fatherhood field

By Ronald B. Mincy, Director
and Serena Klempin
Center for Research on Fathers, Children, and Family Well-Being
Columbia University School of Social Work

To understand the impact of over a decade of erratic fiscal conditions and evolving program priorities, the Center for Research on Fathers, Children and Family Well-Being (CRFCFW) recently undertook a comprehensive survey of the responsible fatherhood field.

The report, “Tossed on a Sea of Change: A Status Update on the Responsible Fatherhood Field,” used four different methods to survey the field. These were: 1) a comprehensive literature review of previous surveys of the fatherhood field; 2) interviews with key research, practitioner, and policy stakeholders; 3) a survey of state agencies likely to be involved in fatherhood work; and 4) a survey of local responsible fatherhood programs.

The survey focused on three main issues: 1) fatherhood program service priorities; 2) the impact of the financial climate on the existence and range of services provided by responsible fatherhood programs; and 3) the extent to which programs have responded to increasing fund requests for evidence of program effectiveness.

As a result of rapidly evolving program priorities, changing funding requirements, and increasing demands for evidence-based practice (the “sea of change”), the center of gravity of the responsible fatherhood field is changing. The report establishes where the field has landed.

Programmatic priorities

The field of responsible fatherhood is taking a holistic view of fathers’ needs and serving a diverse array of fathers. While still tied to its roots in offering employment and parenting services for low-income fathers, the field is continuing to evolve in response to increasing awareness about the breadth of fathers’ needs.

At both the state and the local program levels, this expansion appears to be supported by the development of networks based both on cross-agency collaborations and on web access to large, national fatherhood organizations. The extent of this growth, however, is provoking identity issues for the field. For example, at the local program level, fatherhood services are mainly being delivered through large, multi-service agencies, raising questions about where the fatherhood field sits in relation to the larger field of social services.

Articles in the Community Perspective column do not necessarily reflect the views of OCSE or HHS.

Funding opportunities

Interview and survey participants echoed concerns about limited funding opportunities first raised by the Map and Track surveys in the late 1990s. Increasing reliance on a limited number of federal funding sources continues to pose a threat to the field’s sustainability. Too many agencies providing fatherhood services have only one source of funding or regard their funding as unstable. Even federal grants are not always stable, as a number of grantees failed to have them renewed or successfully leverage those grants into future funding from other sources.

Demand for evidence-based practice

Interview participants agreed that the emphasis on evidence-based practice is growing, but raised a number of practical concerns. Thus far the discussion of evidence-based practice has emphasized rigorous impact studies, without acknowledging programs’ limited capacity to conduct or fund such studies. Thus, the field of responsible fatherhood may be caught in a vicious cycle of needing funding to conduct evaluations, while simultaneously needing evidence of program effectiveness to obtain funding.

To persuade public and private funders to support their services, fatherhood programs will have to build evaluation capacity directly, or collaborate with researchers who have the required expertise. Either way, impact studies will have to be funded. But this is a difficult challenge when programs are struggling to raise funds to sustain basic operations.

To read the full report, please visit [CRFCFW’s website](#). CRFCFW is housed within the Columbia University School of Social Work.

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