

Child Support Report

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ACCESS TO JUSTICE



Domestic relations: One court's approach

**Hon. Kathleen McCarthy, Presiding Judge,
Third District Court, Detroit, MI**

Navigating the legal system can be time-consuming and frustrating to people with good legal representation. Parents involved in domestic relations matters who cannot afford such advice find the system much more difficult. The Third Circuit

Court of Michigan, located in Detroit, is the eighth largest court in the country. Over 80 percent of our domestic relations litigants represent themselves in divorce, custody, paternity, personal protection, and child support cases. The legal system calls these pro per litigants. With over 32,000 domestic relations cases initiated in this court in 2014 alone, the lack of attorneys can strain both litigants and the court.

Lack of knowledge is the biggest problem in court cases without attorney involvement. Pro per litigants who do not understand how the judicial system works can have serious problems. For example, when noncustodial parents' incomes drop, they might not know that they need to file a motion to modify child support payments. Instead of finding out what to do, some ignore the situation in hopes that it will just go away. They might then fail to meet their child support obligation and end up with a contempt of court citation. Because the court cannot retroactively modify child support, both the in pro per litigant and the court get frustrated. The litigants are often angry because they cannot pay, and the court staff is frustrated because it cannot assist litigants who did not ask for the court's help at the proper time. This lack of knowledge and access to justice becomes detrimental to both parties.

Our solution is education and empowerment. In the Third Circuit Court and its child support enforcement arm, the [Wayne County Friend of the Court](#), we recognize the devastating effect that lack of knowledge has on our litigants. We implemented programs and procedures to increase their understanding of and access to our court system. As an initial step, we developed easy-to-understand motion packets that help parents through the filing process for child support, child custody, and parenting time changes or enforcement. We provide hard copies of the materials at several locations throughout the court and they are printable from the [court's website](#).

The availability of motion packets will not work, however, if litigants do not complete and file the motions correctly. To assist parents, we have a self-help center that has motion packets and information pamphlets available, as well as public computers. Parents can use the computers to access www.michiganlegalhelp.org, a site that provides legal advice on domestic relations issues and helps litigants complete and print out motions and other legal documents. Additionally, the self-help center has information about agencies and legal aid offices that provide legal assistance, including volunteer attorneys who provide free on-site and off-site legal advice. The court also offers an on-site legal clinic several days each month and sponsors community outreach clinics during the year that provide free legal advice to litigants throughout our county, including libraries and United Auto Workers centers. All of this updated information can be found on our website. When litigants use these resources, they have filings that are more complete and are better prepared for court hearings.

While trying to provide equal access to all litigants regardless of economic status can be daunting, to us it is an imperative goal. Our court diligently strives to provide the best resources to our pro se litigants so they can achieve the best results in their domestic relations matters for themselves and their families.

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Father's Day

The child support program honors the nation's fathers and children



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Honoring fathers

We're always looking for ways to increase the effectiveness of our child support program, particularly in three major areas, modernizing technology, increasing procedural fairness, and gathering evidence of programs that work. In honor of Father's Day, our June issue focuses on programs and initiatives

that help fathers deepen their financial and emotional commitments to their children.

For more than 20 years, OCSE has been involved in efforts to secure consistent support for children through programs to improve parental responsibility and increase child support collections. Ongoing research and evaluation efforts are designed to yield the evidence required for developing and replicating program models.

Some of the earliest examples funded by the Office of Child Support Enforcement include the Parents Fair Share demonstration grants of the 1990s and the Partners for Fragile Families demonstration grants of the early 2000s. Both project designs aimed to improve child support payment compliance by increasing employment, earnings, peer support, and cooperative parenting, and by improving child support services. Noncustodial parents who participated in the projects said they felt better about their roles as fathers and their ability to support their children financially.

