

# Child Support Report

Vol. 36 No. 2 February 2014

## Commissioner's Voice

### History demonstrates child support lifts children out of poverty


**VOICE | BLOG**

For poor families in America, 1964 was a defining year because it set the stage for many of the social safety net programs we have today, including the child support program. While our program was not enacted for another decade, its establishment was part of the broader agenda to alleviate poverty in America.

In 1960, 27 percent of all children and 67 percent of black children were living in poverty. When President John F. Kennedy died in November 1963, Lyndon Johnson inherited a nation highly divided, with social programs that failed its poorest citizens. In his Jan. 8, 1964, State of the Union

Address, President Johnson announced that his administration was declaring “a war on poverty in America,” and he urged Congress and the American public to join him in his effort. This became known as the War on Poverty.

During the speech, Johnson outlined his plan: “Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it. No single piece of legislation, however, is going to suffice.” Over the next several years, the president pushed through a variety of legislation that set out social services programs.

Two of those initial pieces of legislation that were important for child support were the August 1964 Economic Opportunity Act that created programs such as Head Start and the Food Stamp Act, which made the existing food stamp pilot program permanent, and the 1965 Amendments to the Social Security Act, which brought health care to millions because it gave us the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

*(continued)*

**WAR ON POVERTY**  
**50**  
**Years**

## 50 years later

“... In the richest nation on Earth, far too many children are still born into poverty, far too few have a fair shot to escape it, and Americans of all races and backgrounds experience wages and incomes that aren't rising, making it harder to share in the opportunities a growing economy provides. That does not mean, as some suggest, abandoning the War

on Poverty. In fact, if we hadn't declared 'unconditional war on poverty in America,' millions more Americans would be living in poverty today. Instead, it means we must redouble our efforts to make sure our economy works for every working American. It means helping our businesses create new jobs with stronger wages and benefits, expanding access to education and health care, rebuilding those communities on the outskirts of hope, and constructing new ladders of opportunity for our people to climb.”

—President Barack Obama, from a News Release, Jan. 8, 2014

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## Children served by the child support program

In addition, the child support program serves half of all poor children and their families. See the [Reentry Council Snapshot](#) about child support on the Justice Center website.

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Other major anti-poverty programs followed in the 1970s, including the Supplemental Security Income program (established in 1972) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (established in 1975). Both of these programs are now considered key elements of our social safety net, lifting millions of people out of poverty.

The child support program was part of the 1970s wave of anti-poverty programs. Enacted in 1975, our program has grown dramatically. In FY 2012, we delivered about \$26 billion in child support to families in the program and another \$4 billion to families outside of it. That year, child support lifted nearly one million people out of poverty. Today, we serve 1 in 4 children and 1 in 2 poor children in the United States, three territories, and many Native American tribes.

Although the child support program is not means-tested like other social safety net programs, families served by the program tend to be poor or have relatively low incomes. A recent report shows that in 2009, 63 percent of the families in the child support program had incomes below 200 percent of the poverty threshold, and 89 percent had incomes below 400 percent of the poverty threshold (see the [report on the OCSE website](#)).

Moreover, families eligible for child support are often the same families helped by other social safety net programs. A new OCSE [Story Behind the Numbers fact sheet](#) (see below on this page) shows that 4.2 million

custodial families were poor in 2011. Nearly all of these families are headed by a female custodial parent. Many are young, never married, and a member of a minority. Most have two or more children eligible for child support. These families struggle to make ends meet.

When poor families receive child support, it represents a large percent of their income. In 2011, poor custodial families who received child support collected \$4,503, on average, representing 52 percent of the average income of poor custodial parents. And these figures increased between 2009 and 2011. In 2009, poor custodial families who received child support got, on average \$3,909, representing 45 percent of the average income of poor custodial parents.

As we move forward, the child support program will continue to play a key role in the War on Poverty, delivering child support to disadvantaged families in tough budgetary times. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty, the *Child Support Report* will feature more articles this year that further highlight the role that child support plays in lifting people out of poverty.

**Vicki Turetsky**

If you have questions about a child support case, please contact your state or tribal agency.

## New OCSE fact sheet: Custodial Parents Living in Poverty

For families below the poverty level who received child support in 2011, the average amount of child support represented 52 percent of their average yearly income.

