



Achieving Better Results for Families

A Customer-Oriented Approach to Meeting Child Support Enforcement Goals

By Joy Moses November 2013



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Introduction and summary

In many ways, the country is a much different place than it was when President Lyndon B. Johnson initially declared the War on Poverty on January 8, 1964. As the 50th anniversary of this monumental event approaches in early 2014, some challenges have lessened, new ones have emerged, and, through trial and error, the nation's policymakers and other experts have since identified a multitude of best practices for alleviating and reducing poverty. These factors should be a part of the nation's 50th anniversary reflections while also lighting a path forward in key areas that are relevant to modern anti-poverty efforts. One of these areas is child support and visitation assistance for parents who have separated from one another and no longer live under the same roof.

During the early 1960s, 88 percent of children were living in two-parent households.¹ By 2012, that number had dropped dramatically to 68 percent.² Parents with the most-limited education—and therefore earnings capacity—are even more likely to be separated from their child's other parent. Clearly, times have changed. Shifting family arrangements, along with population growth, suggest that more and more families will at some point need assistance with issues related to co-parenting.

Unfortunately, many families are not getting the help they need. November 2013 data released by the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that government efforts have not evolved sufficiently to appropriately respond to changing family trends and dynamics. Only 53 percent of custodial mothers have a child support order.³ The Census numbers, which account for families with and without access to public benefits programs, are most dismal for those custodial mothers with characteristics associated with poverty—limited education and never-married status. What's more, a growing number of more-well-off women also do not have child support orders. When it comes to visitation, 35 percent of custodial parents report that their child has no contact with their other parent—largely fathers.

This is an under-addressed issue in public policy even though it lies in plain sight and affects the 20.9 million children living with only one of their parents.⁴ Too many families live with the norms of not having formal support arrangements, while they are at the same time in the dark about their legal rights and responsibilities—and not able to afford legal assistance even if they are aware of their rights.

For some parents, it may be hard to imagine a change in this status quo. But given the stakes involved, change must occur. Custodial mothers without child support orders lose out on financial assistance that, on average, represents 17 percent of the income of those who receive it.⁵ For poor custodial mothers who receive child support, these payments represent more than half—52 percent—of their income, making nonpayment of support a critical issue for the most disadvantaged children and families.⁶ Compounding the situation, too many noncustodial fathers have insufficient employment or child support orders that assume they can afford to pay more than they actually can—limiting their ability to contribute to mothers' incomes. They also have limited to no contact with their children, depriving children of a parent's love and guidance. And all family members could be unnecessarily involved in or exposed to conflict arising out of constant back-and-forth, informal negotiations about money and visitation.

Peaceful conflict resolution is the responsibility of the nation's courts; however, multiple entities, such as the American Bar Association, have declared that state courts are underfunded and in crisis, with such concerns existing even before the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. A recent survey found that court administrators in 15 states believe that they are less able to provide access and timely justice than they were just four years ago. Given competing priorities—public education and public safety, for example—in the public sphere, various avenues for addressing the problem of adequate funding and access to justice must be explored, and this includes federal government interventions.

The Child Support Enforcement, or CSE, program, a partnership between the federal and state governments, is currently the most relevant existing program concerned with addressing these issues. Created as a means of reimbursing the government for its expenditures on public benefits programs, CSE's mission needs to evolve to have a greater focus on the best interests of families. Many states, for starters, have implemented pass-through policies that distribute greater collections to low-income women and children rather than keeping them for government coffers.⁷

CSE could take several more steps in this evolution by re-envisioning itself wholly as an agency that acts in the best interest of families, taking a customer-oriented approach, and aiming to provide services that help with family-law needs related to child support and visitation. In significant ways, this would not substantially change CSE's work; it would still be in the business of establishing support orders and doing collections. But it would operate with the additional mission of providing a service for families, requiring a new emphasis on customer service and evaluating success based on the outcomes achieved by families, including reaching economic security and children spending more time with a noncustodial parent, rather than how much money is captured by the state.

Not only would this new focus help reduce the pressure on the courts, evidence from model CSE programs suggests that shifts to more customer-oriented approaches improve compliance, increase the amount of child support money collected on behalf of children, increase the amount of time fathers spend with children, and promote positive co-parenting relationships. Finally, a customer-oriented CSE with more-attractive services may be able to secure greater voluntary participation rather than have to rely on participation requirements tied to public benefits programs.