Today, ongoing research projects will add to the evidence base for child support programs. These studies include

- Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) sponsored by OCSE (read [CSPED Fact Sheet #1](#) to find out more)
- Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation of four Office of Family Assistance Responsible Fatherhood grantees conducted by the Administration for Children and Families (see the article on page 3, "Addressing Low-Income Fathers' Legal Needs and the [Parents and Children Together \(PACT\) Evaluation](#) webpage)
- Department of Labor [Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release](#) (LEAP) initiative designed to increase employment for individuals, including parents, who have been incarcerated
- Paycheck Plus, a demonstration conducted by [MDRC](#) with OCSE support to test Earned Income Tax Credit-like benefits for workers who do not live with children, including noncustodial parents (find out more in the *Behavioral Buzz* newsletter article, [Helping Paycheck Plus participants plan to participate in an informational meeting](#))

Ongoing research and evaluation efforts are designed to build the evidence required for developing and replicating effective program models. No other program has such extensive contact with fathers as child support does. We know that effective child support is linked with higher father involvement. Fathers who are involved with their children are more likely to pay child support, and fathers who pay child support are more likely to stay involved. We also know that parents — fathers and mothers — are more likely to engage with the child support program if they feel that they are treated fairly and even-handedly, receive timely information, and experience the child support program as genuinely helpful and concerned about their well-being. The most effective child support programs combine modern technology with parental engagement and evidence-based strategies to increase collections and address barriers to nonpayment.

Vicki Turetsky

Take the President's Fatherhood Pledge

From the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, [Fatherhood.Gov](#). When fathers aren't around, young people are more likely to drop out of school, use drugs, be involved in the criminal justice system, and become young parents themselves. Fathers, mothers, mentors, and other responsible adults can have a positive impact on our children and youth by providing the encouragement and support they need to fulfill their potential. Show your commitment today, by signing on [The President's Fatherhood Pledge page](#).



LEGISLATION

Fatherhood in Oklahoma: Temporary custody

Renee Banks, Chief Counsel and Legislative Liaison, *Oklahoma Child Support Services*

A new Oklahoma law relating to the ability of the court to grant temporary custody to either parent when it is in the best interests of the child before genetic testing has taken place goes into effect on November 1. Under the new law, courts may award temporary custody to the presumed father until genetic testing has legally established paternity if maintaining the current situation would be in the best interests of the child.

Lawmakers developed the legislation for situations where the court did not have this option and unfortunate results sometimes occurred. Child Support Services provided this example based loosely on a real case. A man and woman had a child. The couple lived as an unmarried, intact family. The mother left the family and the presumed father continued to raise the child. One of the parents filed a petition to establish paternity and the mother requested custody of the child. Although the presumed father had been a fit, sole custodian, the court had no alternative but to award the mother temporary custody because it had no legal authority to award custody to the presumed father prior to genetic testing.

Oklahoma Child Support Services believes this amendment to existing law will have little to no impact on its caseload or business process, but can have a positive impact on some Oklahoma families.

For information, contact Renee Banks, renee.banks@okdhs.org.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Addressing low-income fathers' legal needs

Seth F. Chamberlain and Kathleen McCoy, *ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation*

Since 2005, Congress has funded “[Responsible Fatherhood](#)” (RF) grants. The latest multi-year grant award was \$75 million in 2011. RF grantees typically serve low-income fathers, many of whom are noncustodial parents owing child support. By law, the programs must weave together activities promoting responsible parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability. For example, a program may provide workshops for fathers on how to be more involved in their children’s lives, ways to communicate with their (former or current) romantic partners, and how to format a resume. Some also offer child support assistance. Through the range of services, programs aim to increase the time men spend with their kids and increase the number of fathers with steady employment. These activities often lead to other positive outcomes such as increasing the number of men reliably paying child support.

Gathering data

ACF’s [Parents and Children Together \(PACT\) Evaluation](#) is reviewing four RF grantee programs that serve disadvantaged fathers, many of whom are in the child support system. PACT has found that, although 8 in 10 program participants are noncustodial fathers, only about 6 in 10 have a legal child support arrangement. PACT has also found that about three-quarters of men have been convicted of a crime, and about one-third are on parole when they join an RF program.



PACT participants at the Fathers' Support Center in St. Louis

Recruiting participants

The four fatherhood programs use the child support system, in addition to other strategies, to help recruit men. For example, the Kansas Department for Children and Families sent out flyers to men in their child support caseload inviting them to learn more about the Kansas City Connections to Success program. The Fathers' Support Center in St. Louis received referrals from child support agencies, the courts, and the probation and parole systems.