Learn more in the new [Story Behind the Numbers fact sheet](#), now on the OCSE website. The data in the report is based on the recent U.S. Census Bureau report “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2011.”



## May 22: Employer Symposium

Join OCSE, states and employers for the 2014 Employer Symposium on Thursday, May 22, following the Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association (ERICSA) annual training conference.

Attendees will discuss these topics and more:

- Processing income withholding orders
- Lump sum reporting
- New Hire reporting
- Implementing electronic income withholding orders (e-IWO)

Use these forms to register by May 8:

- [Employer Symposium](#)
- [Hotel reservation](#)
- [ERICSA conference](#) (includes Employer Symposium)

Note: The ERICSA conference will also offer employer-related workshops and include employer-related topics in the plenary session on May 21.



### Behavioral project tests monthly notice to noncustodial parents in Franklin County, Ohio

By Jason Despain  
HHS Administration for Children and Families

People are more likely to do something accurately and on time if it is easy to do. Simplifying a process is like inserting a waterfall on a flat riverbed. It creates a “channel factor” that guides people toward a particular outcome.

Simplification is especially useful when a process is complex or tedious and people are likely to give up before reaching the conclusion or make mistakes that generate unnecessary costs. Creating channel factors is one of many behavioral interventions studied in the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project, which is sponsored by the HHS Administration for Children and Families and conducted by MDRC.

An article in the [August 2013 issue of the Child Support Report](#) profiled the BIAS team, the Texas Office of the Attorney General, and their behavioral test to increase the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents who apply by mail for a downward modification of their child support orders. The team plans to share its results later in 2014.

#### Identifying areas for improvement

Counties all over the nation seek to improve the complex process of collecting child support payments owed by noncustodial parents. Though collections in Franklin County, Ohio, have been higher than

the national average (65.8 percent vs. 62.4 percent in 2011, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures “[State by state data on child support collections, 2011](#)”), millions of dollars are left uncollected, leaving some families without much needed resources. The BIAS team has worked with the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency since January 2013 to identify bottlenecks that may create barriers for noncustodial parents to make regular payments.

The behavioral diagnosis work in Franklin County identified two areas for possible improvement.

First, 75 percent of noncustodial parents in the county do not receive a monthly notice to pay their child support. While they certainly know they must pay their orders, the absence of a notice makes it easier for noncustodial parents to forget to budget a child support payment over the pay period.

Second, for the 25 percent of noncustodial parents who do get a notice, its design may create barriers for the recipient. The notice has a punitive tone, contains jargon, and does not indicate a due date for payment. It comes on letterhead from a state clearinghouse that is likely unfamiliar to the reader and does not give any guidance about what to do if he or she cannot pay in full. These features may increase the likelihood that these parents will respond with negativity or anxiety.

The BIAS team, in partnership with the Franklin County child support agency, has developed several behaviorally informed modifications to address these issues. One evaluation tests alternative types of phone and letter reminders for noncustodial parents who do not receive monthly notices. The second evaluation tests changes to the notice to make it more simple, positive, and easy to return.

#### Changes in the notice

The new notice will:

- Include a specific due date: the 15th or 30th. The earlier due date may help clients who struggle to plan their expenditures over the month by encouraging them to pay sooner. *(continued)*

A blue graphic with white text. On the left, it says "WAR ON POVERTY" in a small font, "50" in a very large font, and "Years" in a medium font. On the right, it says "This article demonstrates that child support lifts children out of poverty" in a white sans-serif font.

A firm due date at the end of the month may increase the likelihood of the payment as well as give parents a target deadline.

- Simplify the information: Edited text will be easier to understand. The new intervention notice itemizes every charge in the monthly total with a clear explanation. For example, the phrase “ORDERED PMT CHD SUPP ARRS” is now “Monthly Back Support Payment,” so the reader understands that this amount is for arrears owed to the agency. The team removed confusing details. The new form replaces the logo and name of the statewide processing center for child support payments with the child support agency logo, since parents are likely more familiar with the county office.
- Clarify the instructions for making payment. On the current notice, the instructions for a payment are in small font at the top right corner of the page. The updated notice features a distinct section in

the middle of the page titled “How To Make A Payment” and includes a detachable segment listing all requirements. In addition, the notice directs clients to contact the child support agency if they have questions about making a payment or paying with a different method.

