

**Improving
Information**

**Obtained from
Applicants and
Clients**

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370 L'Enfant Promenade S.W. 4th Floor East
Washington, D.C. 20447

Submitted by:

CPR
Center for
POLICY
RESEARCH

1570 Emerson Street
Denver, Colorado 80218
303.837.1555
www.centerforpolicyresearch.org

Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.
Nancy Thoennes, Ph.D.
Lanae Davis, M.A.

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Points of view expressed in the document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of OCSE or DOR.

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Executive Summary

The Child Support Enforcement Division of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) collaborated with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to conduct a project funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) to increase the amount and quality of usable information about noncustodial parents elicited from applicants and recipients of public assistance. Welfare reform laws require recipients of public assistance to cooperate with child support enforcement agencies to identify noncustodial parents so that child support can be ordered. Ordinarily, case managers at the public assistance agency conduct all interviews with custodial parents who apply for benefits or appear for a periodic review of their eligibility for benefits. The information they obtain about noncustodial parents is conveyed electronically to child support workers for case processing. DOR workers visit the DTA office several times a month to answer questions from DTA staff or to lead an orientation session with new applicants about the importance of child support, but do not routinely interview the applicants or recipients about the noncustodial parent.

This project tested the effectiveness of having a DOR worker at the DTA agency on a regular basis to explain the child support program to individual applicants and recipients and question them about the noncustodial parent. The project was conducted from June 2005 through June 2006, and involved the following three phases: (1) DOR and DTA workers performing joint interviews with custodial parents about the noncustodial parent; (2) DOR and DTA workers performing separate and sequential interviews with custodial parents about the noncustodial parent; and (3) DOR workers interviewing custodial parents who DTA workers referred because they believed the custodial parent withheld information about the noncustodial parent, provided incomplete or inconsistent information about the noncustodial parent, or because they had child support questions that would be best addressed by a DOR worker.

The evaluation involved collecting data on the amount and type of information about noncustodial parents generated in interviews with applicants and recipients using DOR versus DTA personnel during each phase of the project and interview format. Since a key goal of the project was to produce higher rates of child support order establishment and payment, a component of the evaluation was to assess child support outcomes in cases with custodial parents who were exposed to different interview formats and personnel. The evaluation also examined the comparability of information on the noncustodial parent recorded on automated systems maintained by DOR and DTA. In addition to these quantitative assessments, the evaluation included focus groups with workers, exit surveys with clients, and staff questionnaires.

Table 1 shows the amount of information collected and analyzed during each phase of the project using the various methods of evaluation. In addition, we compared information on the same noncustodial parent recorded on automated systems maintained by DTA and DOR for 283 cases.

Table 1. Information Collected Using Various Techniques During Each Project Phase

	Checklists by DTA & DOR Workers		Client Exit Interviews		Focus Groups and Surveys with DTA and DOR Workers		Extract from Computerized Child Support System	
	DTA	DOR	DTA	DOR	DTA	DOR	2004	2005-2006
Phase I	180	148	26	34	24	6	Comparison Group	328
Phase II	176	175	46	91	19	8		351
Phase III	244	55	38	16	34	11		299
Total	600	378	110	141	77	25	4,000	978

Summary of Findings

DOR and DTA workers obtained similar information about noncustodial parents when they interviewed custodial parents.

There was no consistent evidence that having child support workers conduct interviews with custodial parents improved the amount of information obtained about noncustodial parents. There was also no evidence that DOR interviewers did a better job than their DTA counterparts of explaining child support to custodial parents. Exit surveys conducted with applicants and recipients by independent researchers revealed that regardless of whether they were interviewed by DTA or DOR workers, roughly identical proportions of clients recalled being told basic facts about child support, its benefits, and the consequences of noncooperation.

Interviews with custodial parents conducted by both DTA and DOR workers during the project were significantly more likely to yield information about the noncustodial parent than interviews conducted in 2004.

While the agency affiliation of the interviewer was not associated with increased information, custodial parents interviewed during the project with DTA workers alone or in combination with DOR provided more information about the noncustodial parents than comparable custodial parents who were interviewed in 2004. During their visit to DTA, they were significantly more likely to provide information on the noncustodial parent's address, Social Security number, and date of birth. This suggests that the project

may have raised awareness about the importance of collecting information about noncustodial parents among workers from both agencies and improved their interviewing skills.

The project produced no improvements in the rate of child support order establishment or payment.

A comparison of order establishments and payments for 2004 cases identified prior to the start of the project and the 2005-2006 cases encountered during the three phases of the project yielded statistically identical results. For both of these groups, orders were obtained in about one-third of new cases in both groups that required orders, in the one to two year period following the custodial parent's visit to DTA. Among 2004 cases with orders, noncustodial parents paid 45 percent of what they owed, as compared with 37 percent for noncustodial parents in experimental cases, which was a statistically significant difference at 540 days following the applicant's or recipient's visit to DTA. The percentage of cases where the noncustodial parent paid nothing during the 6 to 18 months following the custodial parent's visit to DTA ranged from 29 to 43 percent for 2004 comparison cases, as compared with 42 to 49 percent for cases in the grant project.

Most applicants and recipients wanted the noncustodial parent to help support the child and did not appear to withhold information.

Approximately two-thirds of clients in each interview group were judged by DTA and DOR interviewers to have provided all the information they knew. This was corroborated in exit interviews conducted with a sample of applicants and recipients, about a third of whom reported that they did not know basic information like the noncustodial parent's address, his employer, his parents' name, and his parents' address. Up to two-thirds of clients told independent researchers that they did not know the noncustodial parent's Social Security number. More than half said that they would not know how to reach him if there was an emergency related to the children. Finally, the project showed that nearly all custodial parents interviewed by workers from DOR (90%) and DTA (75%) were judged to be "very" or "somewhat" interested in receiving help supporting the child from one (or more) noncustodial parents.

A limited number of custodial parents appeared to give incomplete information or less information than they possessed.

During Phase III, DTA workers were invited to refer custodial parents to an on-site DOR worker for an immediate second interview when they believed the custodial parent withheld information about the noncustodial parent, provided incomplete or inconsistent information about the noncustodial parent, or had child support questions that would be best addressed by DOR. Only 18 percent of custodial parents

were referred to the DOR worker for this interview. In addition, nearly half (46%) of these custodial parents were subsequently judged by DOR workers to have been forthcoming and to have provided all the information that they could. This suggests that only about 10 percent of custodial parents in the experimental group were perceived to be deliberately disingenuous.

A substantial amount of information about the noncustodial parent appears to be lost in the automated interface between the DTA and DOR systems.

Although information is meant to transfer automatically from BEACON, the DTA system, to COMETS, the child support system, via the COMETS Interface, a comparison of 21 items about noncustodial parents in 283 cases recorded on BEACON and the COMETS Interface showed disagreements for many cases. For example, the two systems agreed on the address of the noncustodial parent in only 53 percent of the cases, with address information failing to transfer at all from BEACON to COMETS in 36 percent of the cases. Employer identity was identical in both systems in 57.6 percent of the cases, and in 40 percent of the cases employer identity was only available in BEACON. Overall, there was agreement on the information for noncustodial parents on both systems on 16 of the 21 items for 75 percent of the cases. Only 10 of the 21 items in the study showed an agreement rate of 95 percent or better. If the transfer of information from BEACON to COMETS is meant to be truly automatic, one might expect agreement rates of 95 percent or better on all 21 items. Since the completion of this project, DOR has implemented a new interface with DTA that DOR believes has improved the transfer of information substantially.

Workers liked having DOR workers available at DTA and felt that the project improved relationships between the two agencies. At the same time, most only want help with interviews when applicants and recipients provide incomplete or inaccurate information, or have specific questions about child support that would be best addressed by a DOR worker.

DTA workers valued having DOR workers at the public assistance agency to answer questions about cases and convey the message that child support is critical to self-sufficiency. They also favored using DOR workers to interview clients who provided incomplete or inaccurate location information. DOR workers reported that while their work at DTA had reduced their productivity at DOR (remote access to COMETS was not available until Phase III of the project), they felt as though they had provided useful input to DTA workers and clients and that child support should continue to have a presence at the public assistance agency. They also favored the use of child support personnel to interview clients who fail to provide complete and accurate information about the noncustodial parent.

Workers were frustrated with the automated systems they use.

DOR workers were frustrated when they had to conduct interviews using the screens on BEACON that deal with the noncustodial parent and missed the flexibility of a paper form and their ability to ask questions in any order, write notes and record partial information. They also feared that information on noncustodial parents was being dropped on a random basis during the automatic transfer from BEACON to COMETS. DTA workers were frustrated that information on the child support status of clients in their caseload does not automatically pop up in the BEACON system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Bring staff in the two agencies together.

Conducting a demonstration project that involved the child support and public assistance programs necessitated that both agencies focus on coordination and that staff at all levels engage in sustained interactions. The net result was an exchange of phone numbers and e-mail addresses between workers in the two agencies, the development of personal relationships, and increased understanding and awareness of the mission of each agency, including awareness of the importance of information about noncustodial parents. These outcomes mirror those reported by other jurisdictions that have brought together staff across both agencies for conferences, meetings, and other special projects.

Enhance the cooperative relationship between DOR and DTA.

The project underscored the importance of DOR and DTA working together to maximize the information obtained about noncustodial parents. This may include maintaining the periodic presence of on-site DOR liaisons at the public assistance agency to provide information about child support to applicants and recipients, and arranging for child support staff to conduct interviews in cases where the client gives incomplete information or appears to be less than candid. Other jurisdictions have found it productive to use child support workers for this purpose.

Improve data quality and exchange.

Workers in both agencies were frustrated by their inability to transfer and share information. Like other large-scale systems projects, it has been very challenging to remedy some of the technical glitches that have accompanied the introduction of BEACON. The low rates of data congruence between information contained in the automated systems for public assistance and child support suggest that the underlying programming should be examined. It is critical to have technical staff from both agencies work

together along with program staff to identify system problems and develop appropriate solutions. Massachusetts should also examine some system “fixes” implemented in other settings that have made child support outcomes more visible to public assistance workers in a “pop-up” fashion. As noted above, DOR implemented a new interface with DTA after the completion of this project which it believes has improved the transfer of information substantially.

Test additional strategies to increase information collection.

Few of the 1,015 custodial parents in this study experienced a sanction for noncooperation with child support. While this study did not expressly test means of eliciting cooperation beyond varying the type of worker conducting the interview, many DOR workers indicated that they believe financial penalties might induce recalcitrant clients to cooperate. Another approach worth considering with applicants who appear to withhold information is to delay the onset of benefits until DOR has conducted a thorough interview. This was used to advantage in Bay County, Florida. Finally, it was suggested that workers in both agencies use rapid verification procedures to identify incorrect information more quickly so that appropriate measures can be taken.

Target cases with good information and process them quickly.

Many TANF workers are frustrated with the slow pace of case processing at the child support agency. Targeting cases that have the best chance of getting child support is one way to address case processing lags. While most attention has focused on identifying cases nearing the end of their TANF time limits, another group suitable for fast-track treatment is those that have complete and “fresh” information about noncustodial parents. Generating child support payments in such cases would boost confidence in the child support agency, reinforce the importance of careful collection of information about the noncustodial parent and produce tangible benefits for families that struggle to achieve self-sufficiency.

Improve rates of order establishment and payment.

