VOICE — PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

Illinois Implements New Guidelines Under Tight Deadline

Pamela Lowry, Director, Division of Child Support Services, Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services

At different times, all programs face implementing major program changes. Illinois’ most recent challenge was replacing our Percentage of Obligor Income model for child support guidelines with an Income Shares model. We started our replacement discussions in 2006 and continued until February 2015 when House Bill 3982 — Child Support Guidelines — was introduced in the Illinois General Assembly. Legislative discussions concluded at the end of May 2016, and the bill was enacted less than 90 days later with an effective date of July 1, 2017.

Illinois became the 43rd child support program to adopt the Income Shares model for determining child support obligations. We joined 39 other states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

We believe the Income Shares model provides more equitable treatment of families where one parent has significantly more or less earnings than the other, when both parents share parenting time, and for parents who have very low incomes. We also believe that parents must begin the support process with an explicit understanding of how they each contribute to the economic health of their child. When they do, they are in a better position to negotiate other aspects of co-parenting.

Challenging timeline

We did not expect to implement in less than a year. In fact, we had requested at least three to develop and implement a support calculator, amend more than 40 forms and notices, modify many policies and practices, develop and conduct training, and create new scripts for our customer service channels. Luckily, we had some idea of what we needed because we were deeply involved in developing the legislation and had studied operations and tools used in other states.

Illinois’ previous guidelines and many of its case law decisions were rooted in the net income basis for calculating support. Leaders across many sectors wanted to retain net income as the income basis for the new model, so finding consensus was difficult. In the end, we struck a compromise. We developed a standardized method using a tax methodology. Additionally, the parties can opt in to individualized net income with the court’s permission. They can also decide whether to use the net income of either parent or both.

Developing two calculators

We knew that we wanted an easy-to-use format for parents — something intuitive that asked straightforward questions and led parents from one step to the next. We approached the Iowa child support program about adopting their on-line calculator. The staff gave us the entire program at no cost. We ended up reprogramming it to align with our technology and platforms but used many of Iowa’s concepts in our design.

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Child Support Calculation Models

Percentage of Obligor Income
This method uses a straightforward multiplication of a pre-defined percentage of the noncustodial parent’s income — usually based on the number of children the parents have in common — to determine the obligor’s support amount. The income basis may be gross or net at the state’s discretion.

The pre-defined percentages are based on economic models of the cost of raising children, with the custodial parent’s contribution assumed but not visible in the calculation. Most states that use Percentage of Obligor Income have a complementary method they use when parenting time is shared.

Income Shares
This method uses the income of both parents for calculation of support. Illinois uses a chart to determine the basic support obligation using economic data for both parents’ incomes because they would have used both to support a child if the parents were together.

Like the Percentage of Obligor Income model, Income Shares is meant to be used for families that do not have special factors that significantly affect either the expenditures on the child or on the ability of the parents to contribute. Both models incorporate deviation factors to allow for unusual circumstances. As with Percentage of Obligor Income, the income basis may be gross or net according to the state’s preference. Income Shares models generally use a cross-multiplier of 1.5 to adjust each parent’s contribution in families with shared parenting.

More information is available in the Illinois Income Shares Overview.
I couldn’t get excited about another daylong domestic violence training requirement because I thought my experience was enough. During my three years as an Arizona child support section attorney and my previous work as a prosecutor, I’ve had domestic violence training and handled many misdemeanor and felony domestic violence cases. I thought I didn’t really have a lot to learn.

Then I attended a federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) training session as part of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt grant launch. Even as I was sitting in the training, I still wasn’t convinced it was the best use of my time. I can now say that I was wrong.

Unlike previous training sessions, OCSE’s focused on the impacts of domestic violence in the context of child support processes. It included multiple interactive segments that really helped put me in the shoes of a victim trying to get child support. I gained new understanding and skills that I could use to help victims get child support safely.

Changing my procedures
I used to make note if we had a nondisclosure (family violence) indicator on our case file; but truthfully, I usually handled most of the cases the same way. Unless I knew there was a criminal conviction for domestic violence where the parents on our case were the perpetrator and the victim, or we had an order of protection that had serious allegations, we would bring the parents in for a settlement conference.