- Provide paid postage. The new notice will include a pre-addressed envelope and postage to remove another potential barrier. When parents are ready to make a payment they will not have to search for an address or postage because they can simply enter the payment amount on the detachable portion of the form and include their payment.

Both BIAS pilot tests in Ohio began in January 2014, and run for four months. If these tests produce positive results, other ACF and child support programs may find them useful.

*For more information, please contact the author at [jason.despain@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:jason.despain@acf.hhs.gov).*

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

### Success story: Colorado Parent Employment Project raises Jefferson County parent back on his feet

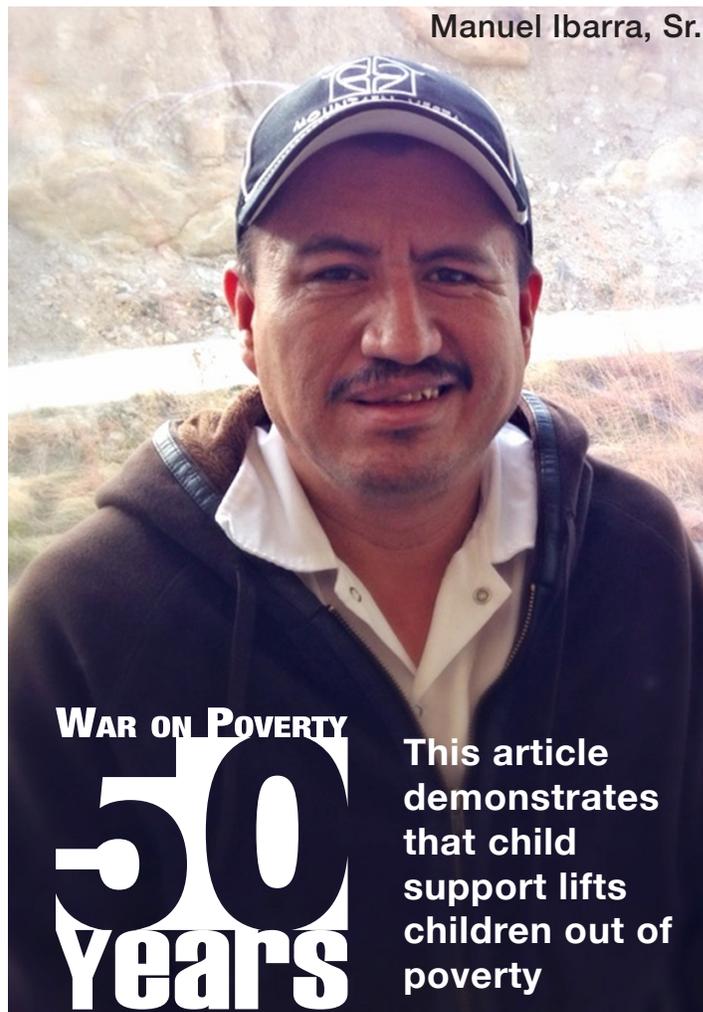
By Faith Rumfelt, Employment Specialist  
*Colorado Parent Employment Project Grant*  
*Jefferson County Department of Human Services*

Manuel Ibarra, Sr., is a 39-year-old father of five who was laid off from his job of 16 years in May 2013. Shortly after the layoff, he was assaulted and mugged on the streets of Denver. The thieves stole his wallet containing \$1,000 from his last paycheck, which he had just cashed. More devastating to Manuel, they took his Social Security card and permanent residence card. He was behind on his rent and car payment. He did not have funds to replace the stolen identification—no employer would hire him without them.

Thankfully, Manuel got help through a grant project called the Colorado Parent Employment Project, or CO-PEP, one of the federal OCSE Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) projects.

*(continued)*

Manuel Ibarra, Sr.



CSPED gives child support programs the ability to help noncustodial parents overcome employment barriers and strengthen their relationship with their children so that they can pay their child support consistently.

In addition to Colorado, seven state child support agencies received the 2012 grants: California, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin. The Colorado grant operates in five counties: Arapahoe, Boulder, El Paso, Jefferson and Prowers. Jefferson County has seen early success helping parents find work.

## As we follow Ibarra's story

Jefferson County CO-PEP staff stepped in to help Manuel with his missing identification and rent situation. They contacted the landlord and worked out a payment arrangement to avoid eviction. They helped Manuel navigate the complicated immigration system. Manuel needed a copy of his Social Security card before an employer would hire him, but he needed a proof of approved residency in the U.S. before he could secure a new Social Security card. He was not sure where to begin.