Child support cases often take many months to acquire a court order and many of those with orders fail to realize any payments. These patterns erode confidence in the child support agency and undermine efforts to demonstrate the importance of child support to clients and DTA staff. DOR has recently undertaken a number of agency-wide changes aimed at improving case processing. These include case ownership arrangements so that establishment and enforcement workers are assigned and retain specific caseloads and early intervention initiatives that involve contacting noncustodial parents as soon as a payment is missed or received in less than the full amount. It is hoped that these re-organization features will soon translate into better performance patterns.

Introduction

The Child Support Enforcement Division of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) collaborated with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to conduct a project funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) to increase the amount and quality of usable information about noncustodial parents elicited from applicants and recipients of public assistance. For those clients who were new to the child support system, the project aimed to achieve higher and faster rates of child support order establishment. Among cases with orders, the objective was to produce higher rates of payment. Welfare reform laws require recipients of public assistance to cooperate with child support enforcement agencies to identify noncustodial parents so that child support can be ordered. The objective of this project was to determine whether the use of different interview formats and personnel would generate better information about noncustodial parents and increase cooperation with the child support enforcement efforts of DOR. The project also examined agency and system performance issues, including the electronic transfer of information from the automated systems of the public assistance agency to the child support agency for case processing.

The project was conducted primarily in the City of Worcester, Massachusetts, and bordering suburbs, which experienced a 10.6 percent decline in population between 2000 and 2005. The 154,398 Worcester residents are primarily non-Hispanic white (66.6%) although Hispanics and African-Americans comprise 16.8 and 10.6 percent, respectively. Nearly 10 percent of households with children under 18 are headed by females, of which nearly half (46.1%) have incomes that fall below the poverty line. In 2005, the unemployment rate for Worcester City was 8.3 percent.

Ordinarily, case managers at the public assistance agency conduct all interviews with custodial parents who apply for benefits or appear for a periodic review of their eligibility for benefits. A child support worker also visits the DTA office periodically to answer questions from DTA staff or to lead an orientation session with new applicants about the importance of child support. This project tested the effectiveness of having a DOR worker at the DTA agency to explain the child support program to individual applicants and recipients and interview them about the location and circumstances of the noncustodial parent. The evaluation involved collecting data on the amount and type of information about noncustodial parents generated in interviews with applicants and recipients using DOR versus DTA personnel and to assess child support outcomes in cases with custodial parents who were exposed to different interview formats and personnel. The evaluation also examined the similarity of information about the noncustodial parent recorded on automated systems maintained by DOR and DTA. In addition

to these quantitative assessments, the evaluation included focus groups with workers, exit surveys with applicants and recipients, and staff questionnaires.

Background

Child support plays a key role in self-sufficiency. According to Sorensen and Zibman (2000), when any support was paid in cases that involve former recipients of public assistance, it represented roughly 30 percent of custodial parents' income. Another study of former recipients of public assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, commonly referred to as TANF) in four states found that for those with any child support income, child support averaged from \$226 to \$285 per month, which represented 27 percent and 29 percent, respectively, of income for these former recipients of TANF (Acs, *et al.*, 2001).

Child support also has some capacity to reduce poverty, especially among children. For example, using the National Survey of America's Families, Sorensen and Zibman (2000) estimated that child support reduces poverty among children by about 5 percent. Meyer and Hu (1999) found that child support alone brought 21 to 23 percent of poor women who receive child support out of poverty. However, because less than one-third of poor women receive child support, the overall antipoverty effect was reduced to 6 to 7 percent of women brought out of poverty.

Finally, child support affects the likelihood of leaving TANF. Using the 1979-1996 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Huang, *et al.*, (2002) found that women who received \$1,000 in child support payments in the previous year were 18 percent more likely to leave TANF and achieve three consecutive months without returning to public assistance. Between 1980 and 1996, improvements in child support collection were responsible for reducing TANF caseloads by 12 to 17 percent (Huang, *et al.*, 2000). The receipt of child support also reduces public assistance re-entry. One study found that the receipt of \$1,000 in child support payments reduced public assistance re-entry by 12 percent (Huang, *et al.* 2000). Another study found that any amount of child support decreased the likelihood of public assistance recidivism for divorced women in Wisconsin (Meyer, 1993).

Despite the obvious benefits of child support income, many poor families fail to receive it. A 1998 study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) in Connecticut, Florida, and Virginia found that the vast majority of the families (71% to 84%) that reached their time limit for TANF had no child support collected for them during the 12 months before their assistance was terminated. More than half of the families reaching the time limit in these states lacked a child support order (47% to 69%). Failure to locate the noncustodial parent was the major reason child support agencies gave for their inability to obtain a child support order (GAO, 1998).

A report (Miller, *et al.*, 2005) utilizing survey data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (1996-2000), the Project on Devolution and Urban Change (1998/1999 and 2001), Parents' Fair Share (1996-1997), and the Wisconsin Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (1997-1998), concluded that relatively few current and former TANF recipients who are eligible for child support have an order. Among those custodial parents with orders, the percentage receiving payments ranged from 21 percent to 46 percent. The combination of no orders and poor payment meant that the percentage of custodial parents receiving child support payments ranged from a low of 9 percent in one study to a high of 22 percent in another.

Fortunately, there is evidence that child support outcomes are improving for both former and current TANF recipients. For example, a synthesis of 15 studies of former TANF recipients found that the percentage of former TANF recipients who reported income from child support ranged from a low of 11 percent in the District of Columbia to a high of 46 percent in Massachusetts, and in six of the eight states that asked, over 20 percent of former TANF recipients reported receiving child support (ACS, *et al.* 2001). Surveys with individuals whose TANF cases were closed because of time limits in Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, and Virginia found that between one-fourth and one-third of respondents reported that they were receiving at least some child support payments when interviewed (Bloom, *et al.*, 2001).

There is also evidence that the percentage with orders and payments increases over time among former recipients of public assistance. Follow-up interviews with families that reached their time limits and had their cases closed revealed that while 22 percent received child support at the time of TANF exit, this increased to 30 percent after six months and 34 percent a year and a half post-exit. Over the 18-month time period, the average amount of support received by families rose from \$48 to \$221 (Gordon, *et al.*, 2002).

Some research findings tie improvements in child support receipt to changes under the 1996 Welfare Act in pass-through and disregard policies or the amount of support collected on behalf of TANF recipients that they are allowed to keep. For example, an analysis of March CPS data from 1976 to 1997 showed that pass-through policies have a positive, significant effect on child support receipts for single mothers on welfare, increasing the likelihood by 5 percent (Sorensen and Halpern, 1999). Other studies have found that higher disregard amounts are significantly associated with paternity establishment and an increased percentage of cases with collections (Cassettey, 2002).

Another explanation for the recent improvements in child support receipt is that custodial parents must cooperate with state child support enforcement programs in order to avoid having their TANF grants

reduced. Failure to provide the child support program with information about the noncustodial parent may result in a determination of noncooperation and a reduction in their grant. Depending on the state, penalties can range from removing the custodial parent from the TANF grant, to partially reducing the TANF grant, to closing the case and/or imposing a 100 percent reduction of cash benefits.

States also have a stake in cooperation and the collection of child support. In addition to obtaining reimbursement for TANF payments, the generation of child support orders and collections determine incentive payments paid by OCSE. More to the point, states that perform below a certain threshold and do not improve their performance face reduction in their TANF block grants.

There has been a good deal of debate about the causes of noncooperation and its remedy. 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. They suggest that rather than declining to cooperate, many sanctioned clients simply do not understand the requirements of the child support agency. They assert that this lack of understanding is a result of the way that clients are told about child support and cooperation. Still others tie the problem to the TANF staff's lack of understanding about the role of child support in self-sufficiency and the importance of accurate and complete information about the noncustodial parent.

States have undertaken a variety of initiatives to try to improve collaboration between the child support agency and the public assistance agency. These initiatives included co-location (Ragan, 2002), cross-agency training (GAO, 1994), and more stringent TANF eligibility requirements (OCSE 2000). For example, a demonstration project conducted in Bay County, Florida, that required all custodial parents seeking TANF benefits to visit the county's child support offices and provide the information needed to initiate a support order led to a reduction in requests for sanctions. It was estimated that the state would have saved \$12.4 million in TANF payments if the policy had been implemented on a statewide basis.

In 2004 and 2006, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement and the federal Office of Family Assistance sponsored several Urban Academies to improve collaboration between child support and welfare agencies. These conferences brought together personnel from child support and public assistance agencies in eight jurisdictions to discuss their concerns and recommendations for improving performance. Several promising practices were identified in these conferences, including providing managers and staff from both agencies the opportunity to work together to develop specific recommendations for cross-program improvements; developing effective automated interfaces and data exchanges so that automated tools support coordination and are amended to incorporate user feedback from both agencies; providing cross program training on the mission and goals of each agency to ensure

that workers understand the importance of collecting and entering critical information; better using periodic reviews of eligibility for benefits (redeterminations) to determine whether any additional child support action should be taken and to stress the importance of child support to family self-sufficiency; and targeting cases that are nearing their time limit for intensive efforts to obtain child support as a source of income (OCSE, 2007).

Massachusetts has also pursued a number of initiatives and policies aimed at promoting collaboration between the public assistance and the child support agencies and improving the quality of information obtained from custodial parents at the public assistance agency. In addition to developing a protocol for victims of domestic violence so that they can receive assistance in obtaining a “good cause” exemption to the cooperation requirement and/or pursue child support with heightened safety procedures, both the Massachusetts public assistance and child support agencies have domestic violence specialists on staff. DTA introduced a new computerized system in August 2001, which includes a computerized interface with DOR and eliminates the need to rely on a manual exchange of information about the noncustodial parent (Pearson, *et al.*, 2001).

Massachusetts also conducted an OCSE-funded project to study collaboration between the child support and public assistance agencies during 2000-2003. Enhancing Interagency Collaboration and Client Cooperation was designed to assess the amount and quality of information that custodial parents typically provide about the noncustodial parent for child support purposes, and the effectiveness of placing DOR child support staff members to serve as liaisons in DTA offices in Boston in order to address communication problems between the two agencies, improve information collection from clients regarding noncustodial parents, and increase the rate of pursuable child support cases (Pearson and Davis, 2003).

An evaluation of the project revealed that using DOR child support liaisons at DTA offices increased the speed with which information about the noncustodial parent was elicited from the custodial parent and conveyed to the child support agency. There was also an increase in case activity and a reduction in time frames for cases processed by the DOR liaison. Finally, the evaluation revealed strong support for DOR liaisons by DTA staff who felt the placements improved communication between the agencies and made child support issues more visible.

The present project built on the strengths of the first project by pursuing more extensive forms of collaboration between the public assistance and the child support agency. In the next section of the

report, we discuss the project procedures, the target population, and the strategies used to evaluate the project interventions.

Project Procedures

The project involved the use of public assistance and child support personnel to conduct interviews with custodial parents in Worcester, Massachusetts who applied for Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), or were recipients of TAFDC with cases under review (called “redeterminations”). Eligibility was limited to applicants and recipients who had at least one dependent child and one noncustodial parent. The goal of the project was to determine whether different types of interview personnel were better able to obtain information about the noncustodial parent and whether such information led to the faster generation of child support orders and payments.

