

# Child Support Report

Vol. 36 No. 3 March 2014

## Massachusetts surveys parents on customer service satisfaction

By Karen E. Melkonian, Counsel  
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We know that we can't always give our customers what they want. But we *can* always give them information they need in a courteous and responsive manner.



To find out what our customers think about the Massachusetts Department of Revenue's Child Support Enforcement Division, we asked the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston to help us design surveys to measure custodial and noncustodial parent satisfaction. During our year-long contract with the center, we learned that there is much more to survey design and development than meets the eye.

Customer input is essential to developing survey questions that get to the heart of customers' experiences. Center researchers held two focus groups (one with custodial parents and the other with noncustodial parents) to give them the opportunity to talk about their likes, dislikes, and understanding of how we communicate.

### Designing the survey

As it turned out, our customers don't always understand us! For example, our customers had no familiarity with our team, the Customer Service Bureau. They actually referred to us as 'DOR's 800 number.' Because of their input, we drafted survey questions using language that would have clearer meaning to our customers. The survey form, with 70 questions, was clearly laid out and accompanied by a cover letter from the Customer Service Bureau to let parents know why we were sending the survey, how DOR was going to use the results, and finally—and perhaps most importantly—that DOR would never know whether or how an individual responded.

We designed the survey instrument and process to encourage response. We initially sent out a large number of surveys—2,500 to noncustodial parents and 1,600 to custodial parents. We later mailed a reminder postcard and followed up with a second survey to non-responders.

### Gleaning results

The survey response rate not only exceeded our expectations, it was also high enough to give us confidence to use the information to develop new systems and processes that better meet the needs of our customers.

Satisfaction was measured across a number of variables, including level of respect and ease of finding and understanding information. While the majority of parents were generally satisfied with our communication efforts, significantly more custodial parents reported satisfaction than noncustodial parents across most of the variables.

For example, many more custodial parents reported courteous treatment during phone calls (96% vs. 82%) and 'fair' treatment at court hearings (89% vs. 52%). Also, more custodial parents felt they were given an opportunity to ask questions during the hearing (92% vs. 67%) and were given information about what to expect after the hearing (80% vs. 55%).

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Among parents who said they asked questions and were given information about what to do after the hearing, custodial and noncustodial parents overwhelmingly, and with no significant difference in numbers, reported that DOR's answers and explanations were easy to understand.

The survey also included demographic questions to determine the responder's education level, age, public assistance status, etc. Custodial and noncustodial parents were similar with respect to all characteristics except level of education. Significantly more custodial parents reported education beyond the high school level. This distinction may explain why so many more custodial parents reported that written information on the web and in letters was easy to understand (92% vs. 68%, and 93% vs. 70%, respectively).

Finally, with respect to future uses of technology, custodial and noncustodial parents both reported that they preferred getting information through e-mail rather than text messages.

## In Focus

### New toolkit can help child support workers develop workforce programs

By John Langrock, OCSE

When enforcing child support orders, we know that reliable and consistent compliance with the support order starts with the job, and the income withholding enforcement technique ensures steady child support payments. While this is true for about 70 percent of the cases, many parents still are without jobs or steady employment.

Recent child support data indicate that about 25 percent of low-income noncustodial parents owe the bulk of the child support debt (estimated at 70 percent of total arrears). Some refer to many of these parents as “hard-to-employ” due to their limited work histories, incarceration, low levels of education and skills, etc. This evolving dynamic prompted us to consider strategies for child support-led employment and training needs.

In 2011, OCSE funded five Section 1115 demonstration grants titled “Partnerships with Child Support Services to Develop Workforce Strategies and Economic Sustainability.” In 2012, OCSE funded eight 5-year demonstration grants to test the efficacy of child support-led employment programs for noncustodial parents, using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) scientific experimental design.

### Planning change

While the findings tell us that most of our customers are satisfied with how we communicate, they also show us there is more we can do—particularly when it comes to closing the satisfaction gap between noncustodial and custodial parents. We are making the specific changes that we can right away, such as modifying our website so that information is more accessible and relevant to noncustodial parents. We're also developing a plan to address some of the larger issues.

Most notably, while we know that parent satisfaction with us is influenced—at least in part—by the role we play in their lives (either by collecting or disbursing child support) and their education level, these factors alone don't explain why noncustodial parents perceive us as less courteous, fair, and informative than their custodial parent counterparts.

