HENNEPIN COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT
VIDEO INTERVIEWING AND
CLIENT REFERRAL SERVICES

FINAL REPORT
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Submitted by:

Esther Ann Griswold, M.A.
Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.
Center for Policy Research
1570 Emerson Street
Denver, CO 80218
303/837-1555
FAX: 303/837-1557
cntrpolres@qwest.net
www.centerpolicyresearch.org

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Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services

Executive Summary

One result of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), with its emphasis on self-sufficiency and limits on the time an adult can receive cash assistance, is an increased awareness that child support can be a vital resource to low-income families. PRWORA also calls for increased cooperation by welfare recipients with Child Support Enforcement in establishing child support and medical support orders, and in establishing paternity. The Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services Project, funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, focused on improving the incidence of client cooperation with the Child Support Enforcement program through reshaping the client-agency relationship and exploration of new roles for the IV-D worker. The project was designed to develop, test, and evaluate the benefits of a coordinated IV-A/IV-D process that included effective interviewing procedures and arrangements, screening and assessments of applicants regarding barriers to cooperation, and referrals to community resources.

The three-year project approached the phenomena of cooperation and non-cooperation as being products of both client and agency performance. For this project, the Hennepin County CSE agency tested the effectiveness of telephone, video, and in-person formats in interviews designed to collect information about the noncustodial parent (NCP) from the custodial parent (CP). The agency also tested a process of screening for barriers to cooperation by having workers administer to clients a set of questions about personal problems that could interfere with cooperation. Clients who disclosed problems were directed to a resource worker who assessed the clients and made referrals to service providers when appropriate. Additionally, this project investigated the use of an expanded set of questions aimed at collecting missing information about the NCP from the CP. CSE
staff working on the project were co-located in the IV-A offices, and staff of the two agencies worked together in several capacities over the course of the project.

Analysis of the research conducted during this project led us to these conclusions:

♦ Most public assistance applicants/recipients do cooperate with CSE requirements, and the majority of those who are determined to be non-cooperative and receive a sanction take action within a month to cure it.

♦ While there are some individuals who willfully disregard agency requirements and appear willing to live with sanctions, other cases of non-cooperation are due to lack of understanding of the regulations, reflecting language and cultural differences that can be bridged. Other sanctioned parties may need intensive case management or special attention in order to move into a state of compliance.

♦ Client cooperation with child support requirements does not appear to be linked to any specific interview format. Nor does client cooperation appear to be affected by the number of times they are informed of child support requirements and sanctions. This is not to suggest that agencies should be cavalier in conducting interviews or that they can forgo providing information on rules, good cause exemptions, and sanctions. Rather, it means that agencies can pick from many methods of collecting information and providing the materials needed for clients to understand the child support process.

♦ Although in-person interviews and immediate interviews are recognized as useful (providing “value-added” service) by Child Support Enforcement administrators, pressures to balance budgets and meet goals set by the federal government may make personal methods of collecting information obsolete when valuable staff time can be saved through using available technology. The larger the agency, the more pressure there is to streamline procedures by replacing human interactions with automated systems for collecting and storing information and initiating agency actions.
Clients like the notion of the child support agency asking about problems that could be barriers to cooperation, but few appear to be interested in using the help that is offered. Child support workers find screening to be outside the realm of how they define their jobs. We believe that the most practical approach for a Child Support Enforcement agency wishing to address problems that could lead to non-cooperation would be to collaborate with the local welfare-to-work program. Typically, these programs screen periodically and have links to community resources and service providers.

A certain amount of collaboration and cooperation between IV-D and IV-A agencies occurs and will doubtless continue as long as it remains uncomplicated, with little demand made on either entity to alter its behavior or revise its public image. Child support and welfare agencies share clients and have clearly recognized the need to develop procedures for the exchange of information.

At the same time, IV-A and IV-D agencies are administered separately, have different technologies and philosophies, and have objectives that have historically been perceived to be at odds with one another. Both agencies are naturally focused on the federal goals and standards they must each meet, and are reluctant to risk being sidetracked by small groups with special needs or time-consuming initiatives launched by the other agency.

The recommendations of the federal Office of Inspector General for collaboration between IV-A and IV-D agencies focus on the development of effective methods of collecting, recording, and exchanging information about clients and noncustodial parents, and on strengthening communication and interactions between agency staff (Office of Inspector General, March 2000b). We suggest that PRWORA also calls on federal and state agencies to expand their vision of “agency collaboration” and combine their resources to create a sturdy launching pad for families attempting to make the transition from dependency to self-sufficiency. For example, IV-A staff should be actively recruiting CSE participation in programs serving families at the end of their time limits. Agency
cooperation should include community outreach programs with teams of staff from both agencies making presentations. CSE staff could be seeking out IV-A programs where child support materials can be incorporated. Through collaboration, the agencies can maximize their contribution to moving families toward independence.

State Child Support Enforcement and Family Assistance agencies understandably need assistance if they are going to engage in various proactive efforts that are currently viewed as peripheral to their core mission. Will federal agencies offer more than verbal support? It is apparent that if the federal government is genuinely interested in fostering collaboration between agencies in order to improve the rates of cooperation of welfare recipients, it will have to provide real incentives to both parties. This means broadening national goals to include collaborative efforts between IV-A and IV-D agencies, providing assistance in developing new sets of programs that draw upon the strength and expertise of the two agencies, and offering financial incentives for agencies willing to move into uncharted waters. By fostering these collaborative efforts, the federal government will take an active and forward-looking role in shaping the impacts of PRWORA on families.
This document, *The Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services: Final Report*, was developed under a grant from the Office of Child Support Enforcement to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division (Grant Number 90-FD-0014). Points of view expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the OCSE, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division, or the Hennepin County Economic Assistance, Collections Services Division.
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The Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services Project was awarded to the Minnesota Division of Child Support Enforcement, which is directed by Laura Kadwell. The project was administered by the Hennepin County Division of Child Support (Collections Services Division) under the direction of Barry Bloomgren. Both Ms. Kadwell and Mr. Bloomgren were highly committed to the project and provided valuable support and encouragement.

The project manager was Thomas Siegert of Hennepin County Collections Services Division, and the project coordinator was Sandy Zarembinski. Together, they competently arranged staff time and resources to meet the myriad demands of the project. Mr. Siegert was very supportive of the project, and Ms. Zarembinski was instrumental in all phases of project operation. We are very grateful to both of them. We thank Mary Stachel for her contribution and assistance with the research on non-cooperation. Thanks also to Jane Lay and Bob Jackson, both of whom were always available to answer questions and to discuss the larger implications of our research. We would also like to recognize the contribution of Hennepin County CSD workers. Individually and in focus groups, they kindly shared their work experiences and observations with us.

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Finally, we would like to express our gratitude for the support of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, which funded this project, and we particularly thank program officer Susan Greenblatt for her interest, patience and guidance.
HENNEPIN COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT VIDEO INTERVIEWING
AND CLIENT REFERRAL SERVICES

FINAL REPORT

Introduction

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement awarded a three-year research and demonstration grant in 1997 to Collections Services Division, the Child Support Enforcement agency (CSE) of Hennepin County, Minnesota. The goal of the Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services Project was to improve the incidence of client cooperation with the child support establishment program. The project aimed to develop, test, and evaluate the benefits of a coordinated IV-A/IV-D process that included effective interviewing procedures and arrangements, screening and assessment of applicants regarding barriers to cooperation, and referrals to community resources when appropriate. Additionally, the project addressed an issue of concern to all human services departments: informing victims of domestic violence of their right to request good cause exemptions from cooperation if they believe that pursuit of child support would increase the danger of violence by the noncustodial parent. The Center for Policy Research (CPR) was the evaluator for the grant project.

The project expanded on a pilot project undertaken by CSE in 1995, known as the Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing Project, which involved electronic interviews with custodial parents to obtain child support information on the same day that they applied for public assistance. As is the case in many jurisdictions, the child support agency and the public assistance agency in Hennepin County are not co-located. Instead, CSE and the public assistance agency are located in different buildings six blocks apart in downtown Minneapolis. The interactive video interview program was designed to reduce the time lag and inconvenience for public assistance applicants who had been required to
travel to another building to complete the intake process. Research for the project was conducted in three phases over a two-year span.