The information that applicants for, and recipients of, public assistance (and clients who visit DTA) must supply on putative parents includes the noncustodial parent’s name, address, phone number, Social Security number, and employer. Prior to August 2001, this information was recorded manually on a form known as the CA/CS (Client Application for Child Support). Following August 2001, information was recorded in DTA’s computer system, BEACON. The automated information about noncustodial parents at DTA must be conveyed to the DOR through an electronic interface for DOR to begin the process of establishing or enforcing a child support order. If there are long lapses between the generation of noncustodial parent information and its conveyance to the child support agency, the information grows stale and accuracy is reduced. It is also a problem if the public assistance worker neglects to enter noncustodial parent information on the BEACON screens and/or the automated transfer of information from BEACON to COMETS is flawed and some information is dropped or changed. Thus, effective interagency collaboration requires:

- Generation of accurate information about noncustodial parents at the onset of public assistance and/or during subsequent meetings at DTA; and
- Rapid and accurate transfer of noncustodial parent information generated at the public assistance offices to the child support agency for further action.

To determine whether DOR or DTA personnel were more effective in obtaining information about the noncustodial parent and whether certain interview formats were more conducive to the generation of information, we compared the type and amount of information produced in various interview settings based on records maintained by DOR and DTA personnel that conducted the interviews. To determine whether DTA or DOR personnel were better able to communicate the rules of the child support program and its relationship to public assistance, we conducted independent exit interviews with applicants and

recipients. To determine whether some information about the noncustodial parent was being dropped in the automatic exchange from BEACON to COMETS, we compared the information recorded in the two systems for a sample of cases. Finally, to determine whether the use of DOR versus DTA personnel made a difference in the rate at which child support orders were generated and payments were obtained, we collected and analyzed child support information from the automated child support system for all cases handled during the project and compared it with a comparable sample of cases processed in 2004, prior to the start of this grant project.

Three different interview formats were tested during the project. The tests occurred in three phases.

Phase I

- Phase I of the project was conducted from June 1, 2005, to October 30, 2005.
- New applicants for Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) and those seeking redeterminations of their TAFDC eligibility were assigned (in alternating order) to a DTA case manager for a standard child support interview or to a DOR staff member for a DOR child support interview which occurred in the DTA cubicle with the DTA case manager present (to enter the data on the DTA's BEACON computer system).
- The assigned DTA or DOR interviewer asked the questions about the noncustodial parent in order as itemized on the 15 screens of the DTA's computerized system (BEACON) that address the noncustodial parent.
- DTA personnel in either interview scenario entered the information provided by the applicant or recipient on the BEACON screens.

Phase II

- Phase II was conducted during November 1, 2005, to February 28, 2006.
- New applicants for TAFDC and those seeking redeterminations of their TAFDC eligibility were assigned (in alternating order) to a DTA case manager for a standard interview or to a DOR staff member for a separate child support interview at the beginning of the application process.

- DOR child support specialists interviewed new applicants and recipients appearing for redetermination of their TAFDC eligibility about the noncustodial parent at the DTA office.
- Unlike Phase I, DOR workers conducted their child support interviews without the presence of a DTA worker, which allowed them to introduce the topic of child support when they believed it was appropriate, and to ask questions about the noncustodial parent in any order they chose.
- Rather than using the screens from the automated system to guide their interview or record the interview results, DOR interviewers used a paper form (the CA/CS) that had been used by workers before the creation of BEACON.
- For DOR child support interviews, a “child support first” approach was used that involved the collection of information about noncustodial parents as the first step of the process of applying for public assistance rather than later in the sequence of questions. DTA case managers completed their child support interviews as they normally would have prior to the grant project.

Phase III

- Phase III was conducted between April 1, 2006, to June 30, 2006.
- Applicants and recipients who had a case involving a noncustodial parent were assigned to a DTA case manager for a standard, single interview.
- The single interview covered all topics pertaining to public assistance, as well as the routine questions about the noncustodial parent.
- Responses were recorded on the 15 screens on BEACON that address the noncustodial parent.
- The DOR staff member only conducted interviews with applicants or recipients when requested by the DTA worker in cases where the client was suspected of being less than fully forthcoming or whenever the DTA case manager felt the client or the case would benefit from a face-to-face interview with a DOR worker. Thus, DOR staff participated in the interview on a selective basis, upon the request and at the discretion of DTA workers.
- As in Phase II, DOR staff members used the interview opportunity to focus exclusively on the noncustodial parent, asked questions in any order they desired, and recorded responses on the CA/CS, the paper form used by workers before the creation of Beacon.

- During this phase, DOR interviewers had discretion to utilize limited remote access to DOR computer systems in order to assess the potential value of new interview data provided by the client.

Evaluation Method

The objective of the evaluation was to assess the immediate and longer-term effectiveness of different interview formats and the use of DOR versus DTA personnel to conduct interviews with applicants and recipients about the noncustodial parent. To accomplish this goal, evaluators used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. During each phase of the project, information was collected from TANF applicants and recipients by project personnel, DOR and DTA interviewers, and independent researchers. In addition, to assess the longer-term impact of the cooperation project on key child support milestones and outcomes, extracts were obtained from the computerized child support system on cases generated during Phase I, II, and III. They were compared with child support outcomes for a comparable group of cases generated during 2004, a year that preceded the initiation of the project. Evaluators conducted focus groups with workers following Phase I and II to obtain their reactions to various interview formats and their suggestions on how to improve collaboration between the two agencies. At the conclusion of Phase III, DOR and DTA workers completed a written questionnaire. Finally, evaluators compared information about noncustodial parents contained in BEACON and COMETS at the same point in time for an identical sample of cases in order to detect differences and the potential loss of information in the automated transfer process.

Following is a summary of the information that was collected in connection with each of these evaluation components (also see Table 1).

Checklists Completed by DOR and DTA Interviewers: Following the conclusion of their respective interviews with applicants and recipients, DOR and DTA staff members completed a checklist recording the type of information elicited about the noncustodial parent and the perceived candor of the respondent. A copy of the Interview Checklist used during Phases I, II and III appears in Appendix A.

Client Exit Interviews: The reactions of applicants and recipients to the interview format they experienced and their understandings about child support were elicited by interviewing them before they left the DTA office. All eligible applicants and recipients were asked to participate in the brief exit interview and were given \$20 in Shaw's Supermarket gift cards as an incentive. The exit interviews were conducted by an independent researcher in both Spanish and English. A copy of the Exit Interview used during all three phases of the project appears in Appendix B.

Information Collected by Project Staff: Two Grant Administrative Assistants assisted the project at the DTA office by screening DTA clients initially to determine if they met basic criteria to participate in the

project, entering necessary research data about each eligible applicant or recipient on a spreadsheet; searching BEACON for information about the custodial parent and the noncustodial parent; printing out the screens with information about the noncustodial parent; assigning applicants and recipients to interviews conducted by DTA workers or those conducted jointly or sequentially by DOR and DTA personnel; collecting the completed Interviewer Checklists from the interviewers following their session with the applicant or recipient; and directing interested applicants and recipients to an independent interviewer who conducted the exit interview.

Comparison of Information in BEACON and COMETS: The Grant Administrative Assistants recorded information for 251 cases with information on the BEACON system prior to the client's visit to DTA during Phase II of the project from November 2005 to February 2006. They compared the information on BEACON prior to and following the client's visit to DTA with the information recorded on the CA/CS manual data collection form utilized by DOR workers for their Phase II interviews for 129 and 171 cases, respectively. They compared the information on the BEACON system prior to and following the client's visit to DTA for 211 cases. Finally, project workers compared the information on BEACON following the interview with the information on the COMETS INTERFACE for 283 cases.

Surveys of Workers: At the conclusion of Phase III, DOR and DTA workers completed a brief questionnaire about the project and the idea of having DOR workers at the public assistance agency to help with client interviews about the noncustodial parent. The questionnaire was completed by 12 DOR workers, nearly all of whom were case establishment workers who had spent at least 11 days at DTA conducting interviews with applicants and recipients over the course of the project. The questionnaire was also completed by 34 DTA workers who handled intake (18%), TAFDC (47%), and food stamps (12%) cases, as well as supervisors (15%).

Focus Groups with Workers: Following the conclusion of Phases I and II, researchers conducted focus groups with DOR and DTA workers. In those sessions, groups of workers in each agency discussed the perceived effectiveness of the interview formats, the candor of custodial parents when questioned about noncustodial parents, the quality of the information obtained from applicants and recipients, the perceived interest of clients in obtaining formal child support, and the functionality of automated systems used to collect and record information about the noncustodial parent.

Extract of Information Contained on Automated Child Support System: To assess the impact of various interview formats and the use of DTA versus DOR personnel to conduct interviews about noncustodial parents on child support outcomes, we obtained two automated extracts. Both were drawn

from COMETS, DOR’s computerized child support system. One extract, generated in January 2007, contained information on the establishment of orders, child support payments, and arrears balances for all project cases generated during Phases I, II, and III. The second extract, generated in October 2006, contained identical information for a sample of comparable cases generated during 2004, the year preceding the start of the cooperation project. The 2004 sample of cases consisted of applicants and recipients with a noncustodial parent who appeared at the DTA office in Worcester, Massachusetts. It was expected that if these clients had appeared after June 1, 2005, when Phase I of the cooperation project began, they would have met the eligibility criteria and would have been included in the project.

Table 1 summarizes the amount of information collected using various data techniques during each phase of the project.

Table 1. Information Collected Using Various Techniques During Each Project Phase

	Checklists by DTA and DOR Workers		Client Exit Interviews		Focus Groups and Surveys with DTA & DOR Workers		Extract from Computerized Child Support System	
	DTA	DOR	DTA	DOR	DTA	DOR	2004	2005-2006
Phase I	180	148	26	34	24	6	Comparison Group	328
Phase II	176	175	46	91	19	8		351
Phase III	244	55	38	16	34	11		299
Total	600	378	110	141	77	25	4,000	978

Description of the Cases

During each phase of the project, DTA and DOR workers met with groups of TAFDC applicants and recipients and interviewed them about the noncustodial parent. For DTA workers, the questions about the noncustodial parent were always part of a much larger application process. DOR workers focused more exclusively on the questions pertaining to the noncustodial parent for the purpose of establishing a child support order and obtaining payments.

The following tables describe the number of applicants and recipients seen by DTA and DOR workers at each phase of the project, selected demographic characteristics of those seen, and the type of information about the noncustodial parent the workers collected. As previously noted, at each phase of the project, a sub-group of applicants and recipients agreed to participate in an exit interview with an independent interviewer following their encounters with DTA and DOR workers. Information from these exit interviews supplements the information elicited by DOR and DTA workers and provides impressions and information about client relationships with the noncustodial parent, their understandings about child support, their interest in receiving child support, and their expectations about the noncustodial parent's ability to pay.

Numbers of Applicants and Recipients in the Project

It was projected that Phase I and II would involve a total of 400 unique cases, 200 in each of the two interview groups. Since Phase III involved the use of DOR interviewers on a selective basis, it was unknown what proportion of the cases would undergo both a DTA and DOR interview. In actuality, the target number of cases was not achieved during any of the project phases (see Table 2)

Table 2. Numbers of Clients Interviewed by DTA and DOR Workers During Each Phase

	Interviewed only by DTA	Interviewed by DTA and DOR	Total clients interviewed
Phase I	188	177	365
Phase II	176	175	351
Phase III	244	55	299
Total	608	407	1,015

Repeat visits to DTA by many applicants and recipients over a short period of time is the chief reason why project personnel did not reach the goal of 400 cases per phase. For example, records maintained by project personnel show that during Phase I, approximately 30 percent of 542 interviews conducted by

DTA and DOR workers involved the same client. All duplication was eliminated both within and across the project phases, and each client was included only once in the project analysis, during their first visit.