Policy change aimed at a more customer-oriented approach should include:

- **Universally available mediation** or other forms of alternative dispute resolution, which support both parents in reaching their own agreements about child support and visitation
- **Visitation assistance** that extends the reach of CSE beyond its current focus on paternity establishments and child support orders
- **Making customer satisfaction a priority** by providing states with the tools to improve customer relations and regularly administer customer-satisfaction surveys. Good results should be rewarded and central to the mission of CSE.
- **Addressing fairness concerns** by ensuring that more of collected funds reach families—requiring pass-through policies in the states—and that men are not punished for being too poor to pay rather than just unwilling
- **Fulfilling talent-management needs** by allocating resources for the retraining that will be necessary to implement customer-oriented approaches

- **Creating and implementing a public relations campaign** designed to inform the public about the changes to CSE and the value of establishing formal child support and visitation orders and encourage compliance and voluntary participation

This would be a common-sense policy change designed to reflect the needs of families and of our nation, both of which have experienced significant transformation over the past five decades. Although some of these approaches would also result in cost savings to states, start-up costs will be needed. The federal government should help with these costs by temporarily increasing the amount of its CSE-funding match over a period of six years while expecting states to maintain their current levels of investment. The match should be 70 percent during the first four years—\$665 million per year in additional federal investments—and then start to phase out, amounting to 68 percent for an additional two years, or \$312 million per year in additional federal investments, before returning to the current level of 66 percent.

January 8, 2014, marks the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty. On that date, President Johnson spelled out his vision to Congress, ushering in a period of sweeping legislative changes that ultimately led to an 8 percentage point drop in poverty in the 15-year period between 1963 and 1978.⁸

Certainly, major anniversaries are a good time for reflection, but while looking back it is important to consider the future and to use those reflections to inform the next era of action. We begin this new era in the shadow of welfare reform in the 1990s and the steady increases in poverty over more than a decade. These and other societal changes over the past half-century suggest the need for bold action in areas such as employment, family strengthening, cash assistance, and social services.

Reforms of this nature should be considered in tandem with reforms of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, program. Since the time of welfare reform, TANF—a provider of cash assistance and other services—has been significantly focused on caseload reduction. Given TANF’s role as one of the largest federal programs targeting families living in poverty, this tack does not make much sense. Instead, TANF should be focused on poverty reduction and reformed in conjunction with other next-generation reforms that advance that goal.

Child support reform fits perfectly in this conversation for the following reasons:

- The dramatic growth in nontraditional families, including unwed births and divorces, over the past 50 years and the accompanying ineffective response of government systems
- CSE's proven ability to lift women and children out of poverty, especially those families in which fathers have stable employment and income
- CSE's history of being considered by Congress in tandem with TANF and child-welfare services in legislation, such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, or PRWORA

As we consider the next generation of CSE services in the upcoming text, let's first explore how we arrived in the place we are now.

Since the War on Poverty was declared in the early 1960s, the structure of the American family has significantly changed. The societal response has not sufficiently kept up with the changes, with certain indicators suggesting that more families could benefit from help with child support and visitation. The potential consequences of a lack of action include less income for childrearing, severed or hindered parent-child relationships, and unnecessary conflict. Unfortunately, while the issue generally falls within the jurisdiction of state family courts, they are experiencing funding and pro se representation challenges that limit their ability to respond.

Background: American families are changing, existing systems are not keeping up

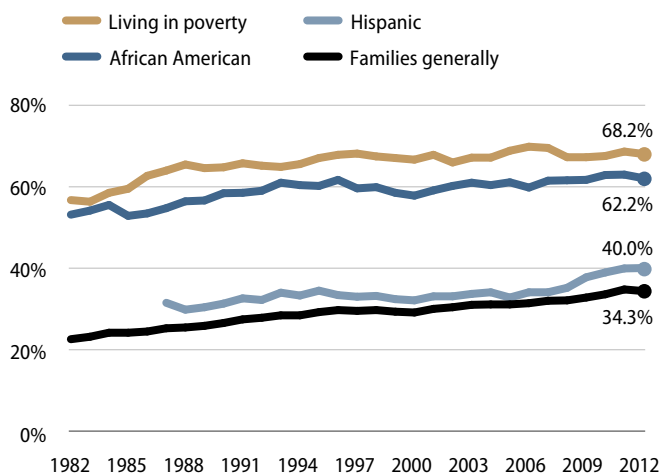
Changes in the American family

Over the past couple of decades, there has been tremendous growth in divorce rates and in the number of unwed births; currently, 35 percent of families with children are headed by a single parent. (see Figure 1)⁹ The trend is even more pronounced in poor families—69 percent—and in African American families—63 percent. These circumstances equate to an elevated need for child support and visitation help—a need that is unlikely to subside anytime soon, even if gains are realized in the areas of family formation, marriage, and keeping families together.