Reducing arrearages and providing legal support

PACT is also documenting how the programs have forged agreements with child support offices to link program participation with arrearage reductions. In St. Paul, fathers attending 12 parenting workshops at the Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota [FATHER project](#) can reduce their public assistance arrearages by up to 35 percent, thanks to an agreement with the Ramsey County child support office. Meanwhile, participants at [Connections to Success](#) (Kansas City) can reduce arrearages by up to \$2,000 depending on the amount of hours they participate. The state has forgiven more than \$235,000 of child support arrearages and participant-fathers have made nearly \$720,000 in child support payments between February 2012 and March 2015.

Some of the RF programs in the PACT evaluation also address legal issues such as custody and visitation. During RF training courses, lawyers give presentations on fathers' rights and obligations during workshop sessions. Staff at [Urban Ventures](#) in Minneapolis, MN, sometimes go to the child support agency or to court with parents to advocate for them or provide support. Two grantees offer legal services for parenting agreements, child support modifications, and custody. At the St. Louis [Fathers' Support Center](#), dads can receive free advice from lawyers at an in-house legal clinic and get legal representation for a fee. Through a partnership with Central Minnesota Legal Services, fathers attending the Goodwill-Easter Seals program can hear pro bono legal advice and a small number may receive free legal representation.

Moving forward

Grantees' programs are still growing and developing. PACT will provide a foundation and an evidence base that will guide future program design and evaluation. The [PACT webpage](#) will have regular updates on the progress of the evaluation, as well as reports and briefs.



PACT participants at the Fathers' Support Center in St. Louis



Grantees' programs are still growing and developing. PACT will provide a foundation and an evidence base that will guide future program design and evaluation.

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation has just released a second report as part of the PACT evaluation, "[In Their Own Voices: The Hopes and Struggles of Responsible Fatherhood Program Participants in the Parents and Children Together Evaluation.](#)" We'll feature in-depth information from this new report in the *July CSR*.

Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field

Adapted from the Fatherhood.gov website

After a divorce or break-up, some noncustodial fathers spend infrequent time with their sons and daughters while others disappear from their children's lives completely. When parents go missing from their children's lives, children sometimes grow up without the knowledge or tools to be a good parent when their time comes. Some noncustodial parents who want to stay involved in their children's lives are lucky enough to find fatherhood programs in their areas; others are not.

In honor of Father's Day, here is a toolkit designed for organizations that want to help men be better dads. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, commonly known by its URL Fatherhood.Gov, has developed a package of materials called the [Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field](#). It provides information for organizations that want to start a fatherhood program, as well as best practices for groups that already have an active organization.

Teachers always tell their students to do their homework. Clearinghouse director Kenneth Braswell says the same is true here. "Before launching a program, it is essential to identify and understand the specific needs of fathers in your community, foster solid partnerships, and determine the scope of services that your program will address." It can be daunting to define the needs of the fathers in the community and match that up with the capabilities and limitations of the organization. The [Start](#) page offers information on planning and design, staffing, and even budgeting and fundraising for a fatherhood program.

There are sections about building a program and working with dads in various types of settings. Many recommendations are time-tested best practices and guidance from established organizations, such as this nugget of wisdom from Joe Jones, [Center for Urban Families](#), "Participants must know that if they slip and fall we've got them ... they have to feel they belong."

Most sections have subsections called Top Takeaways and Helpful Resources that provide additional information. The practical part of the toolkit ends with [Activities](#). The website explains that, "Used effectively, group and one-to-one activities can motivate fathers and help them overcome barriers they once might have thought were insurmountable."

For more information on a broad range of topics for dads, visit Fatherhood.gov.

Update: Brown County adds legal services

Troy Streckenbach, Office of the Executive, Brown County, WI

On March 17, noncustodial parents in the Brown County, WI, Supporting Parents Supporting Kids program were on hand for a beneficial ribbon cutting. Members of the [Brown County Child Support office](#), Legal Resources of Brown County, and the Department of Workforce Development celebrated a new partnership that brings free legal services to low-income residents.

Volunteer attorneys and paralegals discuss court procedures such as filing motions for change of child support orders and enforcement, and changes of placement or visitation. This free legal aid is available every Tuesday evening at the Wisconsin Job Center in Green Bay.