We plan to use the survey results as a benchmark so we can measure whether changes in processes or systems result in greater levels of customer satisfaction in the future.

Contact Karen Melkonian at [Melkonian@dor.state.ma.us](mailto:Melkonian@dor.state.ma.us) with any questions or for a copy of the survey.

### Step-by-step guide

The evaluator (Center for Policy Research or CPR) for the Tennessee workforce strategy grantee (2011) developed a step-by-step toolkit guide to establishing a workforce program for unemployed or underemployed, low-income noncustodial parents in the child support system. Child support agencies can use the guide to develop workforce programs for noncustodial parents who have employment problems and are consequently unable to pay their child support obligations.

The guide explores key topics to consider when developing a workforce program, including program design and partners, roles of the manager and court, co-parenting and fatherhood services, domestic violence considerations, and evaluating outcomes.

See the “Toolkit: Workforce Programs for Child Support Populations” on the [Center for Policy Research website](#).



WAR ON POVERTY  
**50**  
Years

This article demonstrates that child support lifts children out of poverty. Learn more in the [Commissioner's Voice blog](#).



### VOICE BLOG

## Technology – the ‘band boards’ of our program

About 10 years ago, we decided to remodel our house—mostly infrastructure work. We decided to replace the roof and siding, install modern doors, put in more windows, and—the fun project—remodel the kitchen.

One morning, our contractor said, “You need to replace the band boards.” I shrugged, and said, “Ok, how much will that cost?” He repeated with some urgency, “You need to replace your band boards *now*. They have rotted.” He paused, cleared his throat, and said, “Do you know what a band board is?” I shook my head. He said, “The band boards are the only thing attaching the second floor to the first floor.” Well, that little item was not in the budget. But I told him to fix the band boards first.

If customer service is the door to the child support program, and family-centered strategies are the windows to the rest of the world, technology is the band boards. And if the band boards need attention, that has to be the first priority for state child support programs. It's clear that fixing the band boards, or in our case, replacing our legacy systems and technologies, is the most pressing need and top priority for many state child support agencies. In most states, child support computer systems are 15 years old.

Some of the questions we've heard time and again at OCSE are: “Can I use Commercial-Off-The-Shelf or ‘COTS’ software to build it?”; “What are the best new systems out there in the last five years that I might be able to leverage for my own replacement project?”; “How do I decide what the best option is for my program, my state?”; and of course, the question we hear most often, “Where do I begin?”

In the last five years, OCSE has given states more flexibility and opportunity to upgrade technology. Technology options are more flexible and modular than ever before. In 2010, we reformed the Advance Planning Document (APD) federal approval process to recognize the ongoing improvements in technology, and to give states more flexibility on low-risk projects. Under the APD process, states can now submit a feasibility study to define possible solutions, and compare, evaluate, and ultimately identify your best value to a new child support system. With an acceptable feasibility study comes not only substantial federal funding, but also significant

technical assistance from OCSE throughout the life of the state's system development project.

Recent [OCSE guidance](#) can help states take advantage of the full array of new and evolving technology products and services that can support the efficient operation and administration of not only child support programs, but also Child Welfare, Medicaid and Food Stamp programs.

We worked with a number of other federal human service programs and their state counterparts to design a comprehensive architectural framework to facilitate information sharing, improve service delivery, prevent fraud, and provide better outcomes for children and families. Called the National Human Services Interoperability Architecture (NHSIA), it brings together pieces from other architecture models such as the Federal Enterprise Architecture (FEA). NHSIA offers a foundation for common understanding, interoperability, standards, and reuse.

We also began working on a method for ensuring a reusable, repeatable standard for exchanging data between systems through the National Information Exchange Model (NIEM).

Finally, we continue our focus on delivering to our state and tribal programs the most timely, accurate technical assistance on technology-related issues. Whether you seek the advice of the technology staffs in our federal or state systems divisions here in OCSE, consult with staff in another state that has tackled a major system replacement project, or rely on your state's knowledgeable information technology people, the idea of replacing your child support system should not be as daunting as it was 10 or 15 years ago.

Think of your child support program like you do house renovations—are you in need of a little paint and caulk, are you modernizing the windows and doors, and putting in a new kitchen—or is replacing the band boards your first order of business? We can help.