Less than a week after the training, I had a case that could have gone terribly wrong. I decided to try to determine whether the case might need special handing. I saw the nondisclosure indicator was set to “No” and the electronic file showed no indication there was a domestic violence issue. However, as I looked back at the original application for child support services, someone noted that domestic violence was an issue.

Investigating further
The training drove me to review the custodial parent’s family court file. I found several more red flags including the fact that the parent who would receive child support had lived in a domestic violence shelter with the child. Before we even went to court, I decided to meet with the parties separately. I kept thinking about a testimonial letter I read during the OCSE training. The author, a domestic violence survivor, had really been traumatized by the child support court experience, and I did not want these parents to leave feeling the same way. When they arrived at court, I knew I made the right decision.

The custodial parent, who arrived with two advocates from a domestic violence program, was clearly intimidated and overwhelmed by the court process. The noncustodial parent was also concerned that we would treat them unfairly because of the abuse allegations or that I would show favor to the other parent. During the hearing, we took our time so both sides could voice their issues and we could make sure the process was fair and safe for the parties involved.

I’m thankful for the training because it showed me that a settlement conference would have been inappropriate and probably traumatizing for both parents. It also reminded me to take time to look at every case so I handle each one with care and treat the parties with respect and dignity.

For more information about this story, contact Jaimee Oliver at Jaimee.Oliver@azag.gov. For information about OCSE’s domestic violence training, contact Michael Hayes at michael.hayes@acf.hhs.gov.
PROMISING PRACTICES
Arizona Courts Advance Justice Through Community Partnership
Ann Scott Timmer, Justice, Arizona Supreme Court

Many state courts and justice partners have learned within the past few years that punishing noncustodial parents for being behind on child support payments can often needlessly send those parents’ lives into a tailspin. What happens when they are arrested for missing a court date, get fired because they spent a few days in jail, or lose a driver’s or professional license they need to work?

How does this help them pay support? Arizona realizes that strength and success lies in trying to break this cycle. In our court system, we are trying to secure access to justice for litigants, particularly the ones who represent themselves in family court.

A major challenge — helping outlying customers

We have a population of 6.3 million. Just under 4 million of those people live in the Phoenix metropolitan area and another 1 million live in and around Tucson. The rest are spread throughout a large geographic area.

As the largest metropolitan area, Phoenix naturally has more legal assistance resources than outlying areas. Many rural community members face hours-long drives to the major metro regions where legal help is more abundant.

The five-year agenda

Chief Justice Scott Bales’ current five-year agenda, Advancing Justice Together: Courts and Communities, outlines the priorities for Arizona’s 700 judges and 10,000 judicial branch employees. It acknowledges that we have many partners helping us advance or administer justice. Here are the three main goals.

I: Improving access to justice

Bales created a Commission on Access to Justice in 2014 whose members represent a broad cross-section of stakeholders. This group’s work focuses heavily on serving the rural population and has produced remarkable, award winning programs and initiatives. Here is a look at some of the outreach activities.

Virtual Legal Resource Center: This year we launched a statewide virtual legal help center, AZCourtHelp.org. It is far more than a website because visitors can find helpful videos, frequently asked questions, forms, and virtual tours of courts across Arizona. They can also click on topics including bankruptcy, child support, evictions, and civil cases.

It has a live chat function that allows a person to get immediate help from a court specialist during normal business hours. We also host live webinars on various topics with some of the most popular being Family Court 101, the Landlord/Tenant Act, and Advance Directives. Viewers can access the site from smartphones, tablets, or other devices.

This year, the National Association for Court Management named AZCourtHelp one of its Top 10 Court Technology Solutions for developing web technology that improved communication, operational efficiency, and access to justice.

Public libraries: The Arizona State Library partnered with the courts to train our librarians to dispense legal information, not legal advice, to community members. Librarians advise patrons on ways to access social services and locate community resources and legal forms. This program provides a needed service while also breathing...
new life into libraries at a time when paper books aren’t as popular as they once were.

Language access: Language barriers can also affect a parent’s access to justice. In January 2016, the Arizona Supreme Court adopted the Arizona Court Interpreter Credentialing Program, which aids in training, locating, and using quality foreign language translators and interpreters for the hearing impaired.

Pro bono work: Another initiative encourages lawyers to offer their services pro bono for hardship cases. Arizona lawyers can use two hours of pro bono work to satisfy their continuing education requirements. We partnered with the state bar foundation to launch a central hub for pro bono opportunities around the state.