Families not served

With more parents separating in recent decades, there are a growing number of families that may benefit from help with child support and visitation issues. But only 53 percent of all custodial mothers have a child support order, with the numbers being significantly lower for never-married women, women of color, and those with limited education. But there is an emerging new trend. (see Table 1) Growing numbers of white women and women belonging to categories more indicative of working- and middle-class status—divorced, college educated, and full-time, year-round workers—also do not have orders. In 2011, for example, 46

FIGURE 1
Growth in single-parent families, 1982–2012



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance in the United States (Historical Tables)," available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/families.html> (last accessed November 2013).

percent of mothers working full-time, year round jobs did not have child support orders.¹⁰ There are varying reasons why this is occurring, including the facts that some mothers believe support orders are unnecessary and that some fathers cannot afford to pay.¹¹ But such circumstances also suggest that more low-income families, and even some families with greater means, would stand to benefit from the types of services that a customer-oriented child support enforcement system could provide.

TABLE 1
Mothers with child support orders by category, selected years*

	1995	2001	2007	2009	2011
Mothers generally	61%	63%	57%	55%	53%
Marital status					
Never married	44%	52%	44%	46%	44%
Divorced	76%	72%	68%	67%	64%
Race					
Black	46%	54%	47%	48%	41%
Hispanic	48%	52%	46%	48%	50%
White	72%	71%	66%	62%	59%
Education					
High school	62%	63%	54%	51%	51%
Associate's degree	66%	69%	59%	60%	59%
College	73%	70%	65%	61%	56%
Full-time, year-round worker	67%	66%	61%	58%	54%

* U.S. Census data are inclusive of all families, including those with and without connections to public benefits programs.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support* (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1995–2013).

When it comes to visitation, 35 percent of custodial parents reported to the Census Bureau that their child has no contact with their other parent—largely fathers. For families living in poverty, that number is 44 percent. This means a significantly large number of poor children have no contact with their fathers. More information is needed to determine how many fathers are absent from their children’s lives for preventable reasons, including lack of access to conflict-resolution services or co-parenting supports, the shame tied to not being able to provide financial support, and other reasons, as opposed to absence that is unpreventable even with the availability of supports, such as legal determinations of being unfit or a simple unwillingness to maintain contact.

The stakes associated with this issue are high, impacting a significant source of income for families with children, as well as parent-child relationships. Consider some key facts directly related to child support:

- **Significance to family income.** Child support, on average, represents 17 percent of a mother's income.¹² For some subcategories of mothers, child support means even more. (see Table 2)
- **Informal agreements are unlikely.** Ninety-one percent of mothers who receive child support have a legal agreement.¹³ Thus, very few families figure it out by themselves and successfully manage support in an informal manner.
- **Noncustodial parents who have contact with their children are more likely to pay full support.** In 49 percent of cases where the child has contact with their noncustodial parent, the full amount of child support is paid. Where there is no contact, only 31 percent of noncustodial parents pay in full.¹⁴

In short, child support and visitation increase the economic security of women and their families. This is especially important for single-mother-headed families, the family type most likely to experience poverty and near poverty. Since single-mother-headed families are significantly represented within public benefits programs, improvements in this group's economic security are likely to translate into less reliance on those programs.

When it comes to visitation assistance, evaluations of the minimally funded federal Access and Visitation Program have demonstrated that helping families reach formal visitation arrangements is associated with multiple benefits, including increased parenting time for fathers, more positive co-parenting relationships, and increased child support payments.

Thus, it is imperative to families that our national policies get child support and visitation right. To ensure this happens, there must be an ongoing national conversation about the value of these services and the importance of having formal agreements in place.

TABLE 2

Some subcategories of mothers have greater-than-average reliance on child support*

	Average child support income**	Child support as percent of total income
Mothers overall	\$5,160	17%
Less than high school graduate	\$3,838	32%
High school graduate or GED	\$5,191	24%
Some college	\$5,768	19%
Associate's degree	\$4,637	15%
College degree or more	\$6,678	12%
Full-time, year-round workers	\$5,098	11%
Workers overall	\$5,107	14%
Below poverty	\$3,822	52%

* Census data are inclusive of all families, including those with and without connections to public benefits programs.

** Child support income is tied to the employment stability and earnings levels of the fathers responsible for support. Bettering the work outcomes of the fathers of low-income children would increase the amounts paid to families in support.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2009* (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011).

Court challenges

Courts help maintain a civil society by taking on the responsibility of peacefully resolving disputes among their citizens, including those disputes and legal questions tied to parental separations. But for some time, the courts have been experiencing important challenges in carrying out their duties.