*Phase I (August 1998 - April 1999):* CSE tested three child support interview formats: telephone, interactive video, and in person.

*Phase II (May 1999 - January 2000):* CSE continued to use the three formats, and also screened applicants for potential barriers to cooperation. Applicants who disclosed problems received information about community resources or referrals to appropriate county agencies.

*Phase III (June 2000 - September 2000):* Using only the in-person format, workers administered an expanded immediate interview form to try to capture information that was not provided on the referral form, and continued screening for barriers.

Two other research efforts were components of the grant project. First, a 12-month follow-up review was conducted of cases that underwent a child support immediate interview between August 1998 and April 1999. The goal of the review was to determine whether any interview format — telephone, video or in person — was more effective in producing positive child support outcomes, such as paternity and child support orders established, and payment status. The second research effort was a study of non-cooperation within CSE. It incorporated analysis of the agency’s sanctioned caseload using electronic information available through the child support and public assistance automated systems, as well as interviews with sanctioned clients and selected management and line staff. The goals of this study were to analyze the characteristics and patterns of the sanctioned caseload, gauge the extent of the problem of non-cooperation within Hennepin County, and examine the sanction practices of the child support and public assistance agencies of Hennepin County.
This final report reviews the primary issues investigated and the study findings. It incorporates the perspectives of Hennepin County CSE administrators and workers, Hennepin County Family Assistance Division (FAD) (IV-A) administrators and workers, and Minnesota Department of Human Services administrators, as expressed in individual interviews and focus groups conducted by CPR. In the Summary and Discussion section of the report, we frame the research within the larger context of welfare reform and our changing society. Details on each phase of the research process are contained in the reports in appendices A through F:

A: Preliminary Analysis of Phase I (Pearson, Thoennes and Griswold, September 1999)
B: Preliminary Analysis of Phase II (Griswold, Pearson and Davis, October 2000)
C: Reactions of Workers, Service Providers, and Clients to Screening and Referral Activity Aimed at Mitigating Barriers (Griswold, April 2000)
D: Twelve-Month Follow-up Study (Griswold and Davis, October 2000)
E: A Study of Non-Cooperation (Griswold and Davis, January 2001)
F: Analysis of Phase III (Griswold and Davis, April 2001)

Chapter 1. Background

Federal welfare reform, spelled out in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), places an emphasis on the achievement of self-sufficiency by public assistance recipients and limits the lifetime receipt of cash assistance by an adult to 60 months (or less, depending upon state policy). PRWORA replaced the welfare entitlement program Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, which requires recipients to participate in work activities. These changes have led to an increased awareness that child support can be a significant resource for low-income families.
PRWORA also calls for increased cooperation by welfare recipients with Child Support Enforcement in establishing child support and medical support orders, and in establishing paternity. Definitions of cooperation with the child support agency vary by state, but all involve provision of information by the custodial parent (CP) about the non-custodial parent (NCP), as well as other regulations, such as submitting to genetic testing, completing required forms, and attending meetings or hearings. A few states require that a set number of pieces of information about the NCP be provided. Idaho, for example, requires the applicant to produce the name of the NCP plus two other pieces of information, with the entire family denied benefits if this information is not provided (Turcetsy, 1998). Other states allow the CP to attest to a lack of knowledge if she or he cannot provide information. Minnesota requires that the custodial parent “cooperate in good faith” by providing all “known” information, but does not automatically reduce or deny benefits to the recipient of family if specific information is not provided. The determination of cooperation, which previously was handled by the public assistance (IV-A) agency, has become the responsibility of the child support (IV-D) agency.

Although PRWORA calls for stringent sanctions of the CP once non-cooperation has been determined, states have considerable leeway in structuring what triggers the determination. Agencies can shape a set of procedures to include clear notification of expectations and penalties, a conciliation process, anticipatory assessments of barriers to cooperation, case management, and/or specific interventions prior to imposing the sanction. Minnesota’s approach includes flexibility by child support agencies regarding the information about the NCP that the CP is expected to provide; the distribution of a notice of client responsibilities and penalties for non-compliance to all public assistance applicants during the intake interview; and a set of graduated sanctions, beginning with a 10 percent financial sanction for a first-time MFIP¹ determination of non-compliance. In all mailings

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¹ The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) is Minnesota’s variation of TANF.
and materials handed out during interviews, Hennepin County provides a multi-language notice of the client's right to ask for an interpreter if she or he has insufficient English skills to understand instructions and complete forms.

Advocates of families receiving public assistance have argued for years that cooperation with child support regulations is as much a matter of effective agency performance as it is a matter of client decisions (Roberts and Finkel, 1994). They suggest that rather than declining to cooperate, many sanctioned clients simply do not understand the requirements of the child support agency. In part, this lack of understanding is a result of the way that clients are provided with information.

Typically, the IV-A intake worker is responsible for informing the public assistance applicant of the IV-D cooperation requirements, policies regarding the assignment of child support collections to the state, policies around claiming good cause and other exemptions, and penalties for non-cooperation. Additionally, the IV-A worker must collect information about the NCP from the CP. In a recent study conducted by the federal Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General, two-thirds of interviewed IV-A workers said they spend 15 minutes or less on child support materials during the intake interview, which often lasts 1½ to 2 hours (Office of Inspector General, March 2000b). It is not surprising that clients may fail to absorb or remember all the information about child support and cooperation presented to them when it is delivered within a short timeframe and bracketed by public assistance considerations.

The same study documented that IV-A and IV-D staff identified other problems within their system that could interfere with a client's intent to cooperate and provide information. For example, workers cited that lack of public assistance staff training in asking questions of a personal nature, and a reluctance on the part of some IV-A workers to jeopardize the fragile relationship with the client by talking about the CP's relationship
with the absent parent were aspects that needed to be taken into account. And in some cases, they believed custodial parents may fail to provide needed information about the NCP because they find the paperwork too difficult (Office of Inspector General, March 2000a).

The Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services Project addressed a number of these topics relating to cooperation with child support. The project was structured on the premise that both client and agency performance play a role in cooperation and the phenomenon of non-cooperation. Chapter 2 summarizes the methodologies employed in the project for each of the phases. Chapters 3 through 7 discuss the findings of the project. In the final chapter, we provide a brief summary and discussion.

Chapter 2. Methodologies Employed

During the Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services Project, a total of 4,145 individuals participated in child support immediate interviews. Most of these participants (92%) were women. The three phases of data collection involved: (1) Comparing the effectiveness of three interview formats, (2) exploring responses to screening for barriers to cooperation and providing referrals to county resources, and (3) testing the use of an expanded child support interview at the time of intake. Chart 1 presents a visual key to the types of interviews conducted during the project. (See page 6A).

Comparison of Interview Formats

In 1995, the system used by Hennepin County Child Support Enforcement agency (CSE) to open a case for a public assistance recipient involved mailing a Paternity Information Form to a CP after receiving an automated referral from the Family Assistance
**Chart 1: Key to Interviews Conducted with Public Assistance Applicants During the Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A public assistance applicant first went through a IV-A intake interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The IV-A intake technician sent the applicant to the IV-D offices for a child support immediate interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Independent researchers interviewed some of the clients who completed the IV-D immediate interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The client was asked a set of questions by the IV-D interviewer regarding problems that could act as barriers to cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A client who disclosed a problem and said s/he wanted information about dealing with the problem was sent to a resource worker for an assessment interview and, in some cases, received a referral to a county agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>CPR conducted telephone interviews with a small number of clients who had gone through an assessment interview.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Division. Determinations of non-cooperation were primarily based on the failure of the CP to return the form, and often several months had lapsed before a child support worker was able to connect with the CP. CSE staff felt that valuable information could be lost during that time. In 1996, CSE piloted a video conferencing system as a way of collecting information in a convenient and timely manner. Upon completion of a public assistance intake interview, the client could immediately sit in front of a video screen in a private room and communicate with a IV-D worker who was located in another building. The system was well-received by both workers and clients, and CSE staff noticed that non-cooperation dropped significantly within the group having the same-day interviews.

