



Families Forward Demonstration

Finding Effective Ways to Improve Noncustodial Parents' Job Prospects

Families Forward is a public-private partnership to test how child support programs can help parents qualify for higher-paying jobs to meet their child support obligations.

Moving Families Forward with Skills-Building

If noncustodial parents can't pay child support because they have limited job prospects, how can child support programs leverage resources to improve the earning capacity of parents and increase child support payments? To find answers based on research, the Families Forward Demonstration is testing programs that emphasize skill-building activities in select areas of New York, Michigan, Ohio, and Washington.

Families Forward is a public-private partnership funded by federal Section 1115 waivers. The four state child support agencies received private funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to meet their state cost-sharing requirement (34% of operating funds). By requesting a waiver from the requirement to fund the state share with public dollars, the private investment became eligible for Federal Financial Participation (66% of operating funds). The total federal funding cannot exceed \$2 million.

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, is conducting the evaluation and providing technical assistance to sites.

The waiver initiative builds on findings from previous employment-focused projects for noncustodial parents (NCPs), including the recently concluded OCSE-led study, the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED). While CSPED tested relatively large programs that mostly focused on helping NCPs find jobs, Families Forward serves smaller numbers of parents and places a greater emphasis on building skills and increasing job prospects.

Families Forward Model

Under the Families Forward model, each site performs a statewide-occupational analysis to determine which job sectors are in high demand and offer advancement opportunities. The industry classifications and job sectors identified include commercial driving, construction, hotel hospitality, IT support, cyber security, medical secretary, industrial machinery mechanics, welding, carpentry, and manufacturing production technician. These fields require varying levels of skill development and training, have the potential for career progression, and typically provide starting salaries above minimum wage.

The local child support agency is the lead agency for each site. They identify potential participants, establish project requirements, manage the operational and financial aspects of the grant, and provide the child support services. Job training providers and related supportive service providers are contractually outsourced. The child support agency recruits NCPs and collaborates with local community-based organizations and government agencies to provide job training and related, supportive services.

To be included in the study, NCPs must meet the criteria:

- Be between 18-64 years of age
- Have low to moderate income
- Not receive or apply to receive SSI or SSDI benefits
- Have an open child support case with an active child support order
- Be legally allowed to work in the United States
- Meet the requirements of local training providers

NCPs go through an intake and assessment process and complete an informed consent. Parents are then assigned an occupational skills training track. Job training varies based on local requirements for occupational skills, but generally takes two to six months to complete.

Core Service Components

Families Forward provides these services:

- *Occupational skills training* - Connects parents to the skills and training that will make them eligible for higher-paying jobs in their local labor markets
- *Supportive services* - Offers parents services to help them obtain and retain employment and manage their money and debt
- *Responsive child support practices* - Addresses barriers that prevent parents from participating in employment and training-related activities

Each site may provide incentives to encourage and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes, such as gas or public transportation cards. Most sites also provide limited work supports such as uniforms, tools, other protective or work-related gear, certification fees, and emergency set-asides.

Along with the job skills training, Families Forward provides NCPs with supportive services, such as job development services that will help parents obtain and retain employment and potentially advance in their field, and financial capacity-building services to help parents better manage their money and their debt.

Child support programs use responsive practices to engage parents and remove barriers, such as enhanced navigation assistance, removal of certain enforcement actions such as license sanction, order modifications to align current support orders to actual earnings, and consideration for debt compromise plans.

Timeline and Evaluation of Families Forward

The four-year demonstration runs through September 2021. The final evaluation will provide analysis based on detailed, carefully monitored, and documented data from the sites.

MDRC will use a pre/post quasi-experimental design to analyze results, comparing changes in outcomes such as wages and child support payments before and after. MDRC's final report will describe program development and implementation, participation rates, and outcomes using job placement data, child support administrative records, and Unemployment Insurance wage records. The expected number of Families Forward participants is approximately 900. MDRC expects to complete the final evaluation by March 2022.

From Dead-End Job to In-Demand Career

One participant who completed the hospitality training program was featured in a [January 2019 New York Times article](#). Through study, training, and work support, Michael, a noncustodial parent of four children, is on his way to lifting himself out of dead-end fast food jobs. He now qualifies for more rewarding and higher-paying jobs in the hospitality sector and is committed to making a better life for himself and his family. After getting his first job in a New York City hotel, Michael noted, "It's a new experience in my life, and it's a good job, and I look forward to going to work."