

COLLABORATION BETWEEN TANF AND CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT: PARTNERING TO SUPPORT FAMILIES

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Background

While families at all income levels access child support services, and current trends in child support cases are shifting away from public assistance cases,¹ a significant portion (20%) of families receiving child support services also receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Better coordination between TANF and child support at the local level can lead to better overall outcomes for low-income families. Collaboration between the two responsible agencies in the early stages of service delivery can serve to prevent a family from accessing long-term cash assistance by ensuring prompt receipt of child support payments. In this way, child support is a critical method of TANF diversion.

TANF, authorized as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), devolves the operational authority for welfare programs to States while maintaining policy authority at the Federal level and affords States great flexibility in designing their welfare programs provided they are “reasonably calculated to accomplish the purposes of TANF.” These purposes are to:

- ♦ Provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their

own homes or in the homes of relatives;

- ♦ End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- ♦ Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- ♦ Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

As evidenced by the TANF purposes’ focus on work and family stability, PRWORA shifted the focus of anti-poverty family policy from income maintenance to family independence and self-sufficiency. Under TANF Reauthorization, the current emphasis on inter-agency collaboration to support healthy families will only increase, as current successes are built upon and collaborative processes improved and expanded.

By broadening the mission of family support programs, PRWORA made possible the sharing of common goals across formerly disparate agencies.

Where as these agencies might have been conceptualized as having differing missions, today, TANF and child support programs can truly claim to share the goal of helping families to achieve self-sufficiency.

The TANF Perspective

Within the Department of Health and Human Services’ (DHHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF), the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) is responsible for managing the TANF program at the Federal level. OFA provides policy guidance, resources, and technical assistance to States and tribal governments operating TANF programs. By distributing TANF funds via block grants, DHHS maximizes State flexibility in designing programs to meet the needs of TANF clients.

In line with the goals of TANF, OFA is committed to moving families from welfare to self-sufficiency. Resources and technical assistance are committed to helping States and localities develop and operate welfare programs that strive to move clients into employment and support family independence. OFA operates programs with the understanding that families must have access to both work and supportive services to be successful. The focus on paternity establishment



and child support payments as critical to healthy families is prominent in the existing Federal legislation, and fully expected to continue to play a significant role after Reauthorization. This trend will serve to increase the necessity for collaboration between TANF and child support agencies.

Because of this focus on paternity establishment, and because of the child support cooperation requirement on TANF families, child support has become one of the most important supports available to low-income single parents. In fact, for the low income families that receive it, child support makes up a significant portion of the family budget (26%).²

Research has shown that even relatively small (\$1,000) child support payments, when regularly received, can have dramatic impacts on reducing the likelihood a family will return to welfare. Numerous State studies indicate that families who receive child support have much lower rates of return to TANF.³

Further, the establishment of regular, timely, and appropriate child support payments is often the first step to achieving more complete family reunification, where appropriate.

State TANF programs mirror the Federal commitment to healthy families. State TANF programs can best support families onto a pathway to self-sufficiency by collaborating with partners

that can provide TANF families with access to employment and supportive services.

For more information on TANF, visit the Office of Family Assistance online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa>.