Another noteworthy feature of Table 2 is the modest number of applicants and recipients interviewed by DOR workers during Phase III. As previously noted, during Phases I and II, clients were assigned to be interviewed by DOR workers on a random basis. This resulted in half being seen by both a public assistance and child support worker. When DTA workers had the discretion to utilize a DOR interviewer, it was an option that they invoked relatively infrequently. Most clients (82%) were only interviewed by a DTA worker; only 18 percent met with both a DOR and a DTA worker. Thus, 244 clients during Phase III were interviewed exclusively by a DTA worker and were deemed not to need additional questioning about the noncustodial parent. In contrast, only 58 were determined to need additional questioning and only 55 were consequently interviewed by both DOR and DTA.

Characteristics of Applicants and Recipients

Table 3 presents selected demographic information about the applicants and recipients seen by DOR and DTA interviewers at each project phase.

- The majority of the clients were English speaking and the interview was conducted in English across both interview groups and at all project phases.
- The racial/ethnic group with the greatest representation was Hispanic, followed in frequency by whites, and African-Americans.
- The average age of the individuals who were interviewed was 28 years.
- Approximately three-quarters of all respondents were involved with only one noncustodial parent; a quarter had two or more.
- About half of the applicants and recipients interviewed in the project had less than a high school education and a quarter had a GED.
- At least two-thirds of applicants and recipients in every group and every project phase had never been married to the other parent of their children.

Table 3. Selected Demographic Characteristics of the Applicants and Recipients Interviewed by DOR and DTA Workers, by Project Phase

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=180)	DTA Interview (n=148)	DOR Interview (n=175)	DTA Interview (n=176)	DOR Interview (n=55)	DTA Interview (n=244)
Primary language						
English	94%	84%	95% **	84% **	100% ***	85% ***
Spanish	6%	16%	5%	16%	0%	15%
Race/ethnicity						
African-American	20%	12%	16% **	12% **	9%	9%
White	33%	24%	42%	33%	38%	40%
Hispanic/Latino	45%	61%	38%	53%	49%	49%
Other	2%	4%	4%	3%	4%	3%
Age						
Average age	29.2	29.7	28.3	28.7	27.4	28.8
Percent age 25 or less	46%	41%	47%	41%	40%	43%
Number of noncustodial parents						
One	82%	79%	74%	76%	66%	71%
Two or more	18%	21%	26%	24%	34%	29%
Education						
Less than high school	44%	49%	47%	47%	53%	42%
GED	14%	13%	25%	27%	33%	28%
High school diploma	27%	22%	16%	13%	0%	16%
Some college	16%	16%	12%	12%	14%	12%
Marital Status						
Never Married	79%	83%	77%	71%	64% ***	81% ***
Divorced	6%	6%	4%	8%	11%	8%
Other	15%	11%	19%	20%	25%	12%

** Chi square is significant at the .01 level in Phase II.

*** Chi square is significant at the .01 level in Phase III.

Purpose of the DTA Appearance and Public Assistance History

Table 4 provides information about the purpose of the visits that applicants and recipients made to DTA during each project phase and the duration of the interview segment dealing with noncustodial parents. In both interview groups and across all three project phases, approximately two-thirds of the clients were former recipients of public assistance, who were reapplying for TANF. The other third were generally new applicants. There were very few redetermination cases.

Table 4. Reason and Length of Interviews by DOR and DTA Workers, by Interview Group and Phase

		Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
		DOR Interview (n=180)	DTA Interview (n=148)	DOR Interview (n=175)	DTA Interview (n=176)	DOR Interview (n=58)	DTA Interview (n=255)
Reason for interview							
	New application	30%	36%	32%	34%	10%	18%
	Reapplication	67%	64%	68%	66%	74%	77%
	Redetermination	3%	0%	0%	0%	16%	6%

Table 5 provides information about the TANF history and status of clients in each of the interview groups. The table shows:

- There was a considerable range across both interview groups and across all three project phases in the number of times former recipients reapplying for public assistance. had been on and off of TANF. While relatively few clients had been on continuously since their first application, at least a third had been on and off TANF six or more times in every interview group and across all project phases.
- The number of years elapsing since the client first received TANF also varied considerably within each interview group. About a third in each group first received TANF 10 or more years before the current interview in 2005. Almost as many were more recent recipients of public assistance, who first received TANF between one and three years ago.
- Almost a quarter of those reapplying for public assistance in each group had received a work sanction, but few, if any, in each phase had experienced a child support sanction.
- Less than a quarter of the applicants in each interview group were currently exempt from time limits due to pregnancy, the age of their youngest child, or a disability.
- Non-exempt clients in both groups had an average of about 20 months of eligibility remaining. Relatively few — no more than 10 percent in either group — were down to their final 12 months of eligibility.

Table 5. TANF History and Status of Applicants and Recipients Interviewed, by Interview Group and Phase

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=180)	DTA Interview (n=148)	DOR Interview (n=175)	DTA Interview (n=176)	DOR Interview (n=30)	DTA Interview (n=177)
Times on and off TANF (reapplication redetermination cases)						
On continuously	3%	0%	13%	13%	3%	0%
On and off 1-2 times	33%	45%	27%	31%	23%	24%
On and off 3-5 times	22%	19%	27%	20%	37%	34%
On and off 6-9 times	24%	15%	11%	14%	27%	21%
On and off 10 or more times	19%	21%	22%	23%	0%	20%
Years since first received TANF (reapplication redetermination cases)						
Average	8.2	7.7	6.3	6.0	7.3	6.4
1-3 years	28%	29%	49%	53%	30%	44%
4-6 years	25%	23%	18%	16%	27%	19%
7-9 years	12%	18%	9%	10%	10%	12%
10 or more years	35%	30%	24%	22%	33%	25%
Percent of reapplication or redetermination clients with sanctions						
Percent with work sanction	26%	23%	29%	34%	27%	24%
Percent with a child support sanction	0%	0%	4%	1%	0%	0.5%
Client's current work program exemption status						
Exempt	23%	16%	38%	38%	29%	39%
Not exempt	77%	84%	63%	63%	71%	61%
Number of months remaining for non-exempt clients						
Average	20.8	10	20.2	19.4	19.7	21%
Less than 12 months remaining	7%	11%	10%	15%	17%	13%
13-18 months remaining	16%	21%	14%	14%	8%	8%
19-24 months remaining	76%	68%	76%	70%	75%	79%

Relationship Between the Custodial and Noncustodial Parent

Table 6 presents information about the relationship between the applicant and recipient and the noncustodial parent, based on exit interviews conducted with a sub-group of respondents by an independent researcher. The table shows:

- One half to three-quarters of clients who participated in the exit interviews at every project phase reported that they had one child with the noncustodial parent.
- Approximately one-quarter of applicants and recipients reported that they had been previously married to the noncustodial parent. Approximately one-third to one-half reported cohabitation without marriage. For every interview group, the most common response was that they neither married nor lived with the noncustodial parent.
- Nearly all interviewed applicants and recipients described themselves as having little or no contact with the noncustodial parent.
- At least half of interviewed clients in every group and project phase indicated that they would not know how to reach the noncustodial parent if there was an emergency that involved the child.
- At least one half of respondents in every interview category reported that the noncustodial parent never sees the children. On the other hand, about a quarter to a third in each group reported that contact between the child and noncustodial parent occurred at least every few weeks.

Table 6. Noncustodial Parent and Custodial Parent Relationship, by Interview Group Based on Exit Interviews by Phase★

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=34)	DTA Interview (n=26)	DOR Interview (n=91)	DTA Interview (n=40)	DOR Interview (n=16)	DTA Interview (n=38)
Number of children parents have together						
One	75%	73%	57%	53%	38%	55%
Two	21%	19%	24%	28%	50%	32%
Three or more	3%	8%	19%	20%	13%	13%
Marital relationship						
Married	18%	27%	13%	28%	25%	24%
Never married, but lived together	53%	27%	48%	43%	31%	66%
*Never married and never lived together	29%	46%	86%	75%	69%	82%
Reported relationship with noncustodial parent at the time of the interview						
Live together some of the time	3%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
See him occasionally	30%	23%	29%	33%	19%	29%
Little or no contact	67%	77%	71%	80%	88%	84%
Client able to reach noncustodial parent in case of an emergency						
Yes	53%	50%	47%	60%	31%	58%
No	47%	50%	61%	53%	81%	55%
Noncustodial parent contact with children, as reported by custodial parent						
Never sees children	49%	69%	55%	70%	56%	55%
Sees children 1-2 times a year	3%	8%	11%	8%	13%	11%
Sees children every few months	12%	0%	7%	0	13%	3%
Sees children every few weeks	15%	4%	13%	10%	13%	16%
Sees children every few days or more	21%	19%	9%	18%	19%	24%

*Totals may exceed 100% because clients may provide different responses for multiple noncustodial parents.



Results of the Interviews

At each project phase, DOR and DTA interviewers attempted to obtain information about noncustodial parents for the purposes of establishing and/or enforcing child support orders. Applicants and recipients of public assistance are required to cooperate with the child support agency and assist with locating the noncustodial parent and establishing child support orders. They are also required to assign any child support obtained on the behalf of their children to the state.

Length of the Interviews

Table 7 presents information about the average duration of the portion of the interview that dealt with noncustodial parents by project phase. The table shows that:

- Questioning custodial parents about their children’s other parent(s) generally took approximately 15 minutes at each phase.
- Interviews by DTA workers tended to be briefer than interviews by DOR workers, with a significantly higher percentage of interviews by DTA workers taking less than 10 minutes.

Table 7. Length of Interviews by DOR and DTA Workers, by Phase

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
Of those with information, length of interview						
Average length in minutes	15.5	15.6	18*	14*	15.6	15.5
Percent lasting less than 10 minutes	13%	25%	10%	25%	2%**	21%**
10-15 minutes	54%	41%	43%	47%	66%	43%
16-24 minutes	25%	21%	28%	21%	26%	21%
25 minutes or more	8%	13%	20%	7%	6%	15%
Number with information	(39)	(61)	(80)	(72)	(47)	(175)

*Chi square is significant at the .01 level in Phase II.

**Chi square is significant at the .01 level in Phase III.

Information Collected

DOR and DTA interviewers attempted to obtain information about the following aspects of the noncustodial parent: name, address, telephone number, date of birth, Social Security number, employer, parents' names, and parents' address. For each of the eight items, the DOR and DTA interviewer noted if the client provided new information, the same information already in DTA's BEACON, or no information. The results, summarized in Table 8, show:

- DOR and DTA workers were equally effective in gathering information about the noncustodial parent from clients on most data items.
- During Phases I and II, interviews involving DOR workers, conducted either jointly with DTA workers or separately in a sequential fashion, were significantly more likely to yield information on paternal grandparents, as compared with single interviews conducted by DTA workers.
- During Phase II, interviews involving DOR workers appeared to be significantly more likely to elicit new telephone numbers for noncustodial parents. However, this pattern was not seen during Phase III. During Phase III, DOR workers were no more successful than DTA workers in eliciting new or changed information about the parents of noncustodial parents including their names and addresses.
- In Phase III, DOR workers appeared to be significantly less likely than DTA interviewers to elicit new names, addresses, dates of birth, and Social Security numbers for noncustodial parents. The reduced ability of DOR workers to obtain information about the noncustodial parent during Phase III as compared with their performance during Phases I and II may reflect the fact that DOR workers were only being asked by DTA workers to interview more "difficult" clients who appeared to be withholding information and in need of more skilled interviewing.