After setting up four different appointments with the Mexican Consulate, U.S. Department of Immigration, and the U.S. Social Security Administration, the Mexican Consulate gave Manuel a passport.

From there, Manuel visited Immigration where they stamped his valid Alien ID number. Then he secured a new Social Security card.

Within three business days, Manuel had landed a job offer! He was diligent about his job search and secured full-time, benefited employment in a nursing home kitchen. CO-PEP staff is working on a modification for both of his orders so they are within the child support guidelines and "reasonable." Since his orders were established, the financial situation for all the parties has changed and a child emancipated. Manuel planned to make his first full child support payment in January after struggling for nine months to make ends meet.

When asked about his experience with the Colorado project, Manuel said, "Participating in CO-PEP changed my life for the better by helping me work with Immigration, rental assistance, transportation, and my resume. [Before] I felt down, no energy, depressed, and overwhelmed. I didn't know where to start or what to do. I met Faith, and she helped me by giving me wings to fly. She provided me information about computers and the library which has really helped. She is still helping me get better and better. CO-PEP is helping me get back on my feet and provide for the needs of my children. I thank God that He put this program in my life; it has really helped me with everything I need."

## In Focus

# The Power of One

By Gary W. Dart, Director

**Oklahoma Child Support Services Division**

*Director Dart's story is based on an article he wrote for a recent Oklahoma Child Support Services e-publication.*

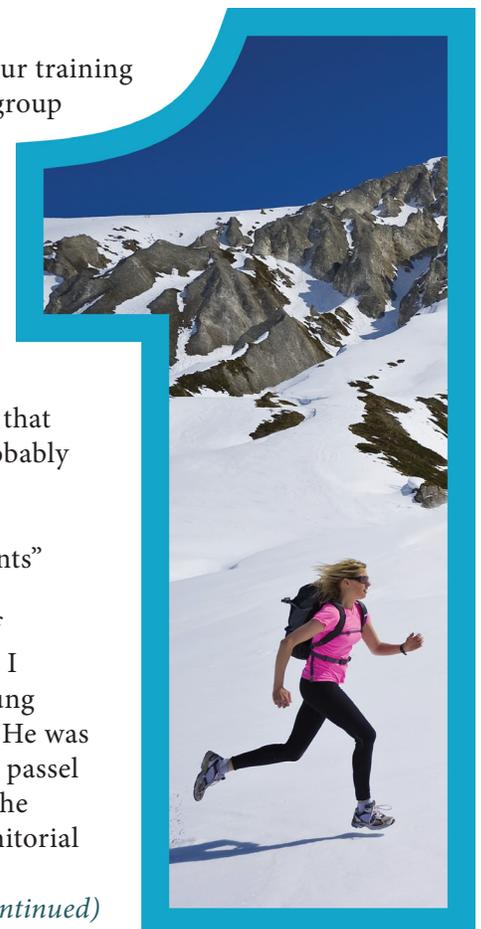
The holiday season is a good time for reflection. One thing that keeps me going is our potential for greatness. Yes, I know, we are overworked and underappreciated, but there is more greatness within us that we have yet to fully realize. I know this because I have learned a few things about the power of each one of us to change the world around us.

One thing that some of you know about me is that instead of just going straight from college into law school, I took a year off to be a V.I.S.T.A. volunteer. V.I.S.T.A. is still around (as AmeriCorps VISTA) and is sometimes referred to as the "domestic Peace Corps" because its volunteers are sent off to work in low-income communities right here in America instead of in other countries in the Peace Corps. My group spent the summer getting training in how to teach adults who were illiterate to read, not using text books but making use of everyday things around us like billboards, newspapers

and signs. When our training was finished, our group was divided up and sent to live and work in the low-income areas of Salt Lake City, Omaha, Kansas City, and Des Moines. It was an experience that none of us will probably ever forget.

Before leaving, I had several "students" who met with me in the basement of a local church, but I remember one young man in particular. He was married and had a passel of children whom he supported with janitorial work at a school.

*(continued)*



He was very eager to learn to read and I was equally eager to try to teach him, as it seemed like the key to opening so many more opportunities for him and his family; but he stopped coming to our meetings after a while. When I was finally able to talk to him, he apologized for dropping out, but told me that he just didn't have time to learn anything—he had to take on other janitorial jobs just to make ends meet. I don't know what ever happened to him, but I will never forget him and the trap that his inability to read had placed him in for the future.