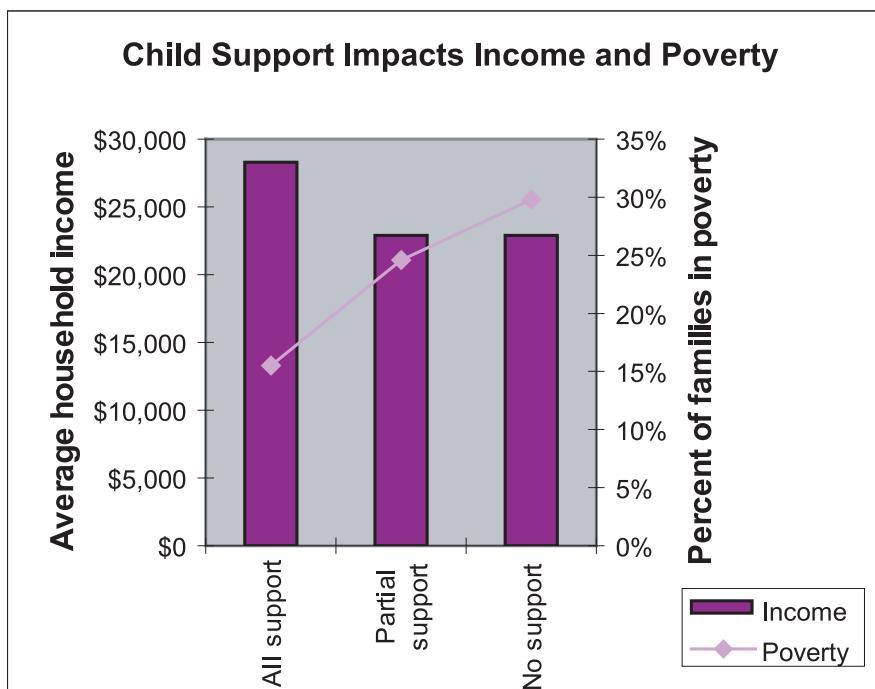
The Child Support Perspective

The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) oversees each independently run State child support program. These programs have four main purposes:

- ◆ Location of non-custodial parents
- ◆ Paternity establishment
- ◆ Support order establishment
- ◆ Support order enforcement.

DHHS provides funding to the States to operate their CSE programs, and makes grants available to States. Programs supported by these grants include access and visitation programs and responsible fatherhood initiatives.

Families receiving TANF benefits are required to cooperate with child support collections, unless there is a “good cause”⁴ for them not to do so. If the family is determined not to be cooperating, and fails to qualify for an exemption, then the State must reduce the family grant by at least twenty-five percent and may deny the



family all assistance under State programs.⁵ Any child support payments collected are used to reimburse the State and Federal governments for TANF benefits provided the family.⁶ The Federal share is reimbursed first and then the State has the option of retaining the additional collection or sending it to the family. When States send some (or all) of the collection to the family, it is referred to as child support “pass through” system. In either case, additional collections (above the amount of the total TANF benefits paid) go the family.

The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement is also committed to ensuring non-financial support is provided from both parents to all children, where appropriate. By supporting access and visitation programs as well as responsible fatherhood initiatives, Federal OCSE provides resources, training, and other supports necessary to reconnect noncustodial parents with their families.

Like Federal and State TANF programs, child support agencies are committed to supporting the overall health and well-being of families. By working with TANF agencies in their State and local areas, child support agencies can maximize their outreach efforts to a significant portion of their caseloads. Because TANF-child

support cooperation is required on the part of the client, collaboration between the two agencies will always improve services to dual-client families.

For more information on the Federal child support provisions, visit the Office of Child Support Enforcement at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse>.

To learn more about your State’s child support provisions, and about resources available for programming, visit the interactive State map at <http://ocse3.acf.dhhs.gov/ext/irg/sps/selectastate.cfm>.

The Value of Collaboration

TANF (IV-A) and child support (IV-D) agencies at all levels must work together at the program design, development, implementation, and operation stages to ensure the best possible services are delivered to client families. Among the outcomes supported by cooperation between TANF and child support programs are:

- ◆ **Improved services to families** – by working jointly to meet the needs of TANF families receiving child support benefits, States can ensure that the needs of the family are met in the simplest and timeliest manner possible.

- ◆ **Reduced need for long-term services** – quality and integration of services delivered to families have the best chance of moving them onto a true path to self-sufficiency, and reducing long-term need for public services.
- ◆ **Improved cost effectiveness and program efficiency** – collaboration reduces the potential for duplication of services, thereby eliminating redundancies that negatively impact both financial and staff resources.
- ◆ **Increased likelihood of prevention** – systemic collaboration can serve to identify families at-risk for TANF receipt and early intervention and services (e.g. diversion payments) might prevent them from accessing cash assistance.
- ◆ **Improved information and referral** – the missions of the two agencies, while similar, are not identical. Clients will still need to access services provided by both agencies. This process will be smoother if caseworkers in both agencies are informed and knowledgeable about the other.

Lessons Learned in TANF-Child Support Collaboration

Several States have enjoyed success in coordinating TANF and child support services. Research⁷ into successful TANF-child support collaboration reveals various State models—some have co-located staff, joint training, and shared data while others rely on more informal methods. Despite these different methods, however, States did report certain lessons in common. These common themes and lessons learned are important because they illustrate how even States disparate in size and structure have realized the same fundamental lessons about collaboration. These lessons can serve to inform the development and operation of collaborations between TANF and child support agencies.