The Supporting Parents Supporting Kids program is one of the pilot sites for the OCSE [National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Projects](#) (CSPED) grant. The February [Child Support Report](#) highlighted one of their success stories, Perseverance pays in Brown County, WI.

For information on CSPED, contact Lauren Antelo, CSPED Grants Project Officer, at lauren.antelo@acf.hhs.gov.



HEALTH

Medicaid and CHIP: Families Can Apply at Any Time – So Why Wait?

Vikki Wachino, Director, *Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services*

Reprinted from [HHS blog](#)

It's so important for children to get the health care they need, when they need it. That's why our Connecting Kids to Coverage Campaign is featuring a "year-round enrollment" message. We want families to know that they can apply for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) at any time – there's no deadline. And, generally, children who are found eligible can enroll and begin getting the health benefits that every child needs.

As a nation, we have made significant progress in reducing the number of uninsured children, and since most uninsured children are eligible for Medicaid or CHIP, enrollment in these programs has been a strong force behind our success. A new Urban Institute analysis of data from the 2013 American Community Survey shows that nationally 88.3 percent of eligible children are enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP. That's up from less than 82 percent in 2008. What's more, 22 states and DC have participation rates above 90 percent, demonstrating that we can get even closer to the goal of enrolling all eligible children. The steps states are taking to simplify enrollment and our collective efforts to reach out and enroll eligible children are working. You can find the [Medicaid and CHIP participation rate in your state here](#).

What does it mean for families to get health coverage for their children? Jessica Olivares, a Las Vegas mother of three, knows the answer first-hand. She and her husband, Gabriel, could not afford to put their children on Gabriel's health plan at work. Jessica found assistance at Positively Kids, a community organization that, under our Connecting Kids to Coverage grant program, helps families sign up for health coverage. The children were enrolled in Medicaid — and when they needed health care, they got it. One of the Olivares boys was able to have painful wisdom teeth extracted and the other got treatment for a sports injury. In addition, since Medicaid covers preventive care, all three Olivares children had their eyes examined and were prescribed glasses. Jessica says, with health coverage, "the feeling of relief is indescribable. And it's invaluable to know that someone besides me cares so much about the health and well-being of my children!"

And there was another bonus: Jessica discovered that, after suffering with serious health problems without insurance, she was eligible herself under Nevada's Medicaid expansion. Now, in 28 states and DC, more parents than ever before, like Jessica, can qualify for Medicaid. When parents are covered, they can be more productive at work and their families will be more financially secure. And, healthy parents are better able to engage in child-focused activities, like participating in school events.

There's still more work to do. The Urban Institute analysis reveals that roughly 3.7 million children are eligible for Medicaid and CHIP but are not enrolled. Together, our Connecting Kids to Coverage grantees and partners can continue to make progress. Check out our website, www.InsureKidsNow.gov for posters, flyers and videos that can support your outreach efforts. We hope you'll help us spread the message that families can apply for Medicaid and CHIP at anytime — so why wait?

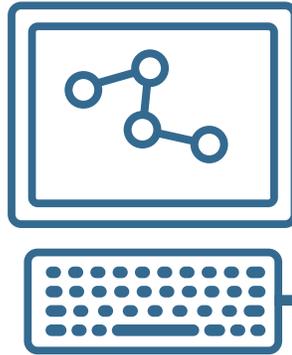


Editor's note: The OCSE [Child Support Portal](#) provides caseworkers, employers, and insurance and financial institutions with a set of electronic tools that help them with their daily activities. The portal allows the organizations to send and receive vital information about child support cases quickly and easily. Indiana uses the full functionality of the portal at the state level. The staff is in the process of training regional field consultants so they can help county-level child support workers with the tools. Program officials share their experiences below.

TECH TALK

How Indiana uses the Child Support Portal

Jan Raffauf, Project Manager, *Indiana Child Support Bureau*



We administer Indiana's child support program at the state level and oversee 92 locally operated county offices. We have been training regional field consultants on the [Child Support Portal](#) by arranging for small groups to try out a new tool first so we can think about procedures and prepare answers to potential questions. Afterwards, we set up accounts for the county staffs, notify them of the tool availability, and provide a user guide. Some tools are very easy to use so people required little training. When they do, the field consultants can go out to assist staffs. The system works well because few people have needed training. When there are minor issues, regional field consultants assist or we talk a user through the steps by phone.