Table 8. Interviewer Report of Information Provided in Interview, by Interview Group by Phase ♦

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=180)	DTA Interview (n=148)	DOR Interview (n=160)	DTA Interview (n=136)	DOR Interview (n=65)	DTA Interview (n=270)
Noncustodial parent's name						
New/changed information	46%	48%	51%	51%	17%***	33%***
Same information on system	54%	50%	50%	52%	82%	70%
Did not provide	3%	2%	5%	3%	8%	4%

Table 8. Interviewer Report of Information Provided in Interview, by Interview Group by Phase ♦

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=180)	DTA Interview (n=148)	DOR Interview (n=160)	DTA Interview (n=136)	DOR Interview (n=65)	DTA Interview (n=270)
Noncustodial parent's address						
New/changed information	43%	50%	42%	39%	25%***	35%***
Same information on system	23%	31%	19%**	36%**	37%	39%
Did not provide	36%	29%	38%**	26%**	52%	37%
Noncustodial parent's phone number						
New/changed information	20%	15%	33%**	16%**	15%	12%
Same information on system	12%	11%	6%**	18%**	15%	12%
Did not provide	73%	81%	66%	69%	79%	82%
Noncustodial parent's date of birth						
New/changed information	39%	44%	39%	42%	14%***	26%***
Same information on system	49%	50%	45%	46%	62%	58%
Did not provide	18%	15%	25%**	15%**	34%	24%
Noncustodial parent's Social Security number						
New/changed information	16%	17%	13%	19%	6%***	15%***
Same information on system	28%	29%	28%	31%	37%	37%
Did not provide	63%	63%	64%**	54%**	68%	59%
Information on noncustodial parent's employer						
New/changed information	24%	27%	19%	22%	23%	18%
Same information on system	17%	14%	11%	15%	17%	26%
Did not provide	60%	63%	64%**	53%**	69%	65%
Name of noncustodial parents						
New/changed information	34%*	24%*	43%**	22%**	19%	20%
Same information on system	17%	9%	24%**	14%**	25%	18%
Did not provide	56%	72%	43%**	65%**	65%	66%
Noncustodial parent's address						
New/changed information	30%*	18%*	38%**	18%**	15%	18%
Same information on system	16%	9%	18%	15%	19%	15%
Did not provide	61%	78%	56%**	66%**	72%	73%

♦Totals may exceed 100% due to different responses for multiple noncustodial parents.

*Chi square is significant at the .05 level in Phase I.

**Chi square is significant at the .05 level in Phase II.

***Chi square is significant at the .05 level in Phase III.

Table 9 summarizes the new information provided during interviews conducted by DTA workers and those conducted by both DTA and DOR workers, controlling for the client's status in the application

process. Patterns are compared separately for new applicants making their first request for public assistance and custodial parents who had previously applied and been interviewed about the noncustodial parent. The analysis demonstrates that among new applicants:

- The interview conducted by DOR workers in conjunction with DTA workers during Phase I was significantly more likely to elicit information about the paternal grandparents than was the case during interviews conducted solely by DTA workers.
- In Phase II, neither group of interviewers consistently produced more information. Clients interviewed only by DTA workers produced new or different Social Security numbers at a higher rate than those interviewed by DOR workers (22% versus 12%). On the other hand, DOR workers were more likely than DTA workers to elicit a new phone number for the noncustodial parent and the name and address of a paternal grandparent.
- The only significant difference during Phase III was that DOR workers were more likely than DTA interviewers to elicit new NCP employer information.

With respect to reapplicants, Table 9 shows:

- There were essentially no differences in the information generated by DOR and DTA interviewers during Phase I, except that DOR workers obtained more information about the paternal grandparents.
- During Phase II, DOR workers were more likely to obtain new information. In addition to providing more address and telephone information on the paternal grandparents, clients interviewed by DOR workers provided new or changed information about the noncustodial parents' address and telephone number at a significantly higher rate.
- During Phase III, DTA workers were more likely to obtain new information. DTA workers provided new or changed information about the noncustodial parent's name, address, and date of birth at a significantly higher rate. As previously noted, DOR workers only interviewed more "difficult" clients who were referred to them by DTA workers because they had provided incomplete or inconsistent information. Also, those clients in Phase III who were referred to DOR simply because they had questions or concerns that the DTA worker felt would best be addressed by DOR, would have already provided the information during their interview with the DTA worker.

Table 9. Noncustodial Parent Information Provided in Interview According to Worker, by Application Status and Interview Group by Project Phase

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=31)	DTA Interview (n=27)	DOR Interview (n=97)	DTA Interview (n=81)	DOR Interview (n=29)	DTA Interview (n=42)
Percent providing new/changed information on:						
Applicants never on TANF before						
Noncustodial parent name	67%	78%	50%	58%	21%	26%
Noncustodial parent address	62%	68%	54%	56%	35%	36%
Noncustodial parent phone number	17%	20%	34%	22%	17%	10%
Noncustodial parent date of birth	63%	73%	41%	44%	17%	21%
Noncustodial parent Social Security number	27%	35%	12%	22%	3%	7%
Noncustodial parent employer	32%	46%	39%	46%	38%	12%
★ Name of noncustodial parent's parents	61%	22%	36%	24%	21%	17%
★ Address of noncustodial parent's parents	52%	11%	36%	22%	21%	19%
Percent providing new/changed information on:	DOR Interview (n=129)	DTA Interview (n=100)	DOR Interview (n=63)	DTA Interview (n=55)	DOR Interview (n=36)	DTA Interview (n=228)
Applicants previously on TANF						
Noncustodial parent name	39%	37%	52%	40%	14% ★★★	34% ★★★
Noncustodial parent address	39%	42%	62%	40%	17% ★★★	35% ★★★
Noncustodial parent phone number	21%	13%	32%	7%	14%	12%
Noncustodial parent date of birth	30%	29%	37%	38%	11% ★★★	26% ★★★
Noncustodial parent Social Security number	13%	13%	14%	15%	8%	17%
Noncustodial parent employer	22%	23%	32%	38%	11%	19%
★ Name of noncustodial parent's parents	26%	25%	52%	20%	17%	21%
★ Address of noncustodial parent's parents	25%	18%	41%★★	13%★★	11%	18%

★ Chi square is significant at .05.

★★ Chi square is significant at .05.

★★★ Chi square is significant at .05.

There is considerable debate about whether public assistance applicants and recipients disclose everything they know about the noncustodial parent. There is, of course, no way to determine the degree to which those individuals interviewed during any phase of the project provided all the information available to them. Table 10 shows the interviewer's assessment of the client's candidness during the interview segment dealing with the noncustodial parent.

- About two-thirds to three-fourths of applicants and recipients were assessed by DTA and DOR workers as being candid and supplying all the information they knew about the noncustodial parents.
- Approximately one-fifth to one-quarter were rated as not having shared all the information they knew about the noncustodial parent during the interview.
- In the remaining quarter of the interviews, DOR and DTA workers were uncertain whether the client had been candid.
- In Phase III, DOR and DTA workers had similar perceptions about which clients were forthcoming with information about the noncustodial parent and which were not. In Phase III, DOR workers were given more “difficult” clients to interview by their DTA counterparts, as well as those who merely had child support questions or concerns.

Table 10. Interviewer Assessment of Clients’ Responses, by Interview Group

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=180)	DTA Interview (n=148)	DOR Interview (n=91)	DTA Interview (n=40)	DOR Interview (n=63)	DTA Interview (n=250)
Interviewer believes client provided all the information she has on one or both noncustodial parents						
Yes	69%	63%	73%	57%	46%	55%
No	18%	18%	12%	16%	27%	26%
Can't say	18%	26%	19%	30%	27%	19%

Child Support: Interest and Understanding

How do clients react to various interview formats and personnel? To answer this question, independent interviewers conducted exit interviews with samples of custodial parents exposed to different interview formats and personnel. The brief exit interviews were conducted as custodial parents were leaving the public assistance agency. Parents who participated in the interview received \$20 in Shaw's Supermarket gift cards as an incentive.

Custodial Parent Understanding of Child Support

Table 11 shows the responses of clients who took part in exit interviews which involved responding to a series of questions about the information the DOR or DTA interviewer provided regarding child support. There were few differences in the recollections of those who had experienced interviews with DTA workers and those who had been interviewed by a DOR worker.

- Nearly all clients in both interview groups and all project phases remembered being told that child support could help them financially and that the agency would try to collect child support if the custodial parent received TANF.
- About two-thirds to three-quarters of clients in both interview groups and all project phases remembered being told that the child support agency would seek an order and collect support, regardless of whether the custodial parent wanted it, and that the other parent of the child would be required to pay the support owed if court ordered. They also recalled being told that the child support agency could take money out of the noncustodial parent's paycheck and intercept tax refunds if the noncustodial parent did not pay.
- About half recalled being told about other benefits to getting child support including getting health insurance for the children
- About two-thirds recalled that they might see the other parent in court if the agency goes after support.
- Clients who had joint interviews with DOR and DTA workers during Phase I were more likely than those who only met with DTA workers to understand that the noncustodial parent would have to pay outstanding child support if the noncustodial parent was located at a later date (91% versus 60%).

- Clients interviewed by DOR workers during Phase III were more likely than those interviewed only by DTA workers to remember being told that they could keep \$50 from any support collected while they received public assistance (81% versus 38%).
- Fewer percentages of clients in both interview groups —about one-third — understood that there is no legal relationship between child support and visitation or access.

Table 11. Child Support Facts That Clients Recall Being Told About, by Interview Group and Based on Exit Interviews, by Project Phase

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=34)	DTA Interview (n=26)	DOR Interview (n=91)	DTA Interview (n=40)	DOR Interview (n=16)	DTA Interview (n=38)
Did the worker tell you the following:						
Getting child support could help you financially.						
Yes	94%	85%	81%	73%	81%	84%
No	6%	15%	17%	18%	13%	11%
Do not remember	0%	0%	2%	0%	6%	5%
If you get assistance, the agency tries to collect child support.						
Yes	94%	92%	87%	88%	94%	92%
No	6%	8%	10%	13%	6%	8%
Do not remember	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Child support could cut the number of hours you must work.						
Yes	41%	58%	36%	41%	31%	27%
No	53%	42%	59%	59%	69%	62%
Do not remember	6%	0%	5%	0%	0%	11%
Child support could help you get off of assistance sooner.						
Yes	70%	64%	51%	54%	56%	38%
No	30%	32%	49%	44%	44%	54%
Do not remember	0%	4%	0%	3%	0%	8%
The child support agency will try to get an order and collect support, regardless of whether you want them to.						
Yes	85%	73%	72%	73%	75%	65%
No	15%	27%	26%	28%	19%	35%
Do not remember	0%	0%	2%	0%	6%	0%
You could get a financial sanction for not helping the child support agency find the other parent of your child.						
Yes	74%	73%	55%	63%	56%	41%
No	27%	27%	42%	38%	38%	49%
Do not remember	0%	0%	3%	0%	6%	11%
The noncustodial parent would have to pay the child support owed.						
Yes	91%*	60%*	75%	64%	80%	76%
No	9%	40%	24%	36%	20%	22%
Do not remember	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	3%

Table 11. Child Support Facts That Clients Recall Being Told About, by Interview Group and Based on Exit Interviews, by Project Phase

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=34)	DTA Interview (n=26)	DOR Interview (n=91)	DTA Interview (n=40)	DOR Interview (n=16)	DTA Interview (n=38)
Did the worker tell you the following:						
You keep \$50 of any support collected while you get TAFDC.						
Yes	77%	52%	54%	44%	81%***	38%***
No	24%	44%	44%	54%	19%	62%
Do not remember	0%	4%	2%	3%	0%	0%
The child support agency can take money out of the noncustodial parent's paycheck/tax refund if the noncustodial parent does not pay						
Yes	77%	69%	65%	65%	69%	57%
No	24%	31%	35%	35%	31%	43%
Do not remember	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
You might see the other parent in court if the agency goes after support.						
Yes	79%	62%	73%	59%	75%	64%
No	21%	39%	27%	41%	25%	36%
Do not remember	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
There is no legal relationship between child support and visitation.						
Yes	53%	40%	39%	33%	44%	32%
No	44%	52%	57%	62%	56%	65%
Do not remember	3%	8%	3%	5%	0%	3%
Getting child support might help you get health insurance for your children.						
Yes	65%	58%	51%	55%	50%	35%
No	32%	42%	47%	43%	50%	60%
Do not remember	3%	0%	2%	3%	0%	5%

*Chi square is significant at .05.

