



## A Project to Enhance Agency Collaboration and Case Processing

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Every community faces some of the same problems and opportunities in handling families with cases in both the child support and child welfare agencies. When the two agencies fail to coordinate, absent parents may not be located, parents with children in foster care may receive child support in error and face the prospect of making repayments, and child support may never be established even though it would help the family to reunify.

The child support and child welfare project was undertaken to improve collaboration between sister agencies in multiple jurisdictions. The Center for Policy Research of Denver, Colo., with grant funding from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, conducted two meetings in Washington, D.C., in 2006 and 2007 to bring together top-level managers and other key representatives of child welfare and child support agencies in targeted jurisdictions to discuss shared concerns

and engage in the development of plans to improve the handling of joint cases and to promote collaboration. Four jurisdictions, Minnesota, California, Wisconsin and New Jersey, convened in 2006; Oregon, Tennessee, Massachusetts and Oklahoma convened in 2007.

Major topics included ways of locating fathers for adoption and placement purposes, improving paternity establishment in foster care cases, referring appropriate cases to child support agencies and avoiding inappropriate referrals, and communicating about changes in custodial arrangements so that child support is distributed appropriately. Representatives of both agencies also wanted administrators and line staff to better understand their counterparts' key goals, pressures and respective roles in processing shared cases. Facilitated project meetings led to the development of site-specific action plans that centered on training, referrals, communication, staffing, automation, locating and paternity establishment.

### Action Plans for Participating Jurisdictions

**Training.** Six of the eight participating sites chose cross-agency training as a priority for future action. Recommended practices included using an interdisciplinary committee to guide the development of training materials, assist in planning training events and incorporate overviews of both agencies into the training.

The proposed cross-agency training generally introduced the goals and mandates of the partner agency, how each agency is evaluated, and how child welfare and child support cases intersect.

**Referrals.** Two sites focused on the policies and practices that govern the referral of child welfare cases to the child support agency. For example, the Los Angeles plan focused on implementing a new California regulation requiring social workers to determine whether a referral to child support is appropriate and to document their determination before making a referral. Since nearly all cases were being automatically referred to child support, a massive training effort was undertaken. Following the completion of the training program, the number of cases referred to child support on a monthly basis by child welfare social workers dropped from approximately 900 to 374.

**Communication.** Four sites made improved communication between child support and child welfare a focal point of their action plans. Los Angeles addressed interagency communication by identifying liaisons for child support and child welfare so that workers have a contact person in each geographical area. Oklahoma proposed forming a workgroup with representatives from child welfare, child support and TANF to exchange information. New Jersey proposed expanding its existing state-level workgroup with other relevant partners. Wisconsin specified convening a workgroup composed of individuals who attended the Washington, D.C.,

collaboration meeting and other relevant individuals, including systems experts, trainers and business analysts.

**Staffing.** Two of the participating sites proposed staffing changes in their action plans. Tennessee proposed assigning a child support worker to handle foster care cases and receive referrals from children's services. Oregon's statewide child support office proposed dividing cases within the office geographically, rather than alphabetically, to help child support workers develop relationships with child welfare field workers. The state hoped that this would ensure that notifications would be given to child welfare workers when child support services were initiated, expedite paternity establishment and aid in gathering information.

**Automation.** Several sites noted the need for changes in the automated system. Minnesota proposed exploring the feasibility of improving information sharing between their child support and child welfare systems. Oklahoma also noted the need for better automated information sharing related to changes in paternity, custody and placement, including the development of an alert "pop-up" to notify workers of changes. Massachusetts proposed incorporating child support referral into the new imaging/workflow document generation system currently under development. The Wisconsin action plan called for convening personnel for the automated child support and child welfare system to examine the level of access accorded to various workers and changes in the systems, re-evaluate the status of system identifiers in the referral



process, and examine web-based systems that allow data sharing between diverse government agencies, such as Virginia's SPIDeR and Utah's eFind.

**Locator and Paternity Establishment.** Several participating sites, including Minnesota and Massachusetts, incorporated an assessment and expansion of child support locate tools to identify and locate absent parents and family members. There was considerable interest in Oregon's procedure for processing Federal Parent Locator Service requests for child welfare workers with legislation (Senate Bill 234) that makes the child welfare agency the obligee in foster care cases and allows the child support agency to routinely do paternity testing by judicial order.

## Lessons Learned



Participants in every jurisdiction credited the Child Support and Child Welfare project with moving the needle on interagency collaboration. Although many had developed relationships with sister agencies and had expressed prior interest in furthering collaboration, these liaisons had occurred only at the highest levels of agency management and efforts to coordinate had typically stalled. The project provided

the framework and timelines to energize discretionary, future-looking interagency collaboration. The Washington, D.C., meetings allowed participants to concentrate on collaboration issues and afforded participants exposure to their counterparts in other geographical settings and to national experts, which helped generate new ways of doing things, and helped import and explore promising practices. Finally, the process of developing an action plan ensured that each jurisdiction left the meetings with a blueprint for future action, a specific set of intermediate steps, a tight timeline and a division of labor.

While the project was an effective, external source of coordination, the experiences of the eight jurisdictions in implementing their action plans suggest that other factors come into play in making change. The following are some more general lessons on how to further interagency coordination and collaboration in other settings and agency pairs.

## Effective Collaboration Requires:

**A Push From the Top.** Collaboration efforts take extra time and energy. In the short-term, these efforts may appear to detract from the performance objectives of individual agencies. Making collaboration a priority requires the participation of top-level managers from both the child support and child welfare agencies. These leaders provided the impetus for the collaboration effort and the momentum to sustain it. In some settings, managers realized that their performance objectives could not be met without collaborative efforts.

**Tenacity.** Directives from the top do not immediately translate into reality without a lot of persistence and follow-through. One agency tends to assume a lead role, and the manager of that entity needs to “stay on top” of the effort. As one administrator put it, “We sent reminder after reminder about meetings or things we had agreed to do. It involves a lot of cajoling and constant follow up.”

**Realistic Expectations.** Successful efforts require that participants have perspective and realistic expectations about what partner agencies will do and their performance timeframes. Partner agencies have other important goals and deadlines. Managers say that it is important to acknowledge these diffuse and conflicting pressures and “cut other participants some slack.”

**Focus on a Few Key Objectives.** The project meetings resulted in the generation of a long list of proposed interventions that were subsequently pared back to a manageable list. In most jurisdictions, collaboration between child support and the child welfare agency wound up involving the conduct of cross-agency training programs and the improvement of communication techniques. Other more elaborate plans that involved new staffing or technological innovations were dropped or postponed pending implementation of top-ranked interventions that could be accomplished more quickly.

**Building and Maintaining Relationships.** Ultimately, cooperation across agencies requires building relationships with individuals in sister agencies. Managers emphasize the importance of connecting with their responsive counterparts in sister agencies, cultivating these ties and reinforcing them over time. Managers are then equipped to share these ideas with other people in their agencies. Positive cross-agency collaborative efforts are generally rooted in human relationships, with technology and geography acting to promote or hinder collaboration.