Integrated/Automated Computer Systems

Quality management information systems – those that integrate and automate access to necessary client data – can greatly facilitate ease of systems coordination. While the systems used vary across States, seamless access

to necessary data improves information and referral services as well as reducing service and data management redundancies, thereby improving cost efficiency.

In **Vermont**, a document imaging system allows all TANF (“Reach Up”) and child support personnel access to electronic paperwork associated with child support cases. Information is entered into a common database to which both agencies have equal access. This shared database includes an electronic messaging system, which allows workers to communicate with one another instantly. Vermont observes that their collaborative efforts improved professional working relationships. The integrated computer system is the key to collaboration, as it provides a higher level of communication, connectivity, and efficiency.

One especially vulnerable population whose interests can be better served by effective and appropriate information sharing are dual systems clients also experiencing domestic and/or family violence. In addition to the good cause exemption highlighted above TANF protects victims of domestic violence by offering the Family Violence Option (FVO). Because both TANF and child support agencies are committed to ensuring family safety, the FVO

provides another avenue for service coordination.

Recognition of Shared Goals

A critical aspect to a true collaboration is an understanding that, ultimately, both TANF and child support agencies are in the same business – that of helping families to succeed. States report that once staff at all levels are able to accept and operationalize the concept of shared goals, other aspects of collaboration fall into place more naturally.

For example, both agencies are committed to paternity establishment – as part of **Arizona’s** Hospital Paternity Program (HPP), child support enforcement dollars are committed to training TANF caseworkers as notary publics. These caseworker-notaries are then placed in hospitals, to facilitate the immediate establishment and notarization of paternity.

Open Communication Protocols

Open communication protocols that allow staff at either agency to directly and immediately ask for assistance from their partner agency support the efforts of both agencies in working together effectively, even in the absence of

formal rules and regulations regarding collaboration. Highly interrelated with a sense of shared goals and common purpose, developing a sense of true cooperation is a prerequisite to maximizing the effectiveness of any interagency collaboration.

South Carolina describes their collaboration as “open communication through regular E-mails, conversations, and the freedom to pick up the phone and just ask for help.” Further, they hold regular conferences to reinforce objectives and shared goals.

Cross-agency Education and Training

States employing cross-agency education and training programs cite the need for TANF and child support staff to develop an improved sense of the mission, goals, and protocols of the partner agency. Through this training, personnel from each agency gain insight into the strengths and challenges of their partners, and are able to develop strategies to overcome the shared challenges by drawing on newly realized common strengths.

In 1999, the State of **Georgia** installed new computer systems for both DFCS/TANF (Success System) and OCSE (Stars System). As staff began

working on the new systems, their frustration grew and clients became increasingly dissatisfied in the way their cases were being handled. Clients complained that they were “getting the run around” when they wanted to apply for TANF and child support, or when they had a problem related to financial assistance. Clients believed that they were being referred back and forth between CSE and TANF without resolution of their problems. While two supervisors (one from OCSE and the other from DFCS) in the Camilla, Georgia service area were on the telephone addressing a client complaint, they began discussing the idea of a joint meeting where both OCSE and DFCS staff could learn about both computer systems and how the systems could interface to support the needs of both programs.

In October 1999, OCSE and DFCS staff from the DHR Camilla service area, including Baker, Mitchell, Decatur, Grady, and Calhoun Counties, attended a joint training session that focused on the Success and Stars computer systems. The two supervisors who organized the training session viewed the meeting as an opportunity to learn and ultimately enable staff to better assist low-income clients by promptly processing eligibility applications.

Co-location of Offices and Staff

Physical co-location of staff facilitates each of the other listed methods of interagency collaboration. In addition to simplifying communication and building interagency relationships and rapport, physically co-locating agency staff eases access for customers, encourages the appreciation of shared goals and objectives, greatly reduces miscommunication and misinformation, and fosters a vital sense of interagency cohesion. While the initial co-location of staff may be labor, time, and resource intensive, the resultant ease and efficiency is invaluable.

In **Colorado**, a county-administered welfare State, the Office of Self-Sufficiency within the Adult Services service area administers both child support and TANF services. Staff from both programs are located in the same offices in certain counties. This collaboration, especially important in those counties lacking immediate electronic interface and data sharing, has resulted in increased visibility and accessibility for child support personnel, and in a greater commitment across the division in supporting the long-term success of children. Further, collaboration at the case management level has directly impacted the viability of additional collaborative efforts

such as the Parent Opportunity Program (POP) expansion.