This small pilot project was the basis for the Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services Project, which tested the effectiveness of three different interviewing formats: telephone, video, and in person. Public assistance applicants were randomly assigned to one of the three test groups and received one of three different intake treatments following a IV-A interview: an immediate telephone interview conducted by a child support worker located in another building; an immediate video interview conducted by a child support work located in another building; or an in-person interview with a child support worker at a later date. In the second phase, in-person interviews were conducted on the same day as the intake interview, rather than two weeks later at a different building. This reduced the number of clients forgetting or missing the appointment.

During Phase I, approximately 50 workers from seven CSE units conducted immediate interviews. The units followed a monthly rotation schedule, so that each unit had the opportunity to participate in the three formats. Phase II interviews were conducted by a small group of approximately 12 workers who volunteered to be part of the research project. In both phases, some workers were telecommuters, working from home part of the time. For each interview, the worker completed a one-page data collection form, which was keyed to the IV-D Referral form. The worker recorded what information had been
missing on the referral form and was what elicited during the immediate interview. The form required little writing on the part of the interviewer, but asked the worker to assess the atmosphere of the interview and which type of interview format would have worked best for that particular client. All forms were sent to CPR for analysis.

Public assistance applicants who underwent a child support interview were asked to fill out a one-page client survey form, which contained a series of statements regarding the applicant’s experience with the interview process and format. Additionally, more than 400 research (often termed “exit”) interviews were conducted face-to-face with applicants following their child support interview during Phases I and II by researchers hired by CPR. These research interviews focused on the degree to which the client felt comfortable, felt free to disclose personal problems, understood the good cause option, understood cooperation and sanctions, and understood the next step in processing his or her case.

**Screening for Barriers to Cooperation**

With the implementation of federal and state welfare time limits and cooperation rules, advocates for low-income families observed that due to life situations such as substance abuse or domestic violence, some recipients may need services and additional time to meet the new requirements (Danziger, et al., 1999). Research focusing primarily on welfare-to-work programs began to document the barriers welfare recipients faced in their attempts to achieve self-sufficiency (Olson and Pavetti, 1996). Hennepin County CSE decided to explore whether the barriers to employment that public assistance applicants and recipients often experience affect cooperation with child support.

Phase II and Phase III of the project were designed to test a process for screening clients for barriers and providing referrals to county service providers when appropriate. During Phase II, clients continued to be randomly assigned to one of the three interview formats, while all interviews in Phase III were conducted in person. The same child support worker who conducted the immediate interview also administered the set of questions about nine kinds of personal problems that could interfere with cooperation, and
completed a data collection form. The nine problems presented as potential barriers were transportation, child care, physical disabilities or health, scheduling conflicts, literacy, custody or visitation, substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence. The worker recorded the response of the client to each problem, and whether the client wished to meet with a Resource Worker to obtain more information or a referral. A form was filled out for each client screened and sent to CPR for analysis.

The Resource Worker, a CSE technician knowledgeable about county agencies and community resources, administered a set of more direct questions about custody and visitation, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health, and completed a form for each client. The Resource Worker recorded whether the individual wished to be referred to a county agency or only wished for printed information about community resources.

The research interviews conducted with clients during Phase II included a set of questions designed to gauge their response to the screening and referral activities of the child support agency. For further insights on the usefulness of referrals, CPR staff also interviewed a small pool of clients (11) several months after they had gone through an assessment with a Resource Worker. Finally, CPR staff conducted individual interviews and focus groups with CSE workers and county agency representatives. Here, respondents were asked to describe their experiences with screening and referrals, and to discuss the pros and cons of a child support agency asking about the personal problems of its clients.

**Collecting Information through an Expanded Questionnaire**

The child support interviews conducted during Phase I and Phase II were called "immediate interviews" because they ordinarily took place immediately after the public assistance intake interview. The set of questions asked by the child support worker was short, aimed at eliciting information about the NCP that had not been supplied in the IV-A intake process. CSE staff selected the in-person format to be used exclusively during Phase III and dropped telephone and video formats. This decision was based on a
combination of key factors. First, there was continuing negative response to the video format by workers. Second, child support staff felt that face-to-face interviews tend to be more effective than telephone or video interviews in establishing a good relationship with the clients, regardless of whether the respondents provide additional information. Third, as a result of renovations, CSE was able to place child support workers at the welfare offices and to utilize in-person, immediate interviews to an extent that had not occurred before. The decision also reflected earlier project findings showing little difference in outcomes for video, telephone, and in-person interview formats.

The interview process tested during Phase III differed from the first two phases in several ways. All interviews were conducted in person by child support workers co-located with the IV-A program. An expanded immediate interview was tested to allow workers to probe for pieces of information missing on the child support referral form and try to stimulate CP recollections. For example, if the address of the NCP was not on the referral form, the child support worker asked if the CP had received mail from the NCP or had visited the NCP. The worker completed a form for each client interviewed. CPR received copies of all forms.

Additional Data Collection Efforts

To gauge the longer-term impact of the three interview formats, CPR analyzed information on the child support status of 886 cases 12 months after the immediate interview. The data used in the 12-month follow up review was collected manually by child support workers from the IV-D automation system, PRISM, and from the IV-A automation system, Maxis. The data for the study of non-cooperation was based on an extraction of information for a sample of 169 sanctioned cases. The information was collected by CSE technicians using the automated systems PRISM and Maxis. Additionally, CPR conducted interviews with selected CSE management and line staff regarding the phenomenon of non-cooperation, and with 13 CSE clients who had received a sanction by the child support agency.
The analysis conducted by CPR focuses on interview formats, screening for barriers, collecting quality information from the CPs, and examining the phenomenon of non-cooperation. In the following chapters, we summarize key findings pertaining to each of these topics.

Chapter 3. Comparison of Interview Formats

In comparing telephone, video and in-person child support interviews, CSE sought to gauge:

- Does one format perform better than another in collecting information from the CP about the NCP?
- Do clients prefer one format over another?
- Do the three interview methods yield different patterns with respect to disclosure of domestic violence and requests for good cause awards, and non-cooperation and sanction activity?
- What are staff reactions to the three formats?
- Do the three interview methods yield different patterns with respect to paternity, child support orders and income assignments established 12 months later?

Judging the effectiveness of various formats, and particularly the video format, has significance nationwide, since the IV-A and IV-D offices in many jurisdictions are located in separate facilities. Detailed descriptions of the structure of the research and the data collection process are found in the reports “Preliminary Analysis of Phase I” and “Preliminary Analysis of Phase II,” Appendices A and B, respectively. The following presents our key findings.
The video, telephone, and in-person formats perform similarly when eliciting locate information, and differences are modest. In-person interviews are the most effective in eliciting disclosures of domestic violence and in leading to the establishment of paternity.

Generating information

There appears to be little difference among the three formats in their ability to generate key information about the noncustodial parent, such as Social Security number, address, and employer. No format consistently outperformed the other two. For example, during Phase I, all formats garnered information about the address of the NCP in approximately one-fourth of the cases where that item was missing from the child support referral form. Although the video format was more effective for eliciting the NCP’s name and identifying information during Phase I, the in-person format did the best job of collecting the NCP’s driver’s license number and employer. During Phase II, the in-person format was more successful gathering information in six of the eight key areas (NCP’s date of birth, address, legal relationship with children, employer, relationship to the CP, and child support order), although the differences were slight.

Disclosing domestic violence

The in-person format is more likely than the other formats to elicit disclosures of domestic violence. Screening for barriers during Phase II elicited disclosure of domestic violence by 19 percent of in-person respondents, compared to 14 percent of video and 10 percent of telephone respondents. The number of interviewees who expressed interest in applying for a good cause exemption due to domestic violence was small (3% of the total people screened); a somewhat higher percentage of requests for good cause came from the video and in-person formats than from the telephone format.

Child support outcomes

The three formats yielded different patterns with respect to paternity, child support orders, and income assignments 12 months later. Cases undergoing the in-person
interview were more likely to have led to the establishment of paternity, child support orders, or wage assignments, although the differences between formats were quite modest with regard to support orders and wage assignments. No format appears to be more conducive to higher rates of cooperation or non-cooperation, as measured by sanctions.

- The response of clients to each of the formats was generally positive.