II: Protecting children, families, and communities
Arizona has implemented pretrial assessments to determine who should remain in custody and who can safely be returned to the community pending trial. We have also adopted evidence-based practices for probation supervision.

Our Dependent Children’s Services Division trained more than 100 attorneys on how best to represent children in dependency cases. We are also fully engaged in statewide programs to combat human trafficking. Earlier this year, Arizona’s governor signed a law that expanded the definition of child sex trafficking.

III: Improving court processes to serve the public better
We formed the Task Force on Fair Justice for All to look at the issue of fairness for those faced with court-ordered sanctions. The task force also examined pretrial release decisions and proposed several reforms to current bail practices.

To fulfill this goal, we are in the process of revising court rules to make them more understandable by people with a basic education. By using plain language, better organization, and less ‘legalese,’ these restyled rules will help self-represented litigants help themselves. The Task Force on Family Law Rules of Procedure meets regularly and will submit its recommendations for rule amendments by January 2018.

Everything happening in Arizona can be replicated to one degree or another. We would love to share our experience with states that would like to make similar changes.

For more information on any of these initiatives, contact Heather Murphy at hmurphy@courts.az.gov or 602-452-3656.

New Toolkit to Engage Veterans
In November, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement will roll out a new toolkit, “Child Support Collaborations to Engage and Assist Veterans,” to give caseworkers tested strategies to better serve the more than half a million veterans who owe child support. The toolkit traces the success of nine pilot programs conducted around the U.S. where teams from HHS, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the American Bar Association collaborated to re-engage veteran parents. Inside, you will see how teams worked together for veterans with solutions that led to arrears being reduced or forgiven, driver’s licenses reinstated, orders modified, and cases closed. The lessons learned from the pilot programs show what effective service looks like for veterans and at-risk veterans, including practical “how-to” information for participating in events such as legal clinics and Stand Down events. Check out next month’s Child Support Report for more information or subscribe to our newsletter to get updates on this and more.

What is a Stand Down?
According to the VA, Stand Downs are typically one- to three-day events that provide supplies and services such as food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, and VA Social Security benefits counseling to homeless veterans. Veterans can also receive referrals to other assistance such as health care, housing solutions, employment, substance use treatment, and mental health counseling. They are collaborative events, coordinated between local VA Medical Centers, other government agencies, and community-based service providers.

For more information, check the Homeless Veterans Upcoming Events website or contact the VA Stand Down point of contact at your nearest VA Medical Center.

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In late August, the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department launched a new, state-of-the-art Customer Contact Center at its headquarters in Commerce, CA. The center incorporates modern workspace designs and technology upgrades that improve customer service and work environments.

The center is vital to the department’s public service because we handle over 500,000 calls every year from clients who need help and information about their child support cases. The renovation is part of L.A. County’s major effort to improve public contact offices for clients and work environments for employees. We also see substantial savings in leasing costs because we are using the space more effectively.

At the August 29 grand opening, department Director Dr. Steven J. Golightly said, “The transformation of this building in the past year has been amazing to bring our center into a new era of technology and improved work environments.”

The new center features digital wallboards that better enable staff and managers to monitor and respond to calls from the public. Supervising Child Support Officer Vernance Crudupt says the boards are a motivational piece. Teams can see how they are doing, so it has sparked some friendly competition to see how well they can perform compared to other teams.

Staff workspaces have sit-stand workstations and voice recognition software, thanks to a grant from the Los Angeles County Quality and Productivity Commission. Dr. Golightly says they improve the work environment for employees and help prevent ergonomic injuries. Child Support Officer Kevin Sangrung says he loves his new sit-stand desk and refers to it as his natural coffee after his morning commute. “Standing up … gets me more active during my calls.”

The center features improved, open space areas and coffee nooks where employees can relax on their breaks and lunch hours because we understand the demanding nature of call center work. The offices also include state-of-the-art wireless connectivity, training and meeting rooms, heating and air conditioning zone separation, and sound acoustics. One supervisor said the entire building conveys to the staff that we care about our employees and want to make the best work environment possible for them.