Custodial Parent Interest in Child Support

Table 12 shows the proportion of the applicants or recipients that DTA and DOR interviewers perceived to be interested in receiving child support.

- During Phase I, about 70 percent of DOR workers and 60 percent of DTA workers thought that the client was “very” or “somewhat” interested in receiving child support.
- During Phase II, DOR workers were significantly more likely to characterize the clients they interviewed as being “very interested” in receiving child support (53% versus 31%). In contrast,

DTA workers characterized a significantly higher proportion of clients as being “not very interested” in receiving child support (27% versus 13%).

- During Phase III, DOR interviewers were significantly more likely to characterize the clients they interviewed as being uninterested in receiving child support (38% versus 21%). In contrast, DTA workers characterized a significantly higher proportion of clients as being “very” or “somewhat” interested in receiving child support (62% versus 50%). As with other patterns for Phase III, this might reflect the more difficult nature of the cases referred to DOR workers for additional questioning, or it may also reflect clients’ concerns that the DTA worker taking their TANF application could deny them public assistance if not convinced they were willing to cooperate in pursuing child support.

Table 12. Interviewer Assessment of Clients’ Interest in Child Support From a Noncustodial Parent, by Interview Group

	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=140)	DTA Interview (n=111)	DOR Interview (n=160)	DTA Interview (n=136)	DOR Interview (n=63)	DTA Interview (n=235)
Very interested in child support	50.0%	41%	53%**	31%**	29%	32%
Somewhat interested in child support	40.0%	34%	26%	29%	21%	32%
Not very interested in child support	14.3%	29%	13%**	27%**	38%***	21%***

** Chi square is significant at the .05 level in Phase II.

*** Chi square is significant at the .05 level in Phase III.

Does the interest of applicants and recipients in receiving child support vary with the custodial parent’s perception of the noncustodial parent’s ability to pay support? Table 13 shows the interviewers’ assessment of the clients’ interest in receiving child support after controlling for whether the applicant or recipient indicated that the noncustodial parent could afford to pay support.

At every project phase, custodial parents who believed that the noncustodial parent could afford to make payments were perceived to be significantly more interested in receiving child support.

- During Phase I, 76 percent of custodial parents who thought the other parent could afford to pay support (and during Phases II and III, 62%) were rated by the interviewer as being interested in receiving child support.

- During Phase I and II, only 6 percent (11% during Phase III) of those who thought the noncustodial parent could pay were rated by the interviewer as being uninterested in receiving in child support.

Table 13. Interviewer Assessment of Clients' Interest in Child Support, by Noncustodial Parent's Perceived Ability to Pay Based on Exit Interviews by Phase

	Applicant Believes Noncustodial Parent Can Pay	Applicant Believes Noncustodial Parent Cannot Pay	Applicant Not Sure if Noncustodial Parent Can Pay
★ Interviewer's assessment of client's interest in receiving child support from one or both noncustodial parents: Phase I			
Very interested in child support	76%	22%	34%
Somewhat interested in child support	18%	48%	43%
Not very interested in child support	6%	29%	23%
Number	(87)	(58)	(104)
★ Interviewer's assessment of client's interest in receiving child support from one or both noncustodial parents: Phase II			
Very interested in child support	62%	3%	5%
Somewhat interested in child support	27%	11%	21%
Not very interested in child support	6%	78%	25%
Cannot determine	6%	8%	38%
Number	(179)	(37)	(76)
★ Interviewer's assessment of client's interest in receiving child support from one or both noncustodial parents: Phase III			
Very interested in child support	62%	22%	20%
Somewhat interested in child support	27%	36%	27%
Not very interested in child support	11%	28%	35%
Cannot determine	1%	14%	19%
Number	(102)	(50)	(136)

★ Chi square is significant at .1.

The results of exit interviews presented in Table 14 show that clients in both interview groups reported that noncustodial parents face a wide range of problems that may limit their willingness and ability to pay child support.

The most common reasons applicants and recipients cited to explain why the noncustodial parent might be unwilling or unable to pay child support were unemployment or intermittent employment patterns; a criminal history that limited employment options; not knowing money was owed; and not being sure he was the father of the child. In addition, approximately one-fifth to one-third of respondents at each

project phase said that the noncustodial parent could not be located or could not afford to pay support and still have enough to live on.

Table 14. Custodial Parent's Report of Issues That May Limit the Noncustodial Parent's Willingness/Ability to Pay Support Based on Exit Interviews, by Project Phase

Client's report of reasons that noncustodial parent may not be able/willing to pay child support	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=34)	DTA Interview (n=26)	DOR Interview (n=91)	DTA Interview (n=40)	DOR Interview (n=16)	DTA Interview (n=38)
NCP is unemployed	31%	36%	39%	38%	38%	47%
NCP is disabled and unable to work	9%	12%	9%	13%	13%	8%
NCP works on and off	47%	36%	46%	40%	25%	42%
NCP is in prison	3%	8%	12%	8%	6%	16%
NCP used to be in prison	22%	36%	29%	33%	44%	47%
NCP sometimes lives with us	3%	0%	4%	5%	6%	5%
NCP has a new family to support and can't afford to pay	19%	32%	18%	30%	25%	13%
NCP can't afford to pay support and support herself or himself	34%	20%	20%	18%	25%	21%
NCP wants to see the children more than CP allows	19%	16%	18%	15%	6%	11%
NCP isn't sure he is the father of the children	55%	36%	30%	30%	6%	13%
NCP thinks CP doesn't need the money	22%	20%	22%	20%	25%	29%
NCP is angry with CP	22%	20%	28%	20%	31%	45%
NCP gives CP money or diapers directly	22%	16%	21%	23%	13%	16%
NCP doesn't know she or he owes money	30%	36%	34%	38%	31%	13%
NCP thinks CP won't spend the money on the children	19%	8%	14%	15%	13%	21%
Children live with NCP sometimes	3%	0%	2%	5%	19%	5%
Unable to locate NCP	20%	17%	32%	20%	44%	37%

Finally, Table 15 shows that clients in both interview groups in every project phase expressed some concern during the exit interview about what a child support order might mean for her and her children. Chief among the concerns cited by custodial parents were the possibility that a child support order might serve to get the noncustodial parent more involved in his or her life, (which he or she did not want), and the possibility that a child support order might anger the noncustodial parent. A third of the clients interviewed by DOR workers and a quarter interviewed by DTA workers told researchers in exit interviews that they would prefer receiving cash and goods from the noncustodial parent rather than formal child support, although we did not ask them why. As previously noted, approximately one-half of interviewed custodial parents in every group and project phase did not think the noncustodial parent would be able to pay child support.

**Table 15. Reasons Why Custodial Parent May Not Want Child Support Based
On Exit Interviews with Custodial Parents, by Project Phase**

Percent of Custodial Parents responding "very" or "somewhat true":	Phase I		Phase II		Phase III	
	DOR Interview (n=34)	DTA Interview (n=26)	DOR Interview (n=91)	DTA Interview (n=40)	DOR Interview (n=16)	DTA Interview (n=38)
I am afraid this parent will start visiting the children or want to see them more often.	16%	21%	29%	18%	19%	18%
I am afraid that this parent will be angry if she or he has to pay support.	41%	46%	43%	48%	31%	47%
I am afraid that this parent will be violent and hurt me or the children.	6%	21%	17%	25%	25%	13%
I would like the other parent to help pay for rent or food instead of paying support to the child support agency.	34%	25%	35%	33%	31%	42%
I do not want to deal with the noncustodial parent or have her or him in my life.	56%	58%	64%	50%	56%	53%
I do not think she or he will be able to pay.	51%	39%	45%	35%	31%	50%

Transferring Information

Sources of Information Compared

Information about the noncustodial parent that is generated in interviews with applicants and recipients is entered on BEACON and is electronically conveyed to COMETS. To determine whether the transfer of information is occurring as expected, project personnel reviewed information about noncustodial parents generated by DTA and DOR workers and recorded on different computerized systems and manual data forms. They focused on clients who visited DTA during Phase II of the *Improving Information Project* in November 2005 to February 2006. They noted whether the information provided about the noncustodial parent from different sources was the same or different. They also noted whether new information about the noncustodial parent, was provided at any point in the interview process, where there was no prior information of any kind. These comparisons were conveyed to the evaluators for analysis.

The analysis focused on the percentage of cases with similar, different, or new information. It was restricted to cases with at least some information about the noncustodial parent in the sources of data that were being compared at each point in time. The relevant sources of information were DTA's computerized system, BEACON, prior to and following the client's visit to DTA; the CA/CS, (the manual data collection form completed by child support workers who interviewed their sub-set of clients during Phases II and III of the project); and the BEACON-COMETES interface, (which transfers information about the noncustodial parent from BEACON and relays it to COMETS automatically).

The biggest limitation to the study was the lack of detail on the nature of the differences in information about the noncustodial parent from these various sources. Since the comparison was done by project staff who did not classify minor differences due to abbreviations, format, syntax, and style as data differences, it appears that they were more substantive. Nevertheless, no detail was provided on the differences. Another limitation was the inability to determine which information source was more accurate. Thus, it was impossible to determine whether DOR workers obtained more valid information on the CA/CS that was never transferred to BEACON, or whether the COMETS interface data reflect information that was subsequently updated.

Key Findings Based on Comparison of Information Sources

One key finding from the analysis was that DTA and DOR workers rarely appeared to obtain new information about noncustodial parents from clients in the course of their interviews, where there was no prior information of any kind. They confirmed and amended previously provided information, but they rarely elicited new information on data items that were blank at an earlier point in time. This pattern is illustrated in Table 16, which compares the information contained on BEACON prior to and following the custodial parent’s visit to DTA. Following the interview at DTA, some different information was generated but little new information was produced on BEACON for items that had been missing prior to the interview. The items with different information included the noncustodial parent’s address (25%), whether the noncustodial parent lived out of state (26%), the noncustodial parent’s employer (16%), the noncustodial parent’s telephone number (10%), the noncustodial parent’s Social Security number (9%), the noncustodial parents’ names (9.5%), the noncustodial parent’s marital status with the applicant or recipient (10%), and the noncustodial parent’s current incarceration status (12%). On all other items, the information was the same for at least 90 percent of the cases.