Clients who were interviewed by researchers in both Phase I and II rated their child support interview favorably, regardless of the format. During Phase I, for example, the majority said they felt comfortable asking questions of the interviewer, although this was true for fewer respondents of a video interview (67%) than for telephone (81%) or in-person respondents (93%). Likewise, most respondents believed the worker was really listening to them. People tended to respond most positively to in-person interviews.

People were also more apt to disclose sensitive information in in-person interviews. As noted above, the domestic violence disclosure rate was significantly higher among applicants interviewed face-to-face. During Phase II, only ten individuals (less than 1% of those screened) answered “yes” to the screening question “Do you or any household member have drug or alcohol issues that might make it difficult for you to cooperate with child support?”, and they were all interviewed in person. Additionally, respondents being interviewed in person were more likely to request a meeting with a resource worker or ask for resource information as were respondents undergoing a video or telephone interview.

- Most workers disliked immediate interviews, and they particularly objected to the video format.

Child support workers responded negatively to immediate interviews during Phase I, in large part because they felt the interviews interfered with their regular routine. Additionally, workers thought that many of the interviews were unnecessary, since the CP had provided all the information that she or he knew on the referral form. An examination of the immediate interview forms completed by workers during Phase I showed clearly that CSE workers varied by how much they invested in an interview. Some used the interview
as an opportunity to gather and record as much information about the case as possible. Most, however, only checked off the required items. During Phases II and III, the job of conducting immediate interview was limited to workers who volunteered or were hired specifically for the project, rather than being rotated through all units. The experience of this select group, particularly those conducting in-person interviews, was that the interviews were very valuable for “putting a face on Child Support Enforcement,” being able to answer a client’s questions, and in general establishing a relationship with the CP. Additionally, they believed they often collected useful information that had been overlooked by the IV-A worker.

The responses of workers to the three formats were complex. They generally preferred the telephone format over the video and in-person formats, explaining phone conversations were more convenient for the client and for themselves. This was especially true when the interview was mainly confirming information already provided by the client. But most workers acknowledged that certain situations called for in-person interviews, such as when the client had a hearing handicap or low English skills, or was “trying to hide something.”

Workers listed many reasons for disliking the video format. In order to conduct a video interview, workers had to leave their desks, telephones, and computers and go to a video conference room. During an interview, there was a slight sound delay and the video image became blurred when a person moved. Workers noted that when they felt the client was not telling the truth or there were indications the client did not understand them, the video format hampered their efforts to communicate. And for some, there was a sense that rapport-building could not occur in a video interview. This is how one worker expressed his frustration with the video format:

When I am doing the interview by video, I feel like I am just reciting a list of things to the client. When I look at the form to read the questions, the client sees me looking down and away from the camera. This must give the
impression I am not really talking to her. It is a very different feeling and atmosphere than being face-to-face with a person. Doing video, I can’t gauge the client’s reaction to what I’m saying, and I am unable to draw her out if I think she is holding back. And looking at it from the clients’ perspective, she is unable to gauge my reactions, so she gets no reassurance that it’s safe to reveal a difficult or embarrassing situation.

Although workers received training in how to operate the video equipment, it was assumed that their interviewing skills were sufficient and no additional training or new techniques were needed. This worker’s description of what was wrong with the format suggests that successful use of video interviewing would require extensive practicing and critiquing of interviews in order to find the most effective techniques for communicating and establishing relationships through this medium.

Chapter 4. Screening for Barriers to Cooperation

By administering a set of screening questions to the public assistance applicants, CSE hoped to learn:

- What is the incidence of disclosure of problems by clients when screened? What are the most frequently reported problems? of requests for good cause exemptions? of requests for referrals to service providers?
- What are client reactions to being screened for potential barriers to cooperation and, in some cases, receiving referrals to other agencies?
- What are staff reactions to screening for potential barriers to cooperation and making referrals to specialists?
- What logistical and data management problems does an agency encounter when screening for barriers?
What types of training do staff need to assess clients who disclose problems and to make referrals to other agencies?

Descriptions of the program to test screening and referrals, and details of reactions by various constituents to screening are found in the reports "Preliminary Analysis of Phase II" (Appendix B), "Analysis of Phase III" (Appendix F), and "Reactions of Workers, Service Providers, and Clients to Screening and Referral Activity Aimed at Mitigating Barriers" (Appendix C). In the following paragraphs, we summarize our findings.

The rates and types of barriers to cooperation with child support regulations disclosed by public assistance recipients in Hennepin County are similar to those reported by welfare recipients across the country.

**Frequency of barriers**

Past research has documented the many problems faced by welfare recipients who are expected to meet welfare-to-work requirements as they strive to achieve self-sufficiency (Olson and Pavetti, 1996). This project focused on problems of recipients that might interfere with cooperation with child support regulations. In response to direct questions during Phase I exit interviews, 70 percent of the interviewees disclosed at least one possible barrier to cooperation with child support rules, and 30 percent disclosed two or more. In Phase II, 42 percent of those who were screened disclosed at least one problem that potentially could interfere with cooperation with the child support agency, and nearly half of the disclosers (46%, or 19% of total screened) said they faced multiple problems. The rate of disclosure of barriers in Hennepin County dropped during Phase III to 22 percent of those screened, with 51 percent of disclosers (11% of total) listing two or more problems. Although we cannot say with certainty, it seems likely that the lower rate of disclosure during this final phase was a result of the poor conditions under which the screening and interviews took place.
These rates reflect what has been learned from a variety of studies of welfare-to-work programs: welfare recipients face substantial barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, including health and mental health problems; domestic violence; substance abuse; and lack of adequate housing, child care, transportation, and basic work skills. In one study of barriers to employment conducted with women receiving welfare from 1997 to 1998 in Michigan, two-thirds of the participants had two or more barriers, and a quarter had four or more (Danziger, et al., 1999).

Types of barriers

The problems that were cited most frequently as potential barriers to cooperation with child support regulations in Hennepin County were lack of transportation (23% of barriers disclosed in Phase II and 30% in Phase III) and lack of child care (25% of barriers disclosed in both phases). These were also the most prevalent barriers identified in a 1995 study of participants in JOBS programs in Colorado (29% transportation and 48% child care), Iowa (24% transportation and child care) and Utah (24% transportation) (Pavetti, et al., 1995). Physical disabilities or health problems were identified less frequently (10% and 9%, respectively, of barriers disclosed in Phases II and III). Domestic violence is discussed in more detail in the next section of this report.

Fewer clients (8% in Phase II and 5% in Phase III) disclosed “difficulty reading or completing forms.” It should be noted, however, that this demonstration project did not include interviews with clients classified as non-English speaking. In December 1999, close to one-fourth (22.5%) of the Hennepin County MFIP caseload did not hold U.S. citizenship, suggesting that in many of these cases English was not their primary language. Thus, it is likely that Hennepin County CSE has many more clients for whom language or literacy is a problem than is reflected in the screening results of this project. CSE recognizes this, and the agency is now in the process of establishing a special unit to work with Spanish and Somali speakers.
In focus groups, Hennepin County child support screeners expressed their belief that public assistance applicants/recipient consistently underreport problems with alcohol and drugs for fear of having their children removed from the home by Child Protective Services. According to several workers, “Drugs and alcohol are a big problem in the lives of many of the CPs we interview, but they are not going to tell us. Often, the NCP has an alcohol problem, but the CP is afraid to reveal that.” These workers also speculated that people are reluctant to disclose mental health problems, out of shame or concerns that they might lose custody of their children.

Disclosure of domestic violence in Hennepin County and responses to child support by victims of domestic violence are similar to those found in other parts of the country.

Incidence of domestic violence

Advocates for victims of domestic violence have argued that public assistance applicants/recipients may not know that they can request to be exempted from cooperating if they believe pursuing child support will put them or their children in danger (Roberts and Finkel, 1994). Typically, public assistance applicants are informed of their right to apply for an exemption from child support requirements during the IV-A intake interview. During Phase I of this demonstration project, CSE relied on the IV-A financial workers to discuss domestic violence with the client. For Phases II and III, IV-A and IV-D workers both discussed domestic violence and the right to apply for good cause. Those people who requested an interview with a resource worker after screening by a child support worker were also reminded of the good cause exemption. Thus, domestic violence was mentioned two or three times in the course of a day to people applying for public assistance and going through a child support interview.