I invite the child support community of workers to submit a comment on my blog, or contact [joseph.bodmer@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:joseph.bodmer@acf.hhs.gov), director of the OCSE Division of State and Tribal Systems, for more information.

*Vicki Turetsky*

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



### Wisconsin staff streamlines intergovernmental casework

By Ike Anyanike, Intergovernmental Specialist  
Central Registry  
Wisconsin Bureau of Child Support

As budgets tighten, timeframes loom, and customers are eager to receive their child support payments regularly and on time—child support workers want to be on top of their game.

Add to that the pressure of handling an intergovernmental case—when two and sometimes three states are involved, and when the initiating caseworker is not fully in charge of the enforcement activities on the case—and frustration can increase for all involved.

#### Lean government principles

To help address these pressures, some state child support programs are turning to the lean government principles to identify and then implement the most efficient way to provide government services. The principles help staff examine every aspect of accomplishing regular tasks to eliminate waste and increase efficiency.

According to the trainer in a session at the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, the lean principles focus on using “value added techniques toward operational excellence with a keen focus on people, systems thinking, and continuous process improvement.” The principles help a workforce support, encourage, and share best practices and continuous improvement techniques.

The Wisconsin child support program has an active Central Registry that focuses on the duties (laid out in legislation) of receiving, transmitting, and responding to inquiries on all incoming intergovernmental child support cases. It works with local child support agencies to resolve complex case problems with jurisdictions outside the state. But oftentimes intergovernmental case enforcement gets bogged down by communication issues or misunderstanding another state’s procedures that—although equally valid—may be dramatically different than another agency’s approach or interpretation of the same issue. The lean government principles provide tools to clear these bottlenecks while providing efficient and timely service.

Applying these techniques in Wisconsin has resulted in 60 percent improvement in intergovernmental case processing in the Central Registry.

#### Putting the lean process to work

To hone the lean government skills in the Bureau of Child Support, six staff members—Marc DiBernardo, Jamie Doeseckle, Patris Lor, Dorothy Nelson, Jodi Ross, and Ike Anyanike (*the author*)—received 16 hours of training over 2 days. Two other staff members, Sarah Schmelzer and Racheal Rolli, had received training earlier to serve as resource persons and facilitators in different program areas.

*(continued)*



Photos: Wisconsin child support staff participate in exercises in value stream mapping

After training, the team worked on an intergovernmental case processing project in the Central Registry. They chose a time-sensitive, complex process that has federal guidelines and timeframes and involved jurisdictions outside Wisconsin. The point was to review a process that has been in place for a long time to determine the impact of technology and regulation changes to improve efficiency while eliminating redundant practices.

The team reviewed how workers handle an interstate referral from the point of receipt through the various steps to achieve measurable results, such as paternity establishment or receipt of payment through income withholding. The team reassessed factors such as the number of workers who handled paperwork, the remedial phone calls to the initiating state, the length of the review period, and the action updates to the initiating state.

The core of the lean government principle was to review current processes and work our way to a new processing standard through the *value stream mapping* tool. The objective was to reduce the processing time by a certain percentage point, create a flow chart of the process, improve case review process, devise best practices, and update the training materials for new and experienced staff.

The above exercise helped the team determine *Value-Added*—an action that the customer is willing to pay for; *Cost-Added*—an action that benefits the customer, but the customer would not be willing to pay for; and *Waste*—an action that does not directly benefit the customer, which includes communication delays, over production and processing, inventory, transportation, inspection, correction and rework, and lack of innovation. However, not all wastes could be eliminated as they may be required

by law or by an inherent principle of the program.

In the end, it was starkly clear what works well and what does not. It became obvious what kind of waste was due for elimination without negatively impacting the quality of service to the child support customers.

Based on the experience of the value stream mapping, we created an action plan—the eventual take-away from the exercise—to improve our case processing, which cut down inefficiency by about 60 percent.

## Looking ahead

Applying value stream mapping to local child support agency case processing will achieve similar results. The lean process will cut down the waste of unnecessary delays, over-processing and over-production of paperwork in the other state, transporting the referral through many workers, and lack of innovation in managing specific cases.

Innovative ideas could be as simple as maintaining an in-house contact list of other states' actual caseworkers and a glossary of equivalent child support terms in other states, or a greater use of new tools on the state services portal, or joining multistate caseworker information-sharing groups and border projects that are springing up in clusters around the country.