Table 16. Comparison of Information on BEACON Prior to and After the DTA Interview, Based on 211 Cases

NCP Name	Same information	98%
	Different information	2%
	First information	0.5%
Good Cause Claim	Same information	67%
	Different information	33%
	First information	0
NCP Alias	Same information	99%
	Different information	1%
	First information	0
NCP SSN	Same information	91%
	Different information	9%
	First information	1%

Table 16. Comparison of Information on BEACON Prior to and After the DTA Interview, Based on 211 Cases

NCP DOB	Same information	93%
	Different information	6%
	First information	1%
NCP Country of Birth	Same information	98.5%
	Different information	1%
	First information	0.5%
NCP Race	Same information	93%
	Different information	6%
	First information	1%
NCP Physical Description	Same information	87%
	Different information	13%
	First information	1%
NCP Live In or Out of State	Same information	74%
	Different information	25%
	First information	1%
NCP Address	Same information	73.5%
	Different information	26%
	First information	0.5%
NCP Phone Number	Same information	89%
	Different information	10%
	First information	1%
NCP Parents' Names	Same information	90%
	Different information	9.5%
	First information	0.5%
NCP Parents' Address	Same information	92%
	Different information	7.6%
	First information	0.5%

Table 16. Comparison of Information on BEACON Prior to and After the DTA Interview, Based on 211 Cases

NCP/Applicant Marital Status	Same information	89.5%
	Different information	10%
	First information	0.5%
Joint Tax Filing	Same information	98%
	Different information	1%
	First information	1%
NCP Driver's License Number	Same information	99%
	Different information	1%
	First information	0%
NCP Military Status	Same information	100%
	Different information	0%
	First information	0%
Receiving Veteran's Benefits	Same information	93%
	Different information	6%
	First information	1%
Receiving Social Security Benefits	Same information	93%
	Different information	6%
	First information	1%
NCP Criminal Record	Same information	91%
	Different information	8.5%
	First information	0.5%
NCP Currently Incarcerated	Same information	87%
	Different information	12%
	First information	1%

Table 16. Comparison of Information on BEACON Prior to and After the DTA Interview, Based on 211 Cases

NCP Employer Name	Same information	83%
	Different information	16%
	First information	1%
Paternity Acknowledged	Same information	91.5%
	Different information	8%
	First information	0.5%
Health Insurance Info	Same information	98%
	Different information	1%
	First information	1%
Court Ordered Responsible	Same information	99%
	Different information	1%
	First information	0%
Child Support Order in Place	Same information	90%
	Different information	9.5%
	First information	0.5%

Another finding was that information collected by DOR workers during their interviews with custodial parents using the CA/CS manual data collection form frequently did not match the information recorded in BEACON. The items with the most substantial differences were the noncustodial parent's name (35%), the noncustodial parent's alias (46%), the noncustodial parent's country of birth (83%), the noncustodial parent's physical description (66%), the noncustodial parent's address (60%), the noncustodial parent's phone number (39%), the paternal grandparents' names (63%), joint tax filing status (60%), receipt of Social Security benefits (33%), the noncustodial parent's criminal record (29%), and the noncustodial parent's child support order status (40%). And, although the incidence of different information was lower for some other key items, it remained substantial: the noncustodial parent's Social Security number (19%), the noncustodial parent's driver's license number (17%), and the noncustodial parent's receipt of veteran's benefits (16%) (see Table 17).

Table 17. Comparison of Information on the CA/CS with Information Contained on BEACON After the Visit to DTA, Based on 171 Cases

NCP Name	Same information	65%
	Different information	35%
	First information	0%
NCP Alias	Same information	53%
	Different information	46%
	First information	1%
NCP Country of Birth	Same information	16%
	Different information	83%
	First information	1%
NCP Physical Description	Same information	34%
	Different information	66%
	First information	0%
NCP SSN	Same information	81%
	Different information	19%
	First information	0%
NCP Address	Same information	40%
	Different information	60%
	First information	0%
NCP Phone Number	Same information	61%
	Different information	39%
	First information	0%
NCP Parents' Names	Same information	37%
	Different information	63%
	First information	0%
NCP/Applicant Marital Status	Same information	84%
	Different information	16%
	First information	0%

Table 17. Comparison of Information on the CA/CS with Information Contained on BEACON After the Visit to DTA, Based on 171 Cases

Joint Tax Filing	Same information	40%
	Different information	60%
	First information	0%
NCP Driver's License Number	Same information	83%
	Different information	17%
	First information	0%
Receiving Veteran's Benefits	Same information	84%
	Different information	16%
	First information	0%
Receiving Social Security Benefits	Same information	67%
	Different information	33%
	First information	0%
NCP Criminal Record	Same information	71%
	Different information	29%
	First information	0%
Child Support Order in Place	Same information	59%
	Different information	40%
	First information	1%

The Electronic Transfer of Information from DTA to DOR

A key component of the analysis was to compare the information on BEACON following the DTA visit with the information that filters over to COMETS via the COMETS-BEACON interface. This comparison offered the best opportunity to determine whether the interface captures the information recorded on BEACON accurately, or alternatively, whether some information is dropped or changed in the transfer process. Information on the transfer process was available for 283 cases.

Table 18 shows that nearly all items flagged for comparison contained the same information in both systems. Thus, in most respects, the computerized transfer of information from BEACON to COMETS

appears to work, with COMETS mirroring the information contained in BEACON. However, there were some notable exceptions. The two systems had the same information on the address of the noncustodial parent in only 53 percent of the cases. There was different information in 12 percent of the cases, and in 36 percent of the cases, address information only appeared in BEACON and did not transfer to COMETS at all. Another item with serious data discrepancies involved the name of the noncustodial parent’s employer. Employer information was the same in both systems in 57.6 percent of the cases, and in 40 percent of the cases employer information was only available in BEACON.

While not as severe, the rate of differences in the two systems exceeded 5 percent for information about the names and addresses of the noncustodial parent’s parents, the child support order status of the case, and the marital status of the client and the noncustodial parent. On two items, the presence of a good cause claim and the noncustodial parent’s military status, there was different information for 63 and 97.2 percent of the cases, respectively.

As previously noted, it was impossible to determine the scope of the differences between the two information sources and/or their relative accuracy. However, since the comparison was done by project staff, we know that they were not trivial differences due to abbreviations (e.g., TX versus Tex versus Texas). It is also possible that at least some of the differences detected in this analysis were due to subsequent updates of COMETS, since there was a time lag between the generation of information on BEACON and the review of COMETS by project staff.

Nevertheless, it is a concern that for more than one-third of the cases, information on some key locate items including the address of the noncustodial parent and the name of the noncustodial parent’s employer only appeared in BEACON and did not get conveyed to the COMETS in the transfer process.

**Table 18. Comparison of Information in BEACON After the Visit to DTA with Information on the COMETS-
BEACON Interface, Based on 283 Cases**

NCP Name	Both same information	97%
	Only in BEACON	0
	Different information	3%
Good Cause Claim	Both same information	37%
	Only in BEACON	0.4%
	Different information	63%

**Table 18. Comparison of Information in BEACON After the Visit to DTA with Information on the COMETS-
BEACON Interface, Based on 283 Cases**

NCP SSN	Both same information	94%
	Only in BEACON	1%
	Different information	4%
NCP DOB	Both same information	96%
	Only in BEACON	2%
	Different information	2%
NCP Country of Birth	Both same information	98%
	Only in BEACON	1%
	Different information	1%
NCP Race	Both same information	98%
	Only in BEACON	1%
	Different information	1%
NCP Physical Description	Both same information	98%
	Only in BEACON	1%
	Different information	1%
NCP Live In or Out of State	Both same information	53%
	Only in BEACON	36%
	Different information	12%
NCP Address	Both same information	52%
	Only in BEACON	36%
	Different information	12%
NCP Phone Number	Both same information	97%
	Only in BEACON	2%
	Different information	1%
NCP Parents' Names	Both same information	84%
	Only in BEACON	2%
	Different information	14%
NCP Parents' Address	Both same information	87%
	Only in BEACON	7%
	Different information	6%

**Table 18. Comparison of Information in BEACON After the Visit to DTA with Information on the COMETS-
BEACON Interface, Based on 283 Cases**

NCP/Applicant Marital Status	Both same information	87%
	Only in BEACON	6%
	Different information	8%
Joint Tax Filing	Both same information	93%
	Only in BEACON	6%
	Different information	1%
NCP Drivers License Number	Both same information	97%
	Only in BEACON	1%
	Different information	2%
NCP Military Status	Both same information	2.5%
	Only in BEACON	0.4%
	Different information	97.2%
Receiving Veteran's Benefits	Both same information	98.9%
	Only in BEACON	0.4%
	Different information	0.7%
Receiving Social Security Benefits	Both same information	98.6%
	Only in BEACON	0.4%
	Different information	1.1%
NCP Criminal Record	Both same information	97.5%
	Only in BEACON	0.4%
	Different information	1.1%
NCP Employer Name	Both same information	57.6%
	Only in BEACON	40.3%
	Different information	2.1%
Child Support Order in Place	Both same information	84.1%
	Only in BEACON	0.7%
	Different information	15.2%

Discrepancies in Information from Different Sources

Table 19 summarizes the amount of missing information at the first comparison point, and the amount of the same or different information at all subsequent comparison points. We consider the number of data items where there was the same information at least 75 percent of the time. We also consider the number of data items where there was the same information at least 95 percent of the time.

The analysis shows that information was most consistent on BEACON itself. When information on BEACON was compared before and after the client’s visit during Phase II, information was consistent at least 75 percent of the time on 23 of the 26 items about the custodial parent. The information was consistent at least 95 percent of the time on 8 of the 26 items. In contrast, there was little consistency on information recorded on the CA/CS and that which was recorded on BEACON both before and after the client’s visit to DTA. Only four items had the same information in 75 percent or more of the cases, and none had the same information in 95 percent of the cases. Perhaps the biggest concern was the lack of agreement between the BEACON system and the COMETS interface. While both systems contained the same information for 75 percent of the cases for 16 items, only 10 of the 21 items in the study were the same at least 95 percent of the time.

Table 19. Number of Items Populating as Same Information At Each Comparison Point

	Comparison 1 (BEACON Pre-Visit Data)	Comparison 2 (CA/CS Data and BEACON Pre-Visit)	Comparison 3 (BEACON Pre and Post-Visit)	Comparison 4 (BEACON Post-Visit and CA/CS Data)	Comparison 5 (Interface and BEACON Post-Visit)
Number of items compared	26*	16	26	15	21
Number of items where 95% or more of information is the same on both systems	4*	0	8	0	10
Number of items where 75% or more of information is the same on both systems	12*	4	23	4	16

* Information is shown on BEACON and is not missing.

Child Support Outcomes

Electronic Extracts of Child Support Outcomes

Did the project affect patterns of child support order establishment and payment? Could any differences be linked to the specific use of DTA versus DOR personnel? To answer these questions, we compared child support outcomes for a sample of cases generated prior to the start of the project with those generated during Phases I through III. Our sample of pre-project cases was drawn from a listing of applicants and recipients who visited DTA in Worcester, Massachusetts, during 2004. The list was restricted to applicants, reapplicants, and recipients of public assistance who came to DTA in 2004, and could logically be expected to receive child support from a noncustodial parent. For those who visited numerous times, we focused on the date of the first visit in 2004.