Do repeated reminders of the good cause exemption translate into an increased number of people applying for an exemption? The evidence says no. In exit interviews during Phase I, 42 percent of respondents reported domestic violence, but less than 3
percent expressed interest in a good cause exemption. During Phase II, 17 percent of those screened by a child support worker disclosed having experienced domestic violence, but only 2 percent said domestic abuse might be a barrier to cooperation, and 4 percent indicated they wanted to apply for a good cause exemption. A higher percentage of applicants interviewed by independent researchers disclosed domestic abuse (33%) in Phase II, but the number viewing the abuse as a barrier and the number of people indicated they wanted to apply for a good cause exemption remained low (3%). Although the number of respondents indicating that they would apply for a good cause exemption in Phase III was consistent (less than 2%), the rate of domestic violence disclosure during screening (7%) was uncharacteristically low. As we noted earlier, we believe the conditions under which interviews were conducted during Phase III were not conducive to people talking about their personal problems.

Domestic violence and interest in child support

In Minnesota and elsewhere, our studies find that while many applicants/recipients of public assistance experience domestic violence, most of them want to pursue child support (Pearson, Griswold and Thoennes, 2001). For example, the majority of respondents in Phase II exit interviews who disclosed domestic violence (68%) said they wanted to collect child support. The reasons they cited for not pursuing a good cause exemption included: the violence happened long ago (68%); the victim is no longer afraid of the abuser (71%); and a child support order was already in place for the NCP (43%). Often, custodial parents have other problems that are more immediate or compelling than their past abuse. Thus, of those respondents in Phase II who disclosed domestic violence, 21 percent also identified transportation as possible barrier to cooperation, 19 percent cited lack of child care, and 10 percent listed physical disabilities or health problems.

Nevertheless, it is important that a process be in place to work with the small percentage of custodial parents requesting an exemption from cooperating with child support because of domestic violence. Advocates for victims of domestic violence and
technicians who handle the public assistance cases involving domestic violence have noted that many CPs only want a good cause exemption for three months or so, while they move from a shelter and locate new housing, or while the relationship with the abusive partner “cools off.” A Minnesota DHS policy analyst maintains that child support and public assistance agencies need to develop a “yellow light” approach to working with victims of domestic violence, proceeding slowly and with caution.²

Clients like the idea of the child support agency asking about problems and offering help, but few take advantage of the resource.

Most clients (92%) taking part in exit interviews during Phase II approved of having a worker in the IV-D agency available to talk with clients about personal problems and refer them to service providers. This was true for 94 percent of the individuals who disclosed domestic violence by the father of their child. Clients who had seen a resource worker and were interviewed several months later all agreed that the agency should provide assistance (if only in the form of information about resources) to people who are having problems that can lead to non-cooperation.

For the most part, people said they felt comfortable answering questions about problems such as domestic abuse or child care issues. Eighty-eight percent of Phase II exit interview respondents agreed they were at ease when talking to the worker about such topics, as did 88 percent of those who disclosed they were victims of domestic abuse. Clients who completed written surveys registered high levels of comfort about talking with the worker, although the approval rate was higher (69%) for those interviewed in person than for those going through a telephone (74%) or video (63%) interview.

² See Turetsky and Notar, 1999, for a full discussion of safety procedures an agency can utilize when working with clients for whom domestic violence is an issue.
Clients who were interviewed by phone several months after the immediate interview and screening generally supported the idea of the agency asking everyone about problems, rather than waiting for the individual to bring up the topic. One woman explained, “I have stayed in homeless shelters several times with my son, who has cerebral palsy. I was afraid to talk about these problems, but if someone asked, it was ok.” Several of these respondents said that, depending on what the person senses about the trustworthiness of the child support interviewer, she or he will decide whether to disclose.

But approving of the offer of help by the agency is not the same as making use of that help. Less than half (42%) of the Phase II exit interviewees who disclosed one or more problems said they had gone to an agency, clinic, or to anyone for help at some time prior to the child support interview. Sixty-one percent of the people disclosing a barrier to cooperation in the exit interviews during Phase II said that they told the child support interviewer about the problem, presumably during the screening process. Yet only one quarter of disclosers said that they wanted to talk with a resource worker. When asked why they were not interested in learning more about available services, their reasons ranged from the problem having been resolved, to the client not being interested in pursuing services, to not trusting the child support agency.

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which community referrals given by IV-D resource workers were useful to those who received them. The Hennepin County Domestic Abuse Service Center does not share information regarding the referral source of their clients. The Family and Children Services Mental Health Program believed that more than a dozen individuals came to them for services as a result of talking with a child support resource worker (more than the number receiving a specific referral). Of the small group of clients (11) who were interviewed several months after meeting with the resource worker, only two said they sought help as a result of the child support agency’s efforts. Two other people said they wished that the resource worker had been more specific about what services were available. However, several others described receiving services, such as counseling,
at other agencies since that meeting. One respondent explained, "I didn't go for help then, because at that time I wasn't capable of acting. But it helped me to talk to someone, and later on I found a counselor on my own."

1. Child support workers do not think screening for barriers should be part of their job.

In general, child support workers disapproved of being asked to screen for barriers and make referrals; they felt it was a waste of time and resources. Some workers suggested it would be better to wait until a cooperation problem surfaced, and then ask about barriers, rather than screen everyone. Although several workers who conducted screening thought that there might be value in the process, they did not think that the task should be part of a worker's responsibilities. Rather, they thought that it should be handled by IV-A workers or social workers. To a large extent, workers conducting the screening disagreed with the idea that non-cooperation is related to problems such as child care or low literacy skills, although they did accept domestic violence as a legitimate basis for non-compliance. Instead, they considered non-cooperation to be driven by a custodial parent's desire to willfully conceal information. Several workers argued that "the biggest barrier to cooperation is not listed on our form. It is that he is living with her, and she doesn't want to tell the financial worker."

Workers conducting in-person interviews seemed more comfortable and engaged in the screening process than were the technicians who conducted telephone or video interviews. One of the objections of workers screening by telephone was that it seemed inappropriate to discuss sensitive matters through such an impersonal medium. The resource workers, who met in person with clients wanting more information or a referral, had a more positive response, but they were ambivalent with regard to how extensive the screening should be. Workers agreed that in many instances the clients needed information on available community services, and most supported having printed materials about service providers available in child support offices.
CSE administrators and supervisors raise the question of appropriate resource allocation when considering the benefits of screening for barriers to cooperation with child support regulations in advance of actual non-compliance. Considering that the majority of clients do cooperate with CSE (for example, 83% of the CSE/MFIP caseload in December 2000 cooperated), this is a valid point. It is not that child support staff and administrators lack interest in the problems that clients are facing. Rather, they believe that what is needed from the client is minimal. As one supervisor explained:

We don’t ask a lot of the CP. We only ask that she return a form, and come to an appointment or hearing. We don’t want much, just enough to get a court order, and then we cut her loose. We don’t think our requirements are harsh or unreasonable. It’s not like Employment Services, where they expect her to get a job.

Chapter 5. Collecting Quality Information through Interviews

Phase III of the project coincided with a large-scale building renovation. Crowded conditions and lack of privacy interfered with the interviewing and screening process, and precluded the conduct of exit interviews by independent researchers. As a result, analysis of the data has been limited to a few questions:

- Does direct questioning by a child support worker elicit information about the NCP that is not provided on the written referral form?
- What kinds of information are clients likely to recall when given cues?

A description of Phase III is found in Appendix F. In the following section of this report, we summarize the results of using an expanded child support interview to elicit missing information.
Expanded child support interviews may elicit more information, but it is not necessarily actionable information.

Child support workers vary in how much they try to assist applicants in remembering or retrieving missing information about the absent parent, regardless of the interview format. Of those respondents interviewed by independent researchers in Phase II who were asked for information they didn't know, less than half (42%) said the child support worker gave them suggestions on where to find missing information. The expanded interview tested one way for the child support worker to help the client remember such items as a birth date, or look for a Social Security number. Also, the expanded interview provided a means for the technician to probe for information that could help with locate activities. For example, if the Social Security number of the NCP was missing on the referral form, the client was asked:

- Do you have any papers with you that might have the NCP's Social Security number on it, such as a lease, driver's license, tax return, or paycheck stub?
- Is the NCP a citizen of the United States; if not, what country is the NCP from?
- Does the NCP vote; if yes, where?