Formal Collaboration Processes

Formal collaborative processes are jointly developed and shared guidelines regarding how, when, and why to share data, and case management and closure protocols, for example. This type of collaboration should not, however, be seen as mutually exclusive with less formal concepts like open communication. Rather, taken together, a set of formal collaboration protocols designed to guide and facilitate the execution of a shared sense of purpose might be the most effective of all of the collaboration models available.

In **Florida**, an interagency planning team meets for two hours every quarter to share legislative concepts, future planning directions, goals, problems and strategies. The agencies alternate hosting the meeting.

In **Massachusetts**, child support and TANF staff meet monthly to discuss concerns and resolve problems, while teams of staff from each agency jointly manage selected cases.

Conclusion

While the programs, policies, funding streams and administrative practices of each State in this research effort differ, they still shared many common experiences developing and maintaining collaborations between TANF and child support programs. Taken together, these common themes and lessons learned can help inform the planning, implementation, and operation of these types of collaborations for other States and localities.

For example, while the systems in certain States may not be compatible with a strategy like co-location, understanding the benefits other States have realized by co-locating staff may generate a commitment to alternative methods of collaborating (e.g. hosting monthly case review meetings).

While the promising practices highlighted here are a beginning blueprint for improving TANF-child support collaboration, many other strategies also exist. For example, some States (AK, FL, WI) have used welfare-to-work dollars to fund job skills training for noncustodial parents – thereby

improving employability and providing them the resources to financially support their children.

Contact Information

The full report on the research excerpted here (http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/pdf/cse_partnering.pdf) includes full contact information for all respondents. The table below provides one point of contact for each State described herein. For more information, including titles, E-mail addresses, and partner contact information, please refer to the full report.

State	Contact
Arizona	Ben Levine 602.542.3882
Colorado	Barbara Drake 719.636.0000
Florida	Nancy Lujá 850.922.9589
Georgia	Cindy Morrell 229.522.3663
Massachusetts	Edward Sanders-Bey 617.348.8412
South Carolina	Leigh Bolick 803.737.9261
Vermont	Jackie Levine 802.241.2992

Resources

Administration for Children and Families (ACF) *Best Practices and Good Ideas in Child Support Enforcement*

2000 <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/reports/best/>

2001 <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2001/best/>

2002 <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2002/best/>

Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) *Child Support & TANF Interaction: Literature Review*

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/CS-TANF-Int03/report.htm#I>

ACF Rapid Response Technical Assistance Project *Partnering to Support Kids: TANF-CSE Collaboration.*

Presentation: http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/ppts/presentation_draft.ppt

Report: http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/pdf/cse_partnering.pdf

National Conference of State Legislators Child Support Project *Spotlight on State Child Support Programs*

<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/intro.htm>

Welfare Information Network *Innovations in Child Support Enforcement*

<http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/publications/sachsmarch.htm>

Urban Institute *Poor Dad's Who Don't Pay Child Support: Deadbeats or Disadvantaged?*

<http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=310334>

ACF Office of Child Support Enforcement *Glossary of Child Support Acronyms*

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/fct/glossary.htm>

¹ Office of Family Assistance TANF 5th Annual Report to Congress.

² Working Toward Independence: Enhance Child Support Enforcement. The White House, February 2002.

³ See Roberts P. (2002) The Importance of Child Support Enforcement: What Recent Research Tells Us. Center for Law & Social Policy.

³ PRWORA does not define either "cooperation" or "good cause." Rather the responsibility to both define and determine "good cause" and "cooperation" is left to the States. Under PRWORA, the determination of "cooperation" rests with the State child support enforcement agency, and the State must decide which agency (child support, TANF, Medicaid) will define and determine "good cause"[42 U.S.C. §654(29)]

⁴ Title 42 US Code, §608(a)(2) and §654(29)

⁵ Title 42 US Code Chapter 7, Subchapter IV, §51

⁶ Drawn from research conducted for DHHS as part of the Rapid Response Technical Assistance Project. The full report is available on the DHHS-sponsored Welfare Peer TA Network Web site at <http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov>. The full report includes contact information for all respondents.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network

Web Address

<http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov>

Contractors

AFYA, Inc.
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