Here are examples of the ways we use some of the tools and why we like them.

Locate - Our state and county staffs use Locate more than any other tool. When we automated electronic income withholding order processing with the Social Security Administration, we needed more benefit information. Now, we can request benefit information for parents and children through the portal whenever we need it. Staff members think the immediate access to National Directory of New Hire (NDNH) data is this tool's best feature. They like receiving email notices that include the Case ID. Our office also helped the Child Welfare staff get their own portal access. They find it useful for locating relatives of abused or neglected children.

Electronic Document Exchange (EDE) - Our Central Registry Unit uses EDE to send Uniform Interstate Family Support Act, commonly known as UIFSA, documents to our counties. When they receive a document, registry staff reviews it, creates or updates the case in our statewide child support system, and then scans the entire packet. They upload scanned documents through EDE so the appropriate county can download them.

The exchange transfers case information faster and lets us monitor documents so we know counties have downloaded them. Paperless counties find the process especially nice. It also saves the state money on envelopes and postage, though the Central Registry still mails certified copies and pages with original signatures.

Staffs use the tool to transfer documents quickly and securely between counties. People needed more training on EDE than for other tools, but our counties are working so well with the exchange that we are anxious to have more states use it.

IRG, QUICK, and FCR Query - Everyone likes having the Intergovernmental Reference Guide (IRG), Query Interstate Cases for Kids (QUICK), and Federal Case Registry (FCR) Query in one location and appreciates the interactive enhancements. For example, with the IRG on the portal, a worker's password is the same for all the tools. QUICK usage increased after recent UIFSA training because workers found they could view information on Indiana cases as well as ones in other states. Our Centralized Enforcement Unit uses the IRG to find insurance match and tax intercept contacts in other states. The more states that use these tools, the better off we all are.

Federal Collection and Enforcement - Two state units use this tool to update tax and administrative intercepts and passport reinstatements immediately rather than including the information in our weekly OCSE update file. Caseworkers can check passport reinstatement and adjustment requests through the portal and determine whether another state has submitted a denial or offset request. By using the portal, staff can respond to questions quickly and refer people to the correct office when they have questions. Counties also submit success stories on reinstated passports.

The staff also uses this tool to find fraudulent tax return information and to download data on legitimate or fraudulent funds. They can confirm that OCSE has received funds and explain when we should receive funds to return overpayments. The feature has helped calm some angry parents.

Federal Case Registry Misidentified Participant

– This provides a much-needed way to disassociate an incorrect SSN from a participant. FCR has also helped us avoid significant costs and delays because we can use the portal rather than modifying our older, statewide child support system. To date, the workers have recorded about 40 SSNs as misidentified. The volume is small, but the impact can be huge for everyone involved.

The portal requires little effort to implement and is easy to use. For example, our Employer Maintenance Unit monitors the Debt Inquiry reports on the portal and notifies employers of the correct balance. More employers are reporting the lump sums because it is easy to do online whether they are comfortable using electronic systems or not.

We have many quotes from portal users containing the words “love it”, “faster”, and “better.” We cannot wait to see what comes next!

For more information, contact Jan Raffauf, Project Manager, Indiana Child Support Bureau, at janet.raffauf@dcs.IN.gov.



Take time to be a dad today.

World Wrestling Entertainment joined the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance, Fatherhood.Gov, and the Ad Council to create public service advertisements (PSAs) to encourage dads to spend quality time with their children. [Here's one video.](#)

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Partnerships to build capacity: University collaborations

Lauren Antelo, OCSE

In the fall of 2011, OCSE awarded demonstration grants to three states to see if partnerships between universities and child support offices could strengthen families. Each study would test a different concept, but they all had the same goals:

- To improve analysis and interpretation of various types of data, and
- To improve capacity across organizations by identifying areas that needed changing and then assessing how those changes affected families.