The most significant challenge is funding. In 2011, the American Bar Association passed a resolution declaring that state justice systems are underfunded and in crisis.¹⁵ Over the past few years, the issue of underfunding has caused nearly half of the states to reduce services offered to the public, while many also reported increased delays and backlogs, staff layoffs, and

Child support enforcement: A history of success

Since the mid-1990s, when Congress reformed welfare and child support enforcement, CSE has exhibited success in its core areas of responsibility. Paternity establishments grew by more than 60 percent, rising from nearly 1.1 million in 1996 to a peak of 1.8 million in 2009. The number of child support orders established each year has largely remained stable, with a large majority of the caseload—81 percent—having an established child support order in 2011. Collections have also steadily increased, growing by 127 percent between 1996 and 2011.

Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Annual Report to Congress (2009–2012)*.

delays in filling judicial and court staff vacancies.¹⁶ Looking ahead to the next three years, 31 states report that the level of court services will remain relatively the same, while an additional five states project that their court functions will become worse.¹⁷ In general, the courts often get the short end of the stick in funding debates. Public confidence in the judicial branch is low, and other issues such as public education and health care are viewed as higher priorities.¹⁸

Further complicating matters has been the rise in pro se representation—individuals representing themselves in court—over the past few decades.¹⁹ In “Grounds for Objection,” a 2011 Center for American Progress paper, the author pointed to the rising costs of attorneys’ fees as a primary reason why more and more low-income and middle-class families were representing themselves in court and, particularly, in family-law matters.²⁰ Pro se litigants must learn to navigate sometimes-complex court processes without a lawyer, which can be frustrating for them and mean that it takes longer to resolve disputes. Large numbers of these cases can clog the system, causing everyone to wait longer to have their issues heard.

Moving forward: A role for child support enforcement

There is clear value to be gained from addressing the child support and visitation needs of more of America's families—increased economic security in single-mother families, potentially reduced reliance on government, and improved family well-being through maintaining parent-child connections and reducing unnecessary conflict. To help advance these gains, significantly stepped-up government efforts are necessary. At the federal level, the most relevant program that currently exists is the aforementioned CSE.

CSE was created in 1975 as a means of reimbursing the government for amounts spent on public benefits. Since that time, the program has developed an impressive success record, effectively establishing paternities and child support orders while continuously improving collection rates. But this initial mission could and should evolve to include more of an express aim of improving family outcomes and aiding states in addressing the child support and visitation needs of their citizens. The change would leave the basic functions and current successes of the program intact, including paternity and child support order establishments and collections. But a focus on serving the needs of families and improving their outcomes does suggest more customer-oriented approaches and some strategic service expansions.

A more customer-oriented approach would:

- Improve the satisfaction, compliance, and outcomes of families who are already required to participate
- Encourage new families to voluntarily participate, reducing the number of families going without help or placing demands on overburdened court systems

Existing and emerging best practices, detailed next, suggest a solid way forward in developing good customer-oriented approaches built on positive interactions with participants and the offering of streamlined, desirable, and attractive services.

Mediation and other forms of alternative dispute resolution

More families should have access to services that help them make their own decisions for their families while reducing conflict in co-parenting relationships.

Legislation should guarantee that all CSE families are offered mediation—accompanied by appropriate domestic violence protections—or some other form of alternative dispute resolution that allows both parents to have a say in the decisions being made about their families, as well as the opportunity to have family-specific orders developed around the unique needs and circumstances of individual families.

Within the context of visitation or parenting-time arrangements, the ideal is detailed parenting plans that aim to improve co-parenting relationships by identifying and addressing potential sources of future conflict ahead of time. There is potential for child support orders to account for noncash forms of support that are so common among families but currently not counted as a form of support by CSE agencies; 57 percent of custodial parents benefit from having the other parent provide items such as child care, medical expenses, clothes, and gifts.²¹

Available evidence supports the transition toward mediation and other forms of alternative dispute resolution for CSE participants. When compared to the adversarial court process, various studies have associated family-law mediation with a host of positive outcomes,²² including:

- Speedier resolutions
- Reduced costs of proceedings
- Higher rates of parental satisfaction
- Greater likelihood of cooperative parenting relationships
- Higher levels of father-child contact
- Greater compliance with child support orders

In addition to this general research, limited federal investments in mediation through the federal Access and Visitation Program have had similar results for the populations already being served by CSE. This was demonstrated in a pair of Health and Human Services studies that were published in 2002 and 2006—one by the Office of Child Support Enforcement, or OCSE, and another by the Office of Inspector General, or OIG. These two agencies found the following:

- **Parenting time increases.** Forty-one percent of parents who reached an agreement in the OCSE study—and 42 percent in the OIG study—reported that fathers had increased visits with their children after mediation.²³
- **Co-parenting relationships show signs of improvement.** Fathers in the OCSE study who reported that their relationships with the other parent were “hostile and angry” dropped from 39 percent to 17 percent after mediation.²⁴ Similarly, custodial parents—who are largely mothers—reporting hostile and angry relations with the other parent dropped from 36 percent to 14 percent.²⁵
- **Parents are more likely to pay support.** Forty-four percent of fathers in the OCSE study—and 61 percent in the OIG study—increased their child support payments after participating in mediation to develop visitation arrangements.²⁶ Greater gains were made by fathers who were never married to the mothers of their children and by those fathers who were not making full payments prior to mediation.²⁷

Evidence from Texas also supports the use of a third party to help parents reach their own agreements about support and visitation.