The questionnaire contained 59 questions for 19 topics and was designed with a skip pattern, so that the client was only questioned regarding the missing pieces of information.

The results of the expanded immediate interviews were mixed. Analysis shows that expanded interviews do garner information that was not provided on the referral form. Of those cases with a missing Social Security number for the NCP, 13 percent provided the number when asked directly or by finding it on documents they had with them. Of the clients who had not written employment information about the NCP on the referral form, 36 percent provided information when questioned directly by the CSE worker. Under direct questioning, clients could often give the full name of the NCP, a past address or where the NCP grew up, some clues about the age of the NCP, and the citizenship status of the NCP.
At the same time, much of the information gathered during the expanded interview was of a general nature or only indirectly useful. Thus, knowing where the NCP used to live or if the NCP has other child support obligations might be helpful to a worker trying to build a case, but such information is not as critical as is the NCP’s Social Security number. Without a larger study that tracks case outcomes, it is difficult to say whether longer interviews are worthwhile.

The high attrition rate in public assistance cases and the problems in transferring information quickly raises questions about the value of “front-end” interviews.

The immediate interview, following on the heels of the IV-A intake interview, was designed to capture information at a critical time, early in the CP’s relationship with the public assistance agency. CSE staff and administrators generally agreed that the immediate interview was a good way to collect information about the NCP in order to locate him. However, there was always the question of whether the outcomes justified the amount of staff time invested. Our 12-month follow-up analysis found that 16 percent of the individuals who went through an immediate interview were not eligible for public assistance or withdrew from the process; consequently, for each of these, CSE was not required to open a child support case. Of those individuals for whom public assistance was granted and a child support case opened, only 56 percent remained open after 12 months. This high attrition rate raised doubts about the overall value of conducting front-end interviews with everyone, at least for the IV-D agency.

The forms completed by the workers showed that in many instances, some of the information missing on the referral form was indeed collected during the immediate interview. However, there was a perplexing aspect to the immediate interview, involving the flow of paper. The clients were in one building, the interviewers — some of whom were telecommuters working from home — were in a variety of places, and the CSE offices were in another building. Due to interoffice mail complications and logistics, the completed
immediate interview and child support referral forms often did not appear in the CSE offices by the time someone in the Assessment Unit was ready to open the case. The worker would have to “build the case from scratch,” that is, without the benefit of information gathered during the IV-A intake interview and the immediate interview. This problem, never fully resolved, further reduced the perceived value of immediate interviews.

- Changes in technology have reduced the importance of the immediate interview.

By the beginning of Phase III, technology had delivered a new tool that tipped the scales against the immediate interview. Hennepin County FAD introduced “Diamond,” a method of scanning into the computer documents such as divorce decrees, birth certificates, and Recognition of Parentage forms. CSE workers in the Assessment Unit (the unit that receives the referrals from IV-A, begins the process of opening a child support case, and assigns the case to the appropriate unit) are allowed access to Diamond, and they testify that this access has made their jobs much easier. Explained a worker in the Assessment Unit, “There are clues in those documents that we might never get from the CP. For example, I have found the Social Security number of the NCP on a divorce decree from another state.”

From the perspective of CSE administrators, the savings to the agency were a big factor in deciding to eliminate co-location of staff and immediate interviews. At the beginning of the grant project, the Assessment Unit had a backlog of more than 10,000 cases waiting to be opened. The Twelve-Month Follow-Up Study of cases going through an immediate interview in 1998 and 1999 (see Appendix D) found that the average case was kept in the Assessment Unit for 3.3 months before being assigned to a worker. Agency administrators say that now, the backlog has been eliminated, and 60 percent of all cases leave the Assessment Unit in less than 20 days after being referred by IV-A. Most of the remaining cases are processed within 45 days. Further, through the combination of redesigned workflow patterns and technology, the agency has been able
to reduce the FTE of the Assessment Unit from 21.5 to 15. Pointing to the new federal incentives and performance standards, one administrator explained, “Now that we have access to Diamond, it’s hard to justify using staff for in-person interviews, when we have so many other things for them to be doing.”

Chapter 6. Cooperation and Non-Cooperation in Hennepin County

In addition to testing ways to improve the rate of cooperation, Hennepin County CSE wanted to learn more about the clients who were determined to be non-cooperative and were sanctioned. The majority of child support sanctions are imposed because the client does not return a required form or does not appear for a hearing or respond to a letter. Questions for the study of non-cooperation included:

- What is the scope and nature of non-cooperation?
- How long do most clients stay in a state of sanction?
- What are the perceived reasons for non-cooperation according to child support and self-sufficiency workers? What do clients have to say about this issue?
- How much of non-cooperation is due to applicant dysfunctions that might be addressed through the provision of community services?

The complete report on non-cooperation is found in Appendix E. In the following paragraphs, we summarize what we learned about sanction patterns and the sanctioned population.

- Most Hennepin County public assistance applicants/recipients do cooperate with CSE requirements.

Most Hennepin County clients provide information needed to identify and locate the NCP. Thus, of the 1,948 applicants going through a IV-A and IV-D intake process during
the first phase of this project, approximately 95 percent of the clients provided a name for the NCP on the child support referral form (completed during the IV-A interview), 25 percent provided the Social Security number of the NCP, roughly two-thirds provided the NCP’s date of birth, close to 50 percent provided the NCP’s address, more than 80 percent provided the NCP’s legal relationship to the child, and approximately one-third gave employment information. Among those clients with at least one of these items missing on their child support referral form, child support workers elicited one or more pieces of information in over 40 percent of the subsequent interviews.

Most clients also appear for interviews and attend court hearings, other aspects of cooperating with CSE. It is difficult to show exact rates of cooperation because records are not kept of “cooperating clients” and “non-compliant clients.” Instead, workers record how many sanctions are imposed within a given month for non-compliance. Unfortunately, no records are kept of sanctions carried over from previous months. Thus, in December 1999, 192 child support sanctions were imposed; this represents approximately 1 percent of the 17,189 CSE/MFIP cases that were active at the time. Fifty-seven percent of these sanctions were cured by the client (the CP) within a month.

Hennepin County’s sanction rate is similar to national patterns. A recent study of IV-A and IV-D sanctions by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO, 2000) found that in 1998, approximately 135,800 families lost part or all of their benefits in an average month as a result of sanctions. This represented roughly 5 percent of the national average monthly TANF caseload. Of these sanctions, only 14,400 (10.6% of all sanctions, and .53% of the national average caseload) were imposed for non-compliance with child support requirements.

The rate of determining child support sanctions in Hennepin County seems to be increasing, but the rate of people curing their sanctions quickly appears to be stable.
Even as the CSE/MFIP caseload has decreased over the past four years, the number of sanctions imposed by CSE has steadily increased. In 1997, CSE workers assigned on average 132 sanctions per month, which was approximately .67 percent of the caseload. During 2000, CSE staff imposed an average of 214 sanctions per month, or 1.4 percent of the caseload. CSE staff view the increase in the sanction rate as a sign of more aggressive caseworker activity, rather than an increase in client non-compliance. What is notable is that the rate of individuals curing a sanction within a month, and thus incurring no financial penalty, has remained at 57 percent for the past three years. This pattern, reflecting a standard percentage of people who, for a variety of reasons, postpone complying until threatened with a penalty, has been documented by other entities such as public service companies (Grosse, 1995). In contrast, roughly a third of the individuals determined to be non-cooperative have been much slower to respond to the sanction and in some cases have had money deducted from their public assistance grant. Within this group, the average sanction for not returning a Parent Information Form had remained in place nine months at the time we reviewed the sanctioned caseload, and the average sanction for failure to attend a meeting had been in place 5.5 months.

The sanctioned population is disproportionately comprised of Hispanics.

Analysis of the extracted data from PRISM and Maxis revealed a portion of the sanctioned caseload was composed of people for whom language and cultural patterns may act as barriers to cooperation with child support requirements. Hennepin County has a significant population of immigrants, including families from the horn of Africa, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Mexico and other Central American countries, and the former Soviet Union. Although Native Americans are not immigrants, language and cultural differences remain a potential basis for non-compliance and subsequent sanctions. In December 1999, 22.5 percent of Hennepin County's MFIP caseload were non-U.S. citizens, and approximately 8 percent of the caseload were Native Americans.