Over the last four years, Iowa, Michigan, and Washington successfully worked towards those goals. In their final, no-cost extension year, the three are sharing lessons learned from the interventions and their close, collaborative partnerships with the universities and researchers in their communities.

Staff, faculty, and scholars brought expertise in research design and data analysis and the use of tools like Geographic Information Systems, better known as GIS. Child support staffs shared their knowledge and experience of managing and operating the complex world of child support activities. Together, the universities and states developed pilots to test new ways of understanding paternity establishment rates, collecting on arrears-only cases, and incentivizing regular child support payments through debt reduction.

The grants end this September but the work will continue because the activities foster a culture of critical inquiry focused on improved program effectiveness. Iowa, Michigan, and Washington will continue to build their internal capacity for research and evaluation and strengthen their relationships with Iowa State University, the University of Michigan, MEF Associates, and the University of Washington.

OCSE Policy Interpretation Question memo [PIQ 12-02](#), explains the rationale behind these programs. “Research, evaluation, and analysis are critical to build the child support evidence base, inform the development of new policies and practices, and assess the effectiveness of partnership programs and strategies in improving child support outcomes.” States can use federal child support funds to partner with a state university to research ways to improve program effectiveness. The memo also says, “State universities may meet the requirement for state matching funds through providing their services as an in-kind contribution or committing matching funds.”

The programs and improvements these partnerships have started may continue to grow with child support funding and the state university's contributions.

In the articles below, the project directors and researchers share what they each learned from their university partnership.

Michigan: Retooling Grant

Jan Merkle, Re-engineering Specialist, Michigan Office of Child Support

Michigan's Office of Child Support partnered with the University of Michigan School of Social Work (SSW) to increase the amount of child support payments, reduce arrears, and improve child support workers' knowledge of effective case management. To do this, the staff analyzed data from the Michigan Child Support Enforcement System and implemented two pilot programs: Compromise Arrears in Return for On-Time Support and Predictive Modeling. They called the overall effort the Retooling Grant.

Compromise Arrears in Return for On-Time Support (CAROTS)

CAROTS, which ended in April, had two major goals: to increase consistent child support payments for families and to reduce uncollectible state-owed arrears. Eligible noncustodial parents signed an agreement stating they would consistently pay monthly child support to reduce their state-owed arrears. Key challenges included recruiting and enrolling noncustodial parents who were eligible to participate and maintaining current contact information.

CAROTS staff learned early that noncustodial parents who successfully completed the first payment period were more likely to remain compliant. By early 2015, the staff had enrolled approximately 200 parents in the two pilot counties and discharged approximately \$1.8 million of uncollectible arrears. Over the next several months, child support, university, and the pilot program staff will analyze the outcomes to determine what to change before they offer CAROTS statewide.

Predictive Modeling (PM)

Project staff also used PM to improve case management and collections. Researchers use this process to analyze people's behavior to predict what they will do in the future. For this part of the grant, they worked with child support staff members in [Friend of the Court](#) offices. Michigan uses [Friend of the Court](#) offices to enforce child support orders.

SSW members developed a survey to collect general predictive data not found in the state child support enforcement system. Child support staff distributed the survey to randomly selected noncustodial parents who had existing orders in one of the seven PM pilot offices. This initial survey asked questions that other states identified as helpful in predicting behavior. Based on the data they received and payment histories of the surveyed noncustodial parents, SSW members identified specific characteristics that predicted payment compliance in Michigan cases.