Unlike a few years ago, there is more variety of disparate but helpful tools for successful intergovernmental casework. Child support agencies will see noticeable performance improvement if they use these innovative ways to manage our complex program.

## Honoring Women's History Month

To commemorate [Women's History Month](#), the U.S. Census Bureau released two infographics—[More Working Women](#) and [Closing the Salary Gap](#)—that illustrate the number of women in the workforce and the gap in salaries between men and women between 1970 and 2012.

For women and their families, the [FDA Women's Health page](#) displays tips to stay healthy and many resources.

## ACA 101 for tribes

[Healthy-tribes.org](#) offers a taped webinar, in video and PDF versions, titled "ACA 101: American Indians/Alaska Natives and the Affordable Care Act," by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.



## White House initiative to reach young men of color

On Feb. 27, President Barack Obama announced a 5-year effort to help boys and young men of color, called *My Brother's Keeper*.

Through partnerships with communities, businesses, and foundations, the initiative plans to connect these boys and young men to mentoring, support networks, and skills they need to find a good job or go to college and work their way up into the middle class.

See details on the [My Brother's Keeper web page](#) and in the [fact sheet](#), both on [WhiteHouse.gov](#).



The Lassen County child support team with partners and supporters of the seminar (*from left*): child support supervisor Kim Dowden, child support specialist Patty Sandbrook, program manager Kelley Cote, Herlong associate warden Tom Short, Herlong warden Mike Babcock, Herlong reentry coordinator Carrie Whitener (*behind*), Lassen County Director Maria Carlomagno-Brice, and teacher Tammi Brown. (Not pictured: child support specialists Cindy Simmons, Deborah Kincheloe, and Carly Winship).

## Lassen County partners with Federal Bureau of Prisons to help inmates connect with children

**Maria Carlomagno-Brice, Director  
Lassen County, CA, Department of Child  
Support Services**

Eight out of 75 California inmates have begun paying child support after attending a child support seminar last May. Others are exploring compromises or modifications. The numbers may be small, but the seminar sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Herlong) and the Lassen County Department of Child Support Services is showing promise. The partners are continuing the seminars; they presented two more since May, and, as of press time, the next seminar—still a month away—had 69 California inmates and 56 other state inmates signed up to participate. The informational seminar for the original 75 inmates accompanied staff training for 20 of the facility’s management team.

The inmate seminar and staff training generates awareness of the child support program and encourages inmates to address their child support cases before their incarceration ends. During the seminars, inmates get a form they can complete and submit to Lassen County Department of Child Support Services to request assistance with their case. Of the 75 inmate participants in the original presentation last May, 39 completed the request forms, including 5 with out-of-state cases.

Lassen County staff researched each request. For cases managed outside the county, they collaborated with other California local agencies or the state child support program to resolve the inmate’s inquiry. To follow up, in August, Lassen County child support staff met one-on-

one with 38 of the original inmate participants to discuss their cases. Inmates learned the amounts they owed in current support and arrears, whether their case was open or closed, and if they were eligible for a compromise of arrears. The team members connected inmates with their child support agency and gave them information to become active participants in their cases.

The strong partnership forged between the Bureau of Prisons and Lassen County Department of Child Support Services prompted the inmates to change; they are taking an active interest in their children. They understand paying child support is a way to show they care for their children. All involved in the collaboration hope that inmates will leave incarceration prepared to engage in their child support case and actively participate in their children’s lives.



### New video for incarcerated moms

Remember the [video for incarcerated dads](#) produced by the California Child Support Directors Association? Now the association offers a video for incarcerated moms, also on the [website](#) (under Access to Services, then click Incarcerated Female Obligor). You can see the video in Spanish and English. To request a CD of the video, contact Laura Roth, child support director in El Dorado County, CA, (*pictured in the video screenshot*) at [laura.roth@edcgov.us](mailto:laura.roth@edcgov.us).



## Is that mobile app government-approved?

By Kim Danek, **OCSE**

In a May 2013 *Child Support Report* article called “[Smart phone apps developed for states](#),” we reported on the proliferation of mobile apps and how they are finding their way into the child support world. My recent search of the term “child support” on the iPhone App Store brought up nearly 100 hits! Unfortunately, most of these apps were developed by third parties without input or oversight from government organizations. Lack of oversight can lead to dangerous situations if the apps ask for personally identifiable information or other sensitive data such as user names and passwords to link to online accounts.

The Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) recently experienced this problem firsthand. Late last year, officials posted a warning on the [DFAS homepage](#) that smartphone owners may have put their “MyPay” payroll accounts at risk by using an unauthorized smartphone app. Officials discovered thousands of DFAS customers may have downloaded a potentially dangerous third-party app thinking that it would allow them to manage their MyPay accounts more efficiently.

According to a U.S. Army [Cyber Crime Alert Notice](#), the unauthorized app asked the users to input their usernames and passwords to access their online accounts. The program also allowed the users to update their security questions so they could change their passwords.

Unfortunately, this app and several similar ones are not sponsored or endorsed by the Department of Defense or DFAS. By providing sensitive information to unknown parties, the users could have compromised their payroll accounts and allowed thieves to steal their funds.

Child support officials should take a look around the smartphone application marketplaces for apps that offer child support advice for your state or jurisdiction. If so, do a little research on your customers’ behalf.

- See what kind of service the app provides. Is it just a general child support calculation tool based on your state’s published calculation standards or does it ask users for personal information?
- Review the “About the Developer” section of the app page and visit the developer’s web page if it has one listed. See what other apps the company has developed and review customer ratings.
- Speak with your customers about how to keep their personally identifiable information safe. Remind them that many apps are not sanctioned or endorsed by your organization, so they should only be used if they don’t require personal information. Also, if the app requires access to the phone’s contact list, camera, calendar, email, etc., then it may not be safe to use.

There is an official resource for smartphone users who want to see lists of official state government smartphone applications. The National Association of State Chief Information Officers website has a searchable [State Mobile Apps Catalog](#). It provides a list of “native, state government mobile apps for smart phones and tablets.” Visitors can search by state or topic area.

While no federal government site lists the same information, USA.Gov offers a [verification site](#) where you can see whether a social media site is actually managed by a federal government agency.



## OCSE infographics on Flickr!

Now you can find our OCSE infographics in the HHS Flickr site [Infographics Pool](#). Look for our Spanish and English versions of “How Do I Apply for Child Support Services.” You’ll also see dozens of infographics produced by HHS agencies. You may want to share some of those in your news publications, social media, or conference presentations.

# Marriage trends shifting

The good news for some child support professionals is that more adults in the United States are getting married, but researchers have to look into the numbers to see the full picture. Richard Fry at the Pew Research Center reports that the increase is promising, but there is more to the story. In 2012, 4.32 million adults got married—a 113,000 increase from 2011. When Pew researchers broke down the numbers demographically, however, they found some interesting statistics:

Almost all of the people making up the increase (98,000) have at least a bachelor's degree.

More older Americans are getting married than young ones; data shows a slight increase in the percentage of 35 to 64 years olds who got married last year while there was a decrease in adults between 18 and 35.

Unfortunately, Fry says that while the increase overall is good, there is still unfortunate news. “The new marriage rate among college-educated adults increased from 55.3 newlyweds per thousand eligible adults in 2011, to 56.7 newly married in 2012. In contrast, the new marriage rate among adults with some college education

and adults with a high school diploma fell further from 2011 to 2012.” The number of adults currently married also continues to decline. The peak came in 1960 with more than 70 percent of adults being married and has fallen steadily to a low of 50.5 percent.

For more information, see the Pew Report “[New census data show more Americans are tying the knot, but mostly it's the college-educated.](#)”

—Kim Danek, OCSE



## Coming soon: Do statistics matter?



In many ways, statistics drive our work in the child support program. We depend on Census data, for example, to see demographics and trends in the diverse communities we serve. Ever wonder how you, the child support professionals, can use data that states submit (in the OCSE 157, 396A, and 34A reports) to answer performance questions? Consider these:

- How do we show the value families receive for the state dollars spent on the child support program?
- How much child support do we collect per child support employee (FTE)?
- Is there a better way to measure the average collection amount per case?
- How much does the child support program save federal, state and local governments?
- How much does the government save for each state and local dollar spent on the child support program?
- How much was saved per each state FTE?

Stay tuned for a *Child Support Report* article that may help you answer those questions and more! Also, OCSE soon will publish more “Stories Behind the Numbers” fact sheets. They will highlight how male employment relates to child support collections and the changing composition of who is owed child support arrears.

## Child Support Report

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