The Texas model: Collaborative negotiation

In 2002, Texas instituted a statewide collaborative negotiation model when it comes to support and visitation agreements, which is similar in concept and practice to mediation. Parents are invited to a meeting with a specially trained child support professional. That individual educates parents about their rights and responsibilities and then works to help them reach an agreement about child support and visitation.

For many child support workers, transitioning to this approach was a challenge. They were accustomed to interacting with parents by phone or online and had to learn the people skills necessary to work and meet with parents in person.

Despite this challenge, the results have been overwhelmingly positive. In 2011, the following was demonstrated:

- **Increased payments.** Cases resolved through collaborative negotiation resulted in an order compliance, or support payment,

rate that was about 18 percentage points higher than those going through the judicial system.

- **Quicker resolutions.** Negotiated cases took an average of 16 days to complete, while cases resolved through traditional means averaged 105 days.
- **Lower costs.** The state estimates that the negotiated cases cost slightly less than half the cost to resolve other child support and visitation cases.
- **More efficient use of court time.** Negotiated resolutions freed up space on court dockets, allowing judges to focus on more challenging and complicated cases.

Sources: Cynthia Bryant, phone interview with author, April 23, 2013; Cynthia Bryant, “Case Conferences: Engaging Parents to Improve Performance” (McLean, VA: National Child Support Enforcement Association, 2011); Cynthia Bryant, “Case Conferences: A Better Way to Reach Agreements” (Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

Expanded visitation

Advance legislation to expand CSE's mission to include visitation, allowing every family to be presented with the option of creating an order that outlines both child support and visitation—or parenting-time—arrangements.

CSE agencies generally do not provide visitation help to families. OCSE does administer a small Access and Visitation Grant that has existed since 1997, but its nationwide budget has never increased above \$10 million per year despite bipartisan support from both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama to grow the effort.²⁸ Over time, its value has eroded with inflation. Recently, the Obama administration went a step further, recommending the incorporation of visitation arrangements in all new child support orders.²⁹

Much could be gained from this change. Replacing the current bifurcated system, which requires parents to pursue two separate processes for child support and visitation, with one pathway that simultaneously resolves both issues would be more efficient. It would help with the courts crisis by eliminating from their dockets some cases solely focused on one issue. Finally, it would help far more families achieve some of the positive results—discussed above—associated with the current federal Access and Visitation Program, including more father-child visitation time and increased payment of child support, which increase the economic security of single-mother families and decrease their reliance on government benefits.

Additionally, this change would reflect good customer service. It saves participants the time and effort that would have been required to pursue separate avenues for visitation. It also communicates that the system respects fathers, acknowledging that they are valuable to their children in ways other than how much they can afford to pay in child support.

Hennepin County, Minnesota's, co-parent court

Recognizing that the family court system was largely geared toward divorcing parents, a partnership in Minneapolis, Minnesota, decided to develop a co-parent court aimed at supporting the needs of parents who have never been married to one another.

Paternity establishment and developing a child support order are part of a process that is inclusive of so much more. Not only do parents benefit from mediated visitation arrangements, but they are also aided in creating their own, far more detailed parenting plan that includes such issues as how they will resolve disagreements or reach important decisions on issues related to their children, such as education and religion.

Also included are extensive co-parenting classes and referrals for both parents to appropriate social services—including employment help, substance-abuse treatment, and access to benefits—that will assist them in being better parents.

Because the aim is to intervene at a point early in the child's life, disruptions in father-child connections are easier to avoid, preventing some of the complications that arise from reintroducing a father into a child's life later on down the road. It also allows for positive patterns and habits to grow and develop around visitation and co-parenting early in the child's development.

The co-parenting court represents a partnership between the local child support agency, the courts, a fatherhood program, legal services, university researchers, and other providers of social services.

As an emerging best practice, ongoing research will compare the outcomes of participant parents to a control group.

Sources: Mary Marczak, phone interview with author, June 24, 2013; University of Minnesota, "Community-University Partnership to Design a Co-Parent Court" (2011).