Looking back, I think my time as a V.I.S.T.A. volunteer probably taught me more than it did any of my “students.” Yes, we learned a few lessons about danger and survival skills; none of us was allowed to have a car and had to go everywhere on foot, even after my roommate from California was knifed one day walking back after his teaching session. We learned

about safety and not to go outside when the kids in the neighborhood would gather to throw rocks and bottles at our house to convince us to leave. We also learned a few things about understanding and appreciating other cultures, such as how living with a Mexican family for a while in Colorado taught me that you can get along just fine on menudo (a traditional Mexican soup) and homemade tortillas if that is all you have. Yet, of all the things we learned, I think foremost our experiences taught all of us about our “power.”

Even though we were just wet-nosed kids fresh out of college, we came to understand that our education and knowledge about the world and how society works gave us tools to open doors and affect change. We knew how to convince local department stores to donate school supplies to us even though none of us was from that community. We weren't afraid to approach the City Council for a vote of support; we persuaded businesses and churches to give us access to hold classes after regular hours; and we were able to share the gift of reading with a few people who could then use that tool for the rest of their lives. We opened closed doors because we knew how.

In a very real way, all of us in our child support program have “power” and can make things happen for those we serve. We know where the resources are in our communities and where people can get help. If a customer has a non-child support problem, instead of just saying “that's not our job,” we can open doors for them by sharing “we don't help with that here,

but I know where you can go.” Instead of continuing to have to say that we can't help with their custody and visitation problems, our offices will soon be able to offer information on how parents can work out agreements with outside mediators or seek help at one of the nonprofit organizations receiving our Access and Visitation grants.

Thanks to our Standing Rules Committee and our Policy Unit, we now have rules that permit us to make child support decisions fitted to the individual circumstances of the customers we see; we have the ability to try to craft “right-sized orders” so that the parties have the best possible chance to have child support paid and received on a regular, reliable and dependable basis.

Our offices now collaborate more closely than ever to see to it that obligors with multiple cases have their cases worked together so that their available income is shared

fairly, and the noncustodial parents are not driven underground. By using our knowledge, our tools, and our “power,” we have the ability to help parents succeed at giving their children the emotional and financial support they need to have higher self-esteem, stay in school, and form healthier relationships as they grow into adulthood.

So, I for one am thankful for jobs that allow us to use our knowledge and to make a difference. Unlike my student whose life was so full of work just to help his family survive, we do have jobs that are stable, with dependable salaries and benefits, paid leave and holidays, and retirement to look forward to. Like so many of our customers, I am seeing through my own stepdaughter's efforts now how hard it is to get more than part-time work or benefits in these economic times. I am thankful we have jobs that allow us to “change the world” one family at a time.

I am also thankful for and amazed at how we manage to hunker down and break old records every year, and so grateful for every extra effort that all of you give. And yet, I hope you know, too, that I am also saddened by the increasing numbers of our employees who, like my student, have to seek outside employment to make ends meet, or who leave saying they just can't afford to stay.

Please know that thousands of children and families have better lives because of what we do, and that I appreciate your daily effort in making it happen.

**...thousands of children and families have better lives because of what we do...**



### Writing for the web: *Keep it short*

By Kim Danek, *OCSE*

In his book “On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft,” Stephen King said, “If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut.”

For pleasure, I listen to a wide variety of books in audible formats on my daily commute. At work, I read articles on social media because we want to make sure our child support messages reach the varied members of our audience in the right tone, with the motivational “call to action” (when appropriate), and on the most appropriate platform.

Over the last year, this Media Matters column featured several pieces on social media tools and platforms. This month, I focus on writing for the web using excerpts from articles on writing. The predominant theme: shorter is better.

Ann Wylie wrote an article for the Public Relations Society of America called “Web Writing by the Numbers.” Her article offers web-writing tips that she learned from a Poynter Institute report on how people look at web pages. First, she says, paragraphs should be short—and by short, Poynter means one or two sentences. As more people read on mobile devices, shorter paragraphs encourage them to read more. It also adds white space and breaks up a page of words.