While Hispanic/ Latino individuals in Hennepin County comprise only 2 percent of the MFIP caseload, they account for 25 percent of those with child support sanctions.
Spanish, Somali, and non-designated languages other than English were recorded as the primary languages in approximately one-third of the cases in the sanctioned caseload. CSE staff have noted that some immigrants are not literate in either their primary language or English, and need assistance interpreting printed CSE notices and completing forms. The agency is in the process of creating a team of bilingual child support staff to work with this population.

There is a subgroup of clients with repeated sanctions by both the IV-A and IV-D programs that may require more aggressive case management.

Another subgroup in the CSE sanctioned caseload was identified as individuals who were dually sanctioned. Approximately 26 percent of the cases under review had both IV-A and IV-D sanctions currently in place. Of this dual-sanction group, more than half had cured IV-A sanctions previously: 36 percent had cured one IV-A sanction, and 18 percent had cured two IV-A sanctions in the past. Additionally, 75 percent had lifted one or more IV-D sanctions previously. Thus, approximately one-quarter of the cases within this caseload demonstrated a pattern of moving in and out of sanctioned status.

Little is known about this group. There is evidence from a recent Hennepin County IV-A pilot project that individuals with patterns of multiple and long-held sanctions may need intensive case management with links to community service providers in order to resolve sanctions and meet agency requirements (Hennepin County, Minnesota, Economic Assistance Department, 2000). In a similar vein, studies conducted by utility companies of low-income customers with arrears and repeated patterns of disconnection found that a percentage of people needed case management, crisis intervention, and decision-making counseling in order to get to a state of "cooperation" with the utility (Grosse, 1995; Browne, 1995). It seems logical for IV-A and IV-D agencies to coordinate their responses to cases with dual sanctions, yet this suggestion is met with polite skepticism by IV-A and IV-D administrators and staff. In the next chapter, we explore the basis for this doubt.
Chapter 7. The Challenges of Collaboration
Between IV-A and IV-D Agencies

More than ever, collaboration between IV-A and IV-D agencies is being emphasized by federal agencies. A report from federal Department of Health and Human Services administrators states that “welfare reform has increased the importance of collaboration between child support enforcement and public assistance agencies,” and points out that typically the public assistance applicant is first introduced to child support requirements by the welfare intake worker (Office of Inspector General, March 2000b). To the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), collaboration between agencies means such things as inter-agency meetings, IV-A workers effectively collecting and transferring NCP-related information to IV-D workers, strengthening communications between agency staff, and providing cross-training to workers and administrators (ibid). This project has revealed some of the opportunities for, and obstacles to, agency collaboration.

Special demonstration projects can be a catalyst for IV-A/IV-D collaboration.

Over the course of the three-year project, IV-A and IV-D staff worked together in several capacities. The grant project Advisory Board included a IV-A supervisor along with IV-D personnel. In addition, an inter-agency work-group for the project was formed. Although the stated intent of this group was to assist in setting up the procedures for conducting immediate interviews and to review the proposed data collection forms, it also served as a mechanism to exchange information about how staff of both agencies perceived the grant project and what the responses of workers were to changes in procedures and forms.

The grant project technicians were co-located at the IV-A offices, allowing for routine interactions between workers of the two agencies. Co-location benefitted IV-A workers on numerous occasions, according to a Hennepin County IV-A administrator:
It's been very helpful to have child support workers here [during the grant project]. For example, we had a family of two parents and children come in for emergency assistance. The father thought the family would be better off if he divorced or left the mother. We were able to take him upstairs to the CSE worker, who explained child support rules to him. That kind of on-the-spot help is invaluable.

The CSE technicians taking part in the project made regular presentations during IV-A staff meetings regarding the goals and procedures of the demonstration project. Two of the CSE technicians working on the grant project were appointed to the Good Cause Committee, which meets regularly to determine whether applications for exemptions from cooperating with CSE will be approved or denied. Prior to the grant project, the good cause committee was composed of IV-A supervisors and field workers, with a CSE representative from the Paternity Unit.

CSE staff believed that as the project progressed, IV-A intake workers did a better job of making sure the child support referral form was filled out. Comparison of the information provided on the referral forms during the three phases shows this perception was accurate in some aspects. For example, the percentage of referral forms with NCP benefit information increased from 27 percent during Phase I to 49 percent during Phase III; the provision of driver’s license or automobile information almost tripled, increasing from 20 percent during Phase I to 58 percent during Phase III. Unfortunately, there was no change in the number of clients providing the most critical pieces of information about the NCP — the Social Security number, address, and employer.

The number of clients saying an intake worker had informed them of child support requirements, sanctions and good cause exemptions also increased during the project. In Phase II exit interviews, 84 percent of respondents remembered being told they could
ask for an exemption if they thought pursing child support might cause violence, an improvement of 33 percent over Phase I.

There are several possible reasons for these improvements. One is the improvements that occurred reflected a growing awareness among IV-A workers that child support can be a much-needed resource for low-income families facing the termination of welfare. Another is the project itself and the impact on IV-A staff of co-location and regular interaction between the workers of the two agencies, as described above. CSE staff believe the demands on both agencies of conducting the demonstration project contributed to a shift in the thinking of IV-A personnel, whereby child support became more meaningful. Finally, by Phase III, IV-A workers were directed to specifically ask applicants for documents such as child support orders or marriage certificates or divorce papers, in order to scan the documents into Diamond, the automation system for storing IV-A files.

Philosophical and technological differences between IV-A and IV-D agencies present substantial barriers to collaboration.

Philosophical differences

Beyond the grant project, there are few ways that Hennepin County CSE and FAD collaborate. Middle managers of both agencies meet periodically, and there is a IV-A/IV-D liaison committee currently in place, created to work out better procedures for exchanging information. Yet administrators from both agencies concede that cross-training efforts have decreased in the past few years. The chief barriers to collaboration appear to be philosophical and technological. Here is how a state administrator described the philosophical differences:

At the state level, we have different directors, and we have different missions. Traditionally, the role of CSE has been to bring money in, and the role of IV-A has been to give it out. Each agency believes its role is the more vital one. Is it any wonder that the county agencies find it hard to work together?
Although both agencies are dedicated to “the good of the children,” they differ in their approach to working with the parents. IV-A workers have never needed to know much about the noncustodial parent. They believe asking details about relationships between CPs and NCPs is too personal and interferes with establishing a good relationship with the CP. Both IV-A workers and Employment Service providers, now an important element of the welfare-to-work program, view the child support agency as invasive (asking personal questions, such as who is the father of the child), punitive, and problematic for service providers who are trying to build a relationship of trust with the client.

On the other hand, CSE staff do not feel that they need to learn very much about the CP to do their job. One of the objections of IV-D workers to screening for barriers to cooperation was that the questions were too personal and sometimes made both the client and the worker uncomfortable. They suggested that these topics did not fit with the task of collecting child support and were more appropriate for IV-A workers or social workers. Furthermore, some IV-D staff believe there is little need for the CP to have a “relationship” with the agency. Access to various databases such as motor vehicle and driver’s license systems has lessened the degree to which CSE depends on information about the NCP from the custodial parent. “As long as the CP gives us his name, we’ll find him,” CSE staff explained.

**Technological issues**

The incompatibility of the two automated computer systems PRISM and Maxis, a principal source of frustration for CSE staff, is indicative of long-standing friction between IV-A and IV-D agencies. “If you want the two agencies to collaborate, you should begin by developing compatible systems,” declared one CSE administrator. The two systems interface, but Maxis, the IV-A system, “is king.” It overrides PRISM. According to a CSE spokesperson, in the year 2000, 40 percent of the information about NCPs entered by IV-A workers into Maxis was incorrect, either through data entry errors or because CPs gave false information. As it now stands, when CSE staff gather information that corrects Maxis
entries, they cannot make changes and must rely on the IV-A staff to enter the correction. A worker described the sort of problem this system has created:

I recently had a case where the address of the CP was typed in wrong in Maxis, so her checks kept coming back and she was receiving nothing. Even though we had the right address in our system (PRISM), we couldn't get the (IV-A) worker to correct the address in Maxis. The CP needed that money, and she couldn't understand why she wasn't getting the checks.