Improved customer satisfaction

States should regularly measure customer satisfaction, rewarding solid or improving levels of satisfaction and marking a shift in CSE's mission to a customer-first model.

CSE has historically experienced challenges with the way parents view its customer service and the extent to which they will be treated fairly in the system. A 2003, four-state study conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, revealed that participants had a negative view of CSE customer service: 93 percent of mothers and 96 percent of fathers reported problems with telephone assistance, and 61 percent of mothers and 77 percent of fathers reported problems with in-person visits.³⁰ While parents were somewhat more satisfied by personal interactions with CSE staff, even in those situations common complaints included long waits, caseworker unavailability, and rudeness.³¹

In addition to the quality of shared personal interactions, there are other factors that help define good customer service. Examples include the ability to conduct successful outreach, inform families of available services, effectively answer questions about rights and responsibilities, and make information readily available.

Evidence from places including San Francisco, California; Texas; and Arizona suggests that tools such as easily understandable materials and information hotlines are well received by families. Model customer-service practices from these states and regions have been associated with such positive outcomes as increased child support payment rates, which improve the economic security of women and children. (see the Texas model text box) Most notably, San Francisco's child support payment default rate dropped from 61 percent to 14 percent within three years of introducing improved customer-service practices.³²

States should be required to measure levels of customer satisfaction via the following:

- **Periodic customer surveys.** Parents involved in the child support system should be regularly asked to evaluate their experiences with CSE. Not only would this give agencies a sense of how they are doing, but it would also provide useful information about which practices encourage greater payment compliance and other positive outcomes, as well as ways that operations could be improved.
- **Tracking voluntary participation.** Agencies already track and report some information on how participants come to their services, but it is not clear how many are voluntarily involved in the system. Currently, most participants—56 percent—are current or former TANF recipients, which means that they were required to participate.³³ Some beneficiaries of Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP—formerly known as food stamps—are also required to participate in CSE.

CSE impressively serves the majority of America's separated families—62 percent—but there may be additional families who could benefit from assistance.³⁴ Forty percent of separated families living below 200 percent of the poverty line are not served by CSE; some may be getting help elsewhere, while others may be getting no help at all. Positive customer-service experiences and customer-oriented services have the potential to attract the voluntary participation of these families not required to engage in CSE, families that as a result of participation may become more economically secure and rely less on public benefits. This may be especially true of families on the brink for whom the added child support income equates to not needing benefits such as TANF or SNAP food assistance. Previous studies have documented such savings, but more up-to-date analysis is needed, including that which accounts for varying CSE program characteristics.³⁵ These factors suggest that voluntary participation is an important item to track.

In order to support the states in their tracking efforts and learn from customer-satisfaction levels, Congress should take the following actions:

- Appropriate new resources to pay for surveys, tracking, and the implementation of model practices
- Build the results of customer surveys into the currently existing incentive structure. States that consistently post solid numbers or demonstrate progress should be appropriately rewarded for their efforts. If states wanted to collect these incentive dollars, agencies would have to draw upon existing resources and their own creativity to improve the experiences of their clients within the system.

An array of outreach and information options

States and localities can pursue an array of approaches to information and outreach that reflect good customer service, helping improve the image of CSE and attracting families to their offerings.

Here are some state and local examples:

- **San Francisco's EPIC project.** The Enhanced Parental Involvement Collaboration, or EPIC, project employs a common-sense approach—simplifying all correspondence sent to fathers, improving one-on-one engagement over the phone and in person, providing information about rights and responsibilities, and engaging fathers in the establishment of their child support orders. The results: a drop in unusually high default rates, which fell from 61 percent to 14 percent in just three years.
- **Texas's Access and Visitation Hotline.** With a subgrant from the Texas child support program, Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas established a hotline to provide information and referrals for additional assistance to Texans with concerns related to access, visitation, and child support. The attorneys at Legal Aid handle calls from both mothers and fathers. In an evaluation of the program, more than half of the parents said the hotline had been “definitely” or

“probably” helpful. About one-quarter of hotline users said parent-child contact increased following their calls to the hotline.

- **Arizona's CSE.** The state formed a special outreach unit that moves child-support employees out of the support office and into communities and, sometimes, outside of traditional work hours. The child support staffers provide information to parents in places such as community centers, job fairs, homeless shelters, and food banks. Although initially apprehensive, many parents walk away appreciative of having their questions answered.

Other types of outreach and information provisions could improve customer service, including courthouse assistance programs, effective uses of technology—including websites and social networking—and effective partnerships with other entities in contact with the service population.