The list of custodial parents seen in 2004 was matched with COMETS to identify all individuals with open case activity in the child support system. For each custodial parent identified in this manner, programmers at the child support agency generated information on each noncustodial parent and case associated with the applicant or recipient. The information was conveyed in an electronic extract that was generated on September 30, 2006. For each relevant case, DOR sent information on child support orders and child support payments at key time periods following the visit. The extract also included information on the availability of key data items for noncustodial parents both when the client visited DTA and upon generation of the extract.

A parallel extract was generated for all cases identified during Phases I through III of the project. Project cases were produced from June 2005 to June 2006. As with cases in the pre-project sample, programmers at DOR generated a computerized extract containing information on cases with all noncustodial parents associated with each applicant or recipient in the project. The extract was generated in January 2007. It included information on noncustodial parent information, child support orders, and payment activity.

Characteristics of Cases in the Experimental and Comparison Groups

A total of 4,514 custodial parents visited DTA during 2004 and were identified for possible inclusion in the extract of comparison cases prior to the start of the cooperation project. Custodial parents who could not be identified in the child support system were eliminated. They consisted principally of applicants for

public assistance who were not approved for benefits or declined them. We also eliminated custodial parents with no active noncustodial parent or dependent child. Although it was impossible to make the time frames equivalent for cases in the experimental and comparison groups, since the comparison group was generated in 2004 and the experimental group was generated in 2005-2006, we eliminated from the comparison group those cases where 800 days or more had elapsed between the visit to DTA and the generation of the extract. For the experimental group generated during Phases I through III, we also eliminated cases that involved custodial parents who were found to be ineligible for public assistance and were not known to the child support system, as well as those with no dependent child. Finally, in some analyses, we eliminated cases associated with custodial parents who had been interviewed by DOR interviews during Phase III, since, for the most part, only problem cases were referred by DTA workers during this phase.

The resulting sample sizes available for analysis of child support outcomes consisted of 516 cases in the comparison group and 878 cases in the experimental group. Table 20 summarizes the size of the groups generated for the phases of the grant project and for comparison purposes in our analysis of child support outcomes. On average, the extract of child support outcomes for cases in the comparison group was generated 22 months after the applicant or recipient visited DTA. For cases in the experimental group, the average time lag was 13 months.

Table 20. Cases with Data From Child Support Enforcement Automated System

	Comparison cases	Experimental cases
Total cases	4,514	1,276 450 Phase I 455 Phase II 372 Phase III
Custodial parent not in the child support system	258	157
Cases with no identifiable NCP	2	0
Cases with construct problems, no dependent shown	42	5
Cases with more than 800 days from DTA visit to data extract	3,552	0
Cases closed at extract	145 (22%)	236 (21%)
Number of cases available for analysis	516	878 319 Phase I 293 Phase II 266 Phase III
Average months from DTA visit to extract	22 months	13 months 17 Phase I 13 Phase II 9 Phase III

Table 21 presents selected information on the cases in the experimental and comparison groups. It shows that approximately two-thirds of cases in both groups were new to child support when the applicant or recipient visited DTA either to apply for benefits or pursue a redetermination of existing benefits, and there were no differences in this pattern for cases that involved custodial parents who were interviewed by DOR and DTA workers versus DTA workers alone. Approximately one-third of the cases in both groups had a monthly support order in place when the custodial parent visited DTA. Over time, the incidence of child support orders rose for cases in all groups. Thus, when the extracts were generated an average of 22 and 13 months after the DTA visit, respectively, 48 percent of cases in the comparison group had orders, as compared with 43 percent in the experimental group. Among cases with orders, average order levels were \$250 and arrears balances averaged about \$9,500. There were no statistically significant differences between the experimental and comparison groups, nor were there any statistically significant differences in the experimental group between those cases where custodial parents were interviewed by DOR and DTA workers, as compared with cases where clients were interviewed by DTA workers only.

Table 21. Profile of Cases at Visit to DTA and Extract from the Automated System, by Group

	Comparison cases	All experimental cases Phases I, II, III	Experimental cases with interviews by DOR and DTA★	Experimental cases with interviews by DTA only
Cases new to child support at visit to DTA	63%	69%	71%	65%
Arrears-only case at visit to DTA	4%	3%	4%	4%
Arrears-only case at extract	5%	4%	4%	3%
Cases with monthly support orders in place at visit to DTA	33%	28%	25%	31%
Cases with monthly support orders in place at extract	48%	43%	40%	45%
Total	(661)	(1,114)	(502)	(612)
If support was due at visit to DTA, average amount per month	\$251	\$248	\$270	\$233
If case was open at DOR at visit to DTA, average arrears balance	\$9,262	\$9,553	\$9,534	\$9,565
Total	(194)	(301)	(118)	(183)

★ Excludes experimental cases interviewed by DOR in Phase III when only problem cases were referred to DOR.

† Difference in means between comparison cases and all experimental cases is significant at .05.

Information on Noncustodial Parents

A key objective of the project was to compare the ability of public assistance and child support workers to obtain information from applicants and recipients on noncustodial parents during their visit to DTA. Table 22 presents the proportion of cases in each group with missing information on key items about the noncustodial parent at two points in time: when the applicant or recipient visited DTA, and when the extract was generated. In the experimental group, we compared cases where the custodial parent was interviewed by both a DOR and DTA worker with those only interviewed by a DTA worker.

The analysis revealed the same patterns of missing information for all groups at both points in time. For example, the name of the noncustodial parent was missing for approximately one-third of the cases when the client visited DTA, and no additional information about the name was obtained for cases in the months between the DTA visit and the data extract. Information about the noncustodial parent's address was obtained in approximately 20 percent of the cases in all groups during the months between the DTA visit and the child support extract. Information on the noncustodial parent's Social Security number was obtained in 25 percent of the cases in all groups, as were dates of birth in approximately 30 percent of the cases.

**Table 22. Changes in Information Available
from DTA Case Creation to Data Extract, by Group**

	All Cases			
	Comparison	Experimental	Experimental cases with interviews by DOR and DTA★	Experimental cases with interviews by DTA only
All Cases, New and Existing				
NCP name missing at visit to DTA	29%	32%	32%	33%
NCP name missing at data extract	0%	0%	0%	0%
Percentage point decrease	29%	32%	32%	33%
NCP address missing at visit to DTA	47%	47%	46%	48%
NCP address missing at data extract	30%	27%	27%	27%
Percentage point decrease	17%	20%	19%	21%
NCP Social Security number missing at visit to DTA	39%	40%	38%	41%
NCP Social Security number missing at data extract	17%	15%	13%	16%
Percentage point decrease	22%	25%	25%	25%
NCP date of birth missing at visit to DTA	39%	39%	37%	40%
NCP date of birth missing at data extract	13%	9%	9%	9%
Percentage point decrease	26%	30%	28%	31%
Total	(516)	(878)	(389)	(489)

★ Excludes experimental cases interviewed by DOR in Phase III when only problem cases were referred to DOR.

Table 23 repeats the comparison of missing information about the noncustodial parent when the applicant visited DTA and upon generation of the extract, but restricts the analysis to new cases that were not known to child support prior to the visit to DTA. There were a few significant differences between the experimental and comparison groups. This suggests that both DOR and DTA workers may have been more effective in getting information on the noncustodial parent’s address, Social Security number and date of birth at the initial visit to DTA in experimental cases during Phases I through III. For these items, rates of missing information were significantly lower for experimental cases as compared with comparison group cases.

On the other hand, there was no evidence that the collection of information was better when DOR personnel were involved with interviewing applicants at DTA. In about one-half of the cases subject to each interview format, the noncustodial parent’s name was missing when the client visited DTA and no new information regarding the name was generated. Information on addresses, Social Security numbers,

and dates of birth was missing for one-half to two-thirds of cases involving new applicants at the DTA interview, and was subsequently obtained for similar proportions of cases in both groups.

Table 23. Changes in Information Available from DTA Visit to Data Extract, by Group Among Cases New to Child Support

	Comparison	Experimental	Experimental cases with interviews by DOR and DTA★	Experimental cases with interviews by DTA only
NCP name missing at visit to DTA	65%	55%	52%	58%
NCP name missing at data extract	0%	0%	0%	0%
Percentage point decrease	65%	55%	52%	58%
NCP address missing at visit to DTA	69% +	59%	55%	62%
NCP address missing at data extract	29% +	25%	21%	29%
Percentage point decrease	40% +	34%	34%	33%
NCP Social Security number missing at visit to DTA	68% +	58%	54%	62%
NCP Social Security number missing at data extract	21%	16%	7%	20%
Percentage point decrease	47%	42%	47%	42%
NCP date of birth missing at visit to DTA	68% +	58%	54%	62%
NCP date of birth missing at data extract	11%	8%	7%	9%
Percentage point decrease	57%	50%	47%	53%
Total	(229)	(463)	(218)	(245)

★ Excludes experimental cases interviewed by DOR in Phase III when only problem cases were referred to DOR.

+ Difference between comparison and experimental is significant at .05

Child Support Outcomes

Once a custodial parent is approved for public assistance, the child support agency attempts to obtain child support on behalf of the dependent children. If the applicant is new to the child support agency, the process involves creating a case on the child support system and then obtaining a court order for child support.

Table 24 shows that while all cases in the experimental and control groups that lacked a child support order had an open child support case, with one-third of cases created between the client's visit to DTA and the generation of the extract of child support outcomes, only one-third of the cases that needed an order established had one generated during that time period. Many issues affect the time it takes to establish an order, including whether DOR is able to locate the noncustodial parent. As previously noted,

the average number of months between the applicant’s visit to DTA and the generation of the extract was 22 months for cases in the comparison group and 13 months for cases in the experimental group. There were no statistically significant differences in the proportion of cases with orders for experimental group cases where the applicant was subjected to interviews with DTA versus DTA and DOR workers.

Table 24. Child Support Milestones for Cases that Lacked a Support Order at the DTA Visit

Percentage of cases without a child support order at visit to DTA (on one or more cases) that:	Comparison	Experimental	Experimental cases with interviews by DOR and DTA ★	Experimental cases with interviews by DTA only
Show a case created date	100%	100%	100%	100%
Show a child support case created between DTA visit and data extract	32%	33%	36%	32%
Show a child support case order entered between DTA visit and data extract	31%	33%	41%	29%
Total	(661)	(1,114)	(502)	(612)

★ Excludes experimental cases interviewed by DOR in Phase III when only problem cases were referred to DOR.

The final set of comparisons we conducted dealt with child support payment patterns for cases with orders following the visit to DTA. We compared the amount paid with the amount due for cases with orders at four time periods following the custodial parent’s visit to DTA. The analysis shows that in comparison group cases, noncustodial parents paid approximately 45 percent of what they owed in child support over an 18-month period. For cases with orders in the experimental group, the proportion of child support paid was 37 percent. The difference between the two groups only became statistically significant at 540 days following the visit to DTA, with the pattern favoring the comparison group. There were no differences in payment for cases where clients were exposed to interviews by DOR versus DTA workers (See Table 25).

Table 25. Payment Performance for Cases with Orders

Percentage of child support that was paid: (excludes cases with no child support due during this period of time)	Comparison	Experimental	Experimental Cases with interviews by DOR and DTA ★	Experimental