If you have web-only newsletters or other publications, Wylie recommends you make them 50 percent shorter than a regular (print) copy. This makes sense because so many people view news on their mobile devices. The further down the page they have to travel to read an article, the less likely they are to finish a piece.

Poynter, an institution dedicated to excellence in journalism, also has an electronic [archive of tip sheets](#) that focus on writing and editing, including one called “25 Non-Random Things About Writing Short.” Item 5 reads, “Obey Strunk & White [authors of the book “The

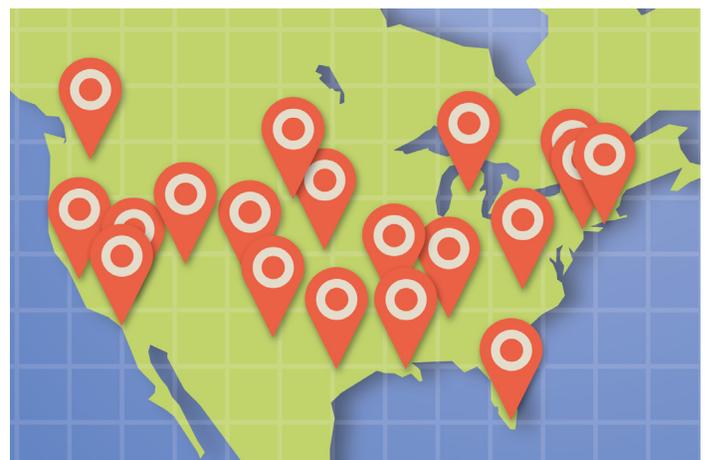
Elements of Style”]: ‘Omit needless words.’ ” Before I send copy on to our editor, I read and rewrite it at least two or three times to make sure it’s concise but still reads well because I also keep in mind tip number 10: “Brevity comes from selection, not compression.”

I’ll leave you with a quote from [David Mamet](#), a prolific American playwright, who wrote, “If the scene bores you when you read it, rest assured it will bore the actors, and will, then, bore the audience, and we’re all going back in the breadline.”

When you write for the web, make your content short, sweet, and to the point, but do not cut so much out that it makes for a “just the facts, ma’am” story with nothing to hold your readers’ attention. Yes, it’s a delicate balance, one that comes easier from practice and reading good writing.

See [plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov) to learn more.

## TECH TALK



### The latest on FIPS (and other) geographic codes

By Joseph Bodmer, Director  
*OCSE Division of State and Tribal Systems*

Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) codes are a standardized set of numeric or alphabetic codes issued by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). People use them to identify geographic locations including counties and states. Recently, the FIPS codes were subsumed into a new set of codes managed and issued by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

ANSI codes are standardized numeric or alphabetic codes to ensure uniform identification of geographic entities through all federal government agencies.

*(continued)*

ANSI has taken over management of geographic codes from NIST. Under NIST, the codes adhered to FIPS.

ANSI now issues two types of codes. They continue to issue the commonly used FIPS codes, although the acronym has now changed to Federal Information Processing Series because it is no longer considered the standard. They also issue the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) identifiers, established by the United States Geological Survey. The U.S. Census Bureau also assigns and issues codes for a number of geographic entities for which FIPS or GNIS codes are not available, and sometimes in addition to FIPS and GNIS codes.

There are three exceptions to the majority of location identifiers that were previously FIPS codes, but are now ANSI codes. The American Indian Areas table in the ANSI standard provides codes assigned by the Census Bureau. The school district code tables provide the local education agency numbers assigned by the U.S. Department of Education, and the voting district tables include codes assigned by the states.

OCSE is validating our geographic identifiers, regardless of originating source (FIPS, ANSI, etc.), as well as identifying all ANSI codes for tribal areas, regardless of source (FIPS, ANSI, or Census Bureau). See a 2007 [OCSE Dear Colleague Letter](#) for the most current list of locator codes.

## Child Support Report

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## The child support program recognizes Teen Dating Violence Prevention Month

Every February, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spreads awareness throughout our communities about Teen Dating Violence Prevention Month.

Please consider sharing these HHS websites, videos, and articles on ways your agency can help.

- CDC's "[Dating Matters](#)" offers training strategies based on evidence about what works in prevention.
- The [Office of Adolescent Health](#) pulls together news, resources, and tips to help you prevent dating violence. The home page includes a link to the White House video "[1 is 2 Many](#)."