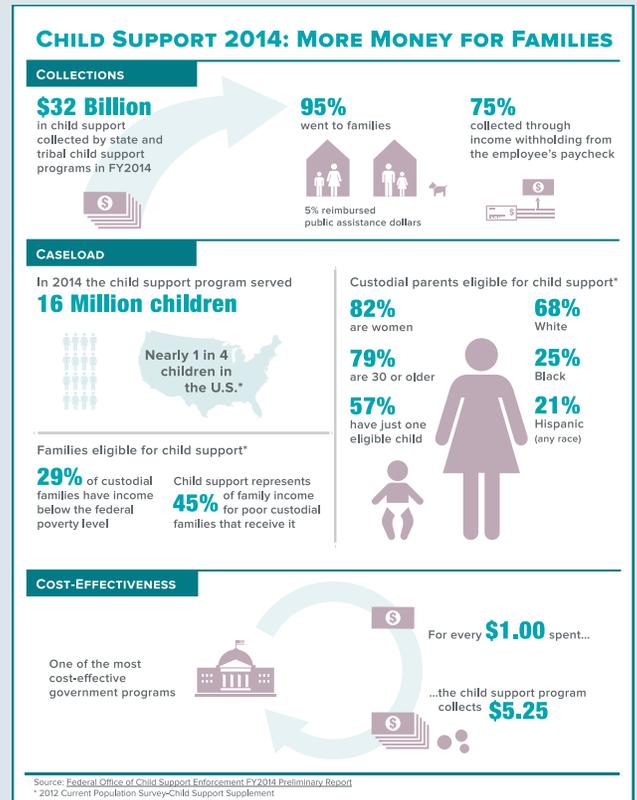
SSW then developed a second survey containing only these Michigan predictors. [Friend of the Court](#) staff members surveyed 50 additional noncustodial parents who had newly established orders. SSW members then provided predictor scores for this second group.

[Friend of the Court](#) office staff proactively worked with parents from both groups who were less likely to comply with child support orders based on their predictor scores.

Preliminary information showed improved case management, better relationships with noncustodial parents, validation of the predictors, and increased collections in offices that embraced this approach. Final data analysis of the pilot will be out soon.

FY 2014 Infographic

This infographic provides a high-level overview of successes in three child support program areas: collections, caseload, and cost-effectiveness. Visit our [Researchers page](#) for state and tribal child support agency data. Our annual [Reports to Congress](#) highlight program achievements and statistics about caseload, collections and expenses.



Washington: Rigorous research to inform agency operations

Asaph Glosser, Senior Research Associate, *MEF Associates*

The Washington State Division of Child Support partnered with the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs and MEF Associates to improve performance on hard-to-collect cases.

The state had been using new automated collection methods, but wanted to improve collections for cases without an income withholding order. The grant funded two different trials designed to increase child support collections from noncustodial parents who were difficult to collect from. Researchers and staff divided the cases into two sets of groups with one set assigned to a dedicated collections unit. Staff would use the other set to determine if monthly payment reminders would motivate parents to pay reliably.

Dedicated collections unit

When Washington received the University Partnership grant, it also got a state authorization to staff a specialized collections unit. This unit would focus on cases that only had state-owed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) debt. The child support division believed the specialized unit would re-focus efforts on these cases and improve collections. They worked with the research team to randomly transfer some of the eligible cases from their caseworkers to the new unit. Cases not transferred became the control group. This process allowed researchers to rigorously compare outcomes between the cases assigned to the specialized unit test group and those that received the normal approach.

Monthly billing statements

While the child support office could send billing statements to noncustodial parents, the office generally sent reports only when the obligor requested one or a staff member decided to send one.

In 2012, the Washington State child support director asked other state directors about their offices' billing statement policies. Of the 20 states that responded, 19 sent statements automatically, but none reported ever trying to assess the effectiveness of this effort.

The staff decided to send billing statements to all new noncustodial parents who did not have wage withholding in place to see if the notice would improve collections. Again, they randomly assigned some eligible parents to

be in the test group – those that would receive billing statements for every month they did not have an income withholding order in place. The control group members would only receive statements at a staff member's discretion.

Test design

Both studies used two validation techniques to provide the best possible data. Researchers and state staff randomly divided cases and participants into test and control groups and they relied exclusively on administrative data to measure the impacts of each intervention. In these ways, researchers did not intrude on office staff or its customers during the tests and, by using these methods, they helped ensure their data was valid.

Results

Team members determined that using the special collection unit for TANF intervention improved collections of state-owed debt. The second intervention, however, did not work as well. Sending regular statements did not increase the likelihood that noncustodial parents would make at least one payment or increase the amount they paid. Researchers also did not see any increases in the number of months with a payment or the total payments either. Further information on the results will be shared in the final report on OCSE's website. In addition to the test results, which have direct policy implications for Michigan and other states, the collaborative experience showed the broader value of integrating rigorous research into efforts to improve agency operations.

Child Support Report

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