

Evaluation: Colorado's 'Parents to Work' deemed success

By Jessica Pearson, Director
Lanae Davis, Research Associate
Center for Policy Research
Denver, Colorado

More and more, the child support program is realizing that one of the best ways to improve payment among low-income noncustodial parents is to link them with job programs. But getting some parents to participate and succeed can be challenging.

Parents to Work is an employment program for unemployed and underemployed child support obligors in Arapahoe County, CO, begun in March 2008. The project has a number of features that have been associated with success in other settings.

Elements of Arapahoe's successful approach

The *Parents to Work* project uses **mixed funding streams**—TANF funds to serve noncustodial parents whose children are current recipients of TANF and funds authorized by the Arapahoe County commissioners to support interventions with eligible noncustodial parents whose children are not TANF recipients.

The program features a **strong collaborative partnership** between the Division of Child Support Enforcement (CSE), Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Center and the Arapahoe District Court/18th Judicial District, and an evaluation conducted by the Center for Policy Research of Denver.

The program uses **specialized child support staff** whose job is to obtain and process referrals, enroll project participants, handle relevant child support actions for enrolled noncustodial parents and communicate with the workforce program, court, and child support workers about the participation status of targeted participants.

CSE retained the effective **local workforce center**, Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Center, to provide services. Dedicated workforce specialists handle project cases. One focuses on assessing clients and managing their cases; one handles job development, provides workshops and operates an intensive job club; and a program coordinator communicates with CSE and ensures coordination of services.

The program offers **varied recruitment sources**. A specialized CSE worker reviews lists of child support cases with obligors who pay less than 66 percent of the child support

they owe and have a verified address, and contacts them to enroll in *Parents to Work*.

Establishment workers refer noncustodial parents who lack employment, work part-time, or earn low wages. The child support magistrate may refer unemployed or underemployed parents who appear in court for nonpayment of child support.

For a **rigorous program evaluation**, eligible participants were randomly assigned to a treatment group for services, and a comparison group was treated in the usual manner. The two groups of cases were compared over time for outcomes pertaining to employment and child support payments.

The program has **strong court involvement**, with a child support magistrate at the Arapahoe County District Court/18th Judicial District who encourages, recommends, or requires parents to participate in *Parents to Work*. In addition, the magistrate conducts review hearings to monitor participation

in *Parents to Work* and dismisses contempt charges for those who successfully participate and pay support.



Parents to Work exemplifies the child support program's efforts to help parents achieve economic stability. See the next page for key findings of the evaluation.

Workers' comments

Child support and workforce staff appreciated the project's high level of flexibility. As one staffer put it, "The strength of the program was its 'Just Do It' attitude...problems would quickly be identified, agreed upon and fixed." Staff also liked the interagency approach and the explicit division of

labor. "If everyone focuses on what they do well, you get the best bang for the buck and the best benefit for the customer."

However, some staff felt that the level of "communication could have been better." Child support workers wanted to be better informed of client participation in *Parents to Work*; they complained about referring noncustodial parents to the program without getting any follow-up feedback. This underscores the importance of having a web-based client tracking system that workers in multiple agency settings can consult for information on client status.

Greater self-sufficiency, economic benefits

Like other "new generation" noncustodial parent employment programs, *Parents to Work* led to greater economic self-sufficiency on the part of these parents and greater child support payments for custodial parents.

The program also had a positive impact on the local and regional economy. Even during the unprecedented 2008 and

2009 economic recession, parents who enrolled in *Parents to Work* participated in workforce development activities at higher levels, obtained jobs and earnings at higher rates, and made greater child support payments. Those who participated more wholeheartedly realized the greatest economic benefits. And even though the recession destroyed jobs and earnings for parents in both groups, parents in the treatment group fared better by not falling as low and by picking up employment more quickly.

Key findings for *Parents to Work*

Between August 2008 and December 2010, 601 noncustodial parents enrolled in the *Parents to Work* experimental group and 349 in the comparison group. During the time when the earliest (August 2007) and final (November 2010) employment and child support outcomes were measured, the unemployment rate in Arapahoe County rose from 3.9 to 8.6 percent. Despite the severe economic downturn, the evaluation produced some promising results.

- **Participants engaged in workforce services at high rates.** Nearly three-quarters of parents (69 percent) in the treatment group participated in workforce services, with 46 percent participating in three or more activities and 23 percent in one or two. Only 31 percent did not participate in any program services.
- **Participants paid more child support.** In the year following program enrollment, the average percentage of owed child support that was paid rose significantly, from 36.6 to 41.3 percent in the treatment group, but was unchanged for the comparison group (28.2 percent versus 27.5 percent). Members of the treatment group who made no payments in the 3 months prior to project enrollment went from paying 16 percent of what they owed to 33 percent, as compared with 15 percent to 23 percent for the comparison group.
- **Participants paid child support more regularly.** Payment regularity improved significantly in the treatment group, rising from an average of 5.3 to 5.7 payments in a 12-month period versus 3.9 and 4.0 payments per month in the comparison group.
- **More involved participants experienced the best earnings outcomes.** Experimental group members who participated in the most workforce development activities were significantly more likely to exhibit post-program earnings (81 percent) as compared with their less involved (72 percent) and uninvolved (68 percent) counterparts. They also experienced a milder decline in earnings due to the 2008/2009 economic recession (4 percent versus 9 percent and 12 percent, respectively).

Many opportunities are upcoming for states and localities to develop collaborative workforce programs for noncustodial parents and realize some of these benefits.

For more information on *Parents to Work*, or to view the full report, please visit the [Center for Policy Research publications page](#).



- **More involved participants have the strongest child support payment patterns.** Child support payment patterns increased significantly only for actively engaged project participants, with the percentage of owed support that was paid rising from 35.9 to 42.9 percent.
- **Workforce programs for noncustodial parents contribute to regional economic growth.** *Parents to Work* contributed positively to the regional economy through job creation, regional sales, and earnings growth. The cost-effectiveness ratio for the program, which considers actual program expenditures and child support collections, were \$1.70 for the first post-enrollment year and \$5.09 after a three-year period, if one-year patterns of collection are sustained. The Return on Public Investment (ROPI) for *Parents to Work* was \$12.72 in regional earnings growth and \$22.51 in sales/revenue growth in the region. When adjusted for experimental-comparison group differences, the ROPIs are \$4.37 in earnings growth and \$7.74 in sales/revenue growth.

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George H. Sheldon
Acting Assistant Secretary for Children and Families

Vicki Turetsky
Commissioner, OCSE

Gabrielle Pagin
Director, Division of Consumer Services

Elaine Blackman
Editor
202-401-5353
elaine.blackman@acf.hhs.gov