For more information on the upgrade, watch the Customer Contact Center 8-minute video or contact Al Reyes at alreyes@cssd.lacounty.gov.
The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) awarded the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) Demonstration and Evaluation Grants in 2014. OCSE wanted child support offices to try to develop practices that would improve program efficiency and help people make decisions that were in their best interests. Now that the first round of demonstrations is over, the preliminary evaluations are showing positive results.

The District of Columbia and seven state grantees — California, Colorado, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington — have launched interventions inspired by the behavioral sciences, namely behavioral economics. The sites, with the aid of their Technical Assistance and Evaluation teams, have defined their individual programs’ problems of interest, diagnosed the existing processes to expose bottlenecks, designed behavioral interventions that address the bottlenecks, and developed rigorous tests.

All sites launched randomized control trials for their Phase 1 intervention. Samples sizes for these tests ranged from several hundred cases to nearly 4,000. It took many sites longer than expected to reach their sample size goals, but with perseverance and dedication, most reached their targets. The focus areas varied. Some sites tested methods to increase initial payments, while others aimed to increase participation during the case establishment period. One site tested methods to improve the modification process in their state. Here is a look at preliminary outcomes from three states.

Georgia — revised outreach letter
Georgia designed its interventions to get more parents who owe support into the child support office. Once there, staff would present information, perform genetic testing, and provide other services. To encourage more parents to come in, the BICS team revised their initial outreach letter to tell the parents what was happening. The letter invited them into the office at a specific date and time so they could have a say in the child support process.

The staff sent the letters in a redesigned envelope and included a calendar magnet. Early analysis of this randomized control trial shows positive results. Nearly 23% of the parents who owed support came into the office versus about 15% of the control group. Georgia is very excited about these results and hopes to continue using at least some of the materials they developed.

Texas — new post-order establishment meetings
During its intervention, Texas staff had two goals. They wanted to increase the number of payments received within the first few months of a newly established child support case and raise payment amounts. The intervention used newly designed post-order establishment meetings with a payment specialist. In the meeting, the specialists used materials designed to address common behavioral bottlenecks, and then gave them to the parents to help them understand their obligations and options. Staff made follow-up calls to the parent afterwards.

Texas has analyzed about half the samples and the preliminary results are promising. In the first month after orders were established, the number of payments made on the orders increased from almost 55% to over 61% (see figure 1 below), and the average payment amount was $6 higher in the treatment group.

Vermont — redesigned pre-court meetings
According to early results, staff were able to positively affect both of their primary goals. Vermont parents must go before a judge to establish a child support order. Court staff used to hold a Case Management Conference before the parents went to court. The first BICS intervention replaced the court conferences with case negotiations, called Resolution Meetings, run by child support staff. They used new meeting reminders that incorporated behavioral concepts, like plan making and personalization, and held the meetings at the child support office. A child support caseworker trained in procedural justice and behavioral science led the meetings.

The primary goals were to increase both the number of meetings that the parents attended together and the number of stipulations or agreed orders. Early results show that almost 37% of the parents in the treatment group attended both meetings, compared to the control group’s 23% (see figure 2 below).
The treatment group also obtained stipulations nearly 26% of the time, which was over 17 percentage points higher than the control group (figure 3).

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### Behavioral Economics Definitions

#### Behavioral economics

Traditional economics assumes that all people have unlimited time and ability to think through complex problems effortlessly to arrive at the “correct” choice. Behavioral economics uses insights from psychology and other related fields to help explain how and why we act in ways that are not always in our best interest — whether we are procrastinating on an important project, missing a deadline, or making impulse decisions. Using behavioral economic theories, child support programs can better understand why program participants do not always carefully consider options and analyze details.

#### Behavioral bottleneck

Behavioral bottlenecks are cognitive biases or ways in which decision-making is impacted by predictable reasoning errors. A very common example is procrastination. People predictably put off unpleasant or arduous tasks. This bottleneck can affect completion of forms, attendance at appointments, or response to communication from a child support agency.

### Intervention

An intervention is a combination of program elements or strategies designed to produce behavior changes or improve outcomes among individuals or a specific population. Interventions may include services, practices, changes to policy, changes to the environment, or programs.

For more information on behavioral economics, read [OCSE Introduces Recipients of Behavioral Interventions Grant](#) in the November-December 2014 Child Support Report and the first BICS Fact Sheet.