Sources: Cynthia Bryant, phone interview with author, April 23, 2013; Michael Hayes, phone interview with author, June 4, 2013; Marjorie Clark, phone interview with author, April 24, 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Establish Realistic Child Support Orders: Engaging Non-Custodial Parents* (2012); Center for Family Policy and Practice, “Federal Report Summarizes Program and Research Design to Assist Non-Custodial Parents,” *CFFPP Policy Briefing* 11 (8) (2009): 1–4, available at http://www.cffpp.org/briefs/2009/brief_0910.pdf; Karen Royce, “Enhanced Parental Involvement Collaboration (EPIC)” (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Department of Child Support Services, 2007); Center for Policy Research, “Evaluation of the Texas Access and Visitation Hotline” (2008).

Improved talent management

Continued shifts to customer-oriented approaches will require a focus on adequately preparing and supporting agency staff.

Effectively implementing alternative dispute-resolution strategies and innovative forms of outreach and information dissemination would alter the way many agencies do business. Caseworkers will need to develop new negotiation and customer-service skills for in-person meetings, phone conversations, and written materials. Importantly, they will also have to learn new protocols, with leadership from HHS, for ensuring the safety of women and children involved in domestic violence and child-abuse situations—this is especially critical when implementing alternative dispute-resolution and visitation services that may foster greater interactions between fathers and families.

New training opportunities and ongoing professional development of CSE staff will be needed to get the best possible results. The Texas example is informative. CSE staff there had largely communicated with program participants via the computer and the telephone with the goal of garnering information and pursuing collections. Some had to make the shift to simultaneously working with both parents and negotiating agreements between them within the context of in-person meetings. (see the Texas model text box)

Talent management is crucial to the success of all other reforms. If caseworkers never appropriately learn how to implement new requirements and expectations, it will be impossible for agencies to succeed on behalf of families, and any new investments in reforms will have been wasted. At the extreme of bad results, the safety and well-being of families could be put at risk.

New start-up funds for talent management are an appropriations priority requiring a dedicated line item. HHS must take leadership in helping states with this task, assisting in developing curricula and informative materials while also distributing best-practices information. HHS should also consider using tools such as federal agency-based national-service programs as a competitive recruitment strategy for placing emerging professionals in agencies throughout the country, as outlined in a recent CAP report, “The Great Public-Service Talent Search: Using National Service to Grow and Develop Human Resources for Antipoverty Programs and Other Public Needs.”

Enhanced perceptions of fairness

Adjusting policies that are unfair to customers should be part of any customer-oriented approach.

Certain CSE policies create situations that are unfair to customers. Some mothers, many of them low income and struggling to make ends meet, may not receive all or part of the money that is collected on their behalf, as states can retain funds in order to recoup public assistance dollars expended on a family.³⁶ Since child support, on average, represents 30 percent of the income of mothers on public assistance,³⁷ government retention of the funds is certainly felt by families.

Another significant concern is tied to “dead-broke dads,” a play on the phrase “deadbeat dads” that was popularized to describe fathers who seem to unfairly suffer negative consequences for being too poor to pay child support.³⁸ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 16 percent of fathers paying child support have family income below the poverty line and 21 percent have not worked in the past month.³⁹ Research has demonstrated that 80 percent of unpaid child support debt is owed by the lowest-income parents.⁴⁰ A significant cause of this problem is that some low-income fathers are expected to pay more than they can afford. Most states have historically engaged in a practice of setting default orders, which assume a certain level of income and may be established in a father’s absence, or a father may experience a loss of income—through either a job loss or pay cut—but never go through the process of having his order adjusted.⁴¹

Importantly, the agencies are aware of these issues and over the past several years have been making progress in these areas. Currently, 26 states have a pass-through policy, meaning that they distribute some or all collected dollars to families associated with TANF.⁴² The Obama administration and various state leaders have also been actively promoting models for establishing and modifying orders to better fit what men can afford to pay, as well as incorporating employment help within program offerings.⁴³

More research is needed to evaluate how well states are progressing on these fronts. But federal legislative fixes would ultimately resolve some of these questions.

Congress should require all states to develop pass-through policies, allowing families to receive a minimum of 25 percent of the monthly child support payment that is collected on their behalf and eligible to be retained by the government as repayment for the TANF benefits being received by the family. Twenty-five percent is a little more than what is currently offered by states that have the least generous pass-through policies.⁴⁴ States should continue to be encouraged to disregard all or some child support as family income for the purpose of determining families’ TANF benefit levels.

Fathers should not experience negative consequences if they are too poor to pay their child support obligations. In developing their child support plans for submission to the federal OCSE, states should be required to include detailed information about how they will ensure that orders are correctly established and appropriately modified when financial circumstances change.

Expanded public relations campaign

CSE's less-than-stellar history of customer service suggests a need to rehabilitate its image among current and potential customers.