CSE administrators have been working hard to change to this problem and feel they are making headway. Saying "Sometimes we are treated like Cinderella" by IV-A, they believe what is needed is for CSE workers to have the authority to correct Maxis records themselves, rather than wait for IV-A workers to make the changes.

Differences in agency culture and incentives work against logical collaboration efforts between IV-A and IV-D agencies

Child Support Enforcement and public assistance agencies work with the same population, and it seems logical that the two agencies would collaborate, especially in terms of working with clients who require additional attention or special programs. In Hennepin County, one prime target for potential collaboration is the group of welfare recipients who will come to the end of their time limit in September 2002 (and a smaller group originally from other states that will meet their limit in 2001). Hennepin County IV-A staff have been marshaling a variety of programs to position these people to exit welfare armed with access to all available community resources. But CSE has been involved only marginally in the planning. Likewise, the Sanction Resolution Project, which began in 2000 and utilizes community-based organizations to help resolve cases of MFIP clients who have been in a sanctioned state for at least four continuous months, does not include CSE staff. A third group that might be targeted for IV-A and IV-D collaboration involves the non-English speaking clients of Hennepin County Economic Assistance. CSE is starting a
bilingual program to work with Spanish-speaking and Somali-speaking clients, although IV-A already has a Multicultural Unit, with 39 staff who speak the languages and know the ethnic or cultural practices of the various immigrant groups now populating Hennepin County.

Agencies have distinct cultures, too. Historical cultural differences and traditions of working separately appear to keep the agencies from entering into collaborative efforts easily. IV-A administrators and staff are ambivalent about child support. They forget to include it in discussions of self-sufficiency, although they readily acknowledge that child support can be a valuable source of supplemental income for a family that has left welfare and is struggling to make ends meet. Some IV-A staff state that the conflicting objectives of the two agencies will always make working together difficult. A CSE staff person agreed:

CSE is rarely invited into collaborative efforts. Sometimes we are viewed as law enforcement. One outreach project for Economic Assistance put together programs like MFIP, Medical Assistance, child care and food stamps for some kind of neighborhood fair. They didn’t want child support represented — they said our presence would send the wrong message.

At the same time, CSE administrators see these projects as peripheral to their central mission. For example, when explaining why the agency is not more actively involved with the project focusing on MFIP clients exiting the system, one CSE administrator noted that “We are ready to serve (these clients) when the time comes. Until then, we don’t need to be involved.” With regard to the Sanction Resolution Project, CSE staff members explained in interviews that sanctioned clients represent a very small percentage of their caseload. They feel it would be a waste of agency resources to invest too much staff time in addressing the problems of sanctions, particularly when the collections for these cases are projected to be minimal at best.
Chapter 8. Summary and Discussion

The Hennepin County Child Support Video Interviewing and Client Referral Services project was an ambitious one, designed to develop, test and evaluate the benefits of a coordinated IV-A/IV-D process that included effective interviewing procedures and arrangements, screening and assessments of applicants regarding barriers to cooperation, and referrals to community resources. The primary goal was to improve the incidence of client cooperation with the child support enforcement program through reshaping the client-agency relationship and exploration of new roles for the IV-D worker. The project approached the phenomena of cooperation and non-cooperation as being products of both client and agency performance. In the previous pages, we have described the results of three phases of interviewing, an analysis of the non-cooperative caseload, and the dynamics of collaboration by the child support and financial assistance agencies.

The project was conducted amidst difficult changes in federal and state policies, the introduction of new automation, agency restructuring, building renovation, and a shrinking public assistance population. In spite of the unanticipated challenges, the project stayed on course, providing a number of lessons to consider. Briefly, the conclusions we can draw from this complicated demonstration project include:

♦ Most public assistance applicants/recipients do cooperate with CSE requirements, and the majority of those who are determined to be non-cooperative and receive a sanction take action within a month to cure it.

♦ While there are some individuals who willfully disregard agency requirements and appear willing to live with sanctions, other cases of non-cooperation are due to lack of understanding of the regulations, reflecting language and cultural differences that can be bridged. Other sanctioned parties may need intensive case management or special attention in order to move into a state of compliance.
Client cooperation with child support requirements does not appear to be linked to any specific interview format. Nor does client cooperation appear to be affected by the number of times they are informed of child support requirements and sanctions. This is not to suggest that agencies should be cavalier in conducting interviews or that they can forgo providing information on rules, good cause exemptions, and sanctions. Rather, it means that agencies can pick from many methods of collecting information and providing the materials needed for clients to understand the child support process.

Although in-person interviews and immediate interviews are recognized as useful (providing “value-added” service) by Child Support Enforcement administrators, pressures to balance budgets and meet goals set by the federal government may make personal methods of collecting information obsolete when valuable staff time can be saved through using available technology. The larger the agency, the more pressure there is to streamline procedures by replacing human interactions with automated systems for collecting and storing information and initiating agency actions.

Clients like the notion of the child support agency asking about problems that could be barriers to cooperation, but few appear to be interested in using the help that is offered. Child support workers find screening to be outside the realm of how they define their jobs. We believe that the most practical approach for a Child Support Enforcement agency wishing to address problems that could lead to non-cooperation would be to collaborate with the local welfare-to-work program. Typically, these programs screen periodically and have links to community resources and service providers.

A certain amount of collaboration and cooperation between IV-A and IV-D agencies occurs and will doubtlessly continue as long as it remains uncomplicated, with little
demand made on either entity to alter its behavior or revise its public image. Child support and welfare agencies share clients and have clearly recognized the need to develop procedures for the exchange of information.

At the same time, IV-A and IV-D agencies are administered separately, have differing technologies and philosophies, and objectives that have historically been perceived to be at odds with one another. The result is a certain amount of agency mistrust and aversion to more complicated forms of collaboration. At root, both agencies are naturally focused on the federal goals and standards they must each meet and are reluctant to risk being sidetracked by small groups with special needs or time-consuming initiatives launched by the other agency.

The passage of PRWORA created new expectations and limits for low-income families; it also generated new expectations and tools for both IV-A and IV-D agencies, for the purpose of moving public assistance recipients to a state of self-sufficiency. The tremendous impacts of welfare reform, which are only now beginning to be seen, are challenging federal and state agencies to view their responsibilities to clients in broader terms. Thus, CSE agencies are beginning to address issues such as custody and visitation, unemployed and under-skilled fathers, and incarcerated obligors. Likewise, IV-A agencies are turning their attention to barriers to employment and the need for post-welfare benefits.

The recommendations of the federal Office of Inspector General for collaboration between IV-A and IV-D agencies focus on the development of effective methods of collecting, recording, and exchanging information about clients and noncustodial parents, and on strengthening communication and interactions between agency staff (Office of Inspector General, March 2000b). We suggest that PRWORA also calls on federal and state agencies to expand their vision of “agency collaboration” and combine their resources to create a sturdy launching pad for families attempting to make the transition from
dependency to self-sufficiency. For example, IV-A staff should be actively recruiting CSE participation in programs serving families at the end of their time limits. Agency cooperation should include community outreach programs with teams of staff from both agencies making presentations. CSE staff could be seeking out IV-A programs where child support materials can be incorporated. Through collaboration, the agencies can maximize their contribution to moving families toward independence.

State Child Support Enforcement and Family Assistance agencies understandably need assistance if they are going to engage in various proactive efforts that are currently peripheral to their core mission. Will federal agencies offer more than verbal support? It is apparent that if the federal government is genuinely interested in fostering collaboration between agencies in order to improve the rates of cooperation of welfare recipients, it will have to provide real incentives to both parties. This means broadening national goals to include collaborative efforts between IV-A and IV-D agencies, providing assistance in developing new sets of programs that draw upon the strength and expertise of the two agencies, and offering financial incentives for agencies willing to move into uncharted waters. By fostering these collaborative efforts, the federal government will take an active and forward-looking role in shaping the impacts of PRWORA on families.
References


Hennepin County, Minnesota, Economic Assistance Department, October 2000. *Service Strategies for Long-Term MFIP Clients*.