Even with ongoing progress and potential changes, current and future CSE customers may not take full advantage of emerging service models if previous impressions about customer service and unfair policies cause them to actively avoid the program.

Thus, an effort to rebrand the program will be necessary. This should include a public relations campaign funded through the new pot of funds targeting customer satisfaction and aimed at informing the public about the following:

- CSE's new service options and, particularly, the availability of visitation help
- CSE's new customer-service-oriented focus
- The value of establishing formal child support orders and encouraging people to voluntarily seek assistance or, at the very least, be cooperative with program requirements
- Policy changes that increase fairness and the perception of fairness

Increased funding

Reinventing CSE service models will require restoring lost funding and temporarily adding new resources.

In recent years, CSE has taken a significant financial hit from the federal government. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, or DRA, eliminated the federal match on states' incentive funds beginning in fiscal year 2008.⁴⁵ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 temporarily restored these funds for two years, but states are now once again feeling the budgetary impacts of the 2005 legislative change. Notably, the DRA sought to advance an important goal included in this paper—expanding and improving pass-through policies that ensure that women and children receive more of the money collected on their behalf and generally improve their economic security. Only 11 states responded to the call to improve their policies.⁴⁶ A 2011 Government Accountability Office report found that most of the state officials wanted to make such changes but indicated that they could not due to the new budgetary constraints.⁴⁷

Federal match funds eliminated by the DRA should be restored in order to strengthen programs and allow them to proceed with the DRA's goal of improving pass-through policies.

But there is still more work to do. This paper points to other needs that promote positive family outcomes while advancing the goal of improving collections, including expanding access to alternative dispute-resolution approaches and visitation, measuring and improving customer satisfaction, developing quality talent-management tools, ensuring that more fathers have orders that reflect what they can afford to pay, and working to improve the image of CSE in communities. There is also another significant issue that will be discussed in future CAP products—CSE employment assistance for fathers who find it difficult to pay support. These new initiatives will require start-up funds.

During a previous round of significant CSE reforms in the 1980s, the federal government provided an administrative-funds match of 70 percent that was decreased over a period of six years to the current rate of 66 percent.⁴⁸ The nation should reinstitute this structure, temporarily increasing its CSE match to 70 percent and slowly decreasing that amount back down to 66 percent. States should be expected to maintain the current levels of spending coming from their coffers and produce plans for how they will implement reforms and spend new federal funds. If all states take full advantage of this opportunity, the additional cost to the federal government would be \$665 million annually during the initial four years of the effort and \$312 million annually for an additional two years—an amount that would be accompanied by the approximately \$500 million per year associated with permanently reinstituting the incentive-funds match that was eliminated in the DRA.⁴⁹

This approach does not reduce the states' current funding responsibilities. Since many of the reforms suggested will likely reduce program costs and/or only be temporary in nature, increasing funding for start-up purposes only seems appropriate. Shifts from judicial to alternative dispute-resolution approaches are generally associated with reduced costs. Texas's collaborative negotiation approach, for example, reduced the amount of time spent on cases; the state estimates program costs at slightly less than half the price tag of establishing support orders through the courts.⁵⁰ Adding visitation to CSE's offerings streamlines processes by requir-

ing only one process, rather than two separate processes, to determine visitation and establish support. Finally, some reforms aimed at addressing men who are too poor to pay are also more cost effective. South Carolina, for example, estimates that its efforts to provide nonpayers with employment services rather than jailing them saved its taxpayers \$7,500 per father.⁵¹

Other suggested reforms likely will have steeper costs in the early years then decrease over time. Talent management aimed at orienting staff to new practices in areas such as customer service requires more resources on the front end, as new materials are developed and all staff must be engaged. But fewer resources are required as time progresses because developed materials are reused, and only new staff must learn the basics. Likewise, public relations efforts aimed at recreating an agency's image should also be at their most resource intensive in the early years after reform.

Conclusion

More families stand to benefit from increased and easier access to services that help them resolve questions about child support and visitation. With many family courts across the country stretched thin financially, the federal government could help greatly ease this problem by working with states to reform child support enforcement. These reforms should be built on the best of what we know from model practices. Many of these model practices have one thing in common: customer-oriented approaches, a concept that should form the basis of next-generation CSE services.

Improvements should include uniformly offering mediation or other forms of alternative dispute resolution, incorporating visitation into the CSE process, giving states the tools to increase customer satisfaction and requiring periodic measurements of this factor, addressing fairness concerns, and effectively training caseworkers to successfully implement these changes.

These common-sense policy changes will impact the growing number of American children being raised in single-parent households and in need of the security that comes with formalized plans for how they will be raised, cared for, and financially supported.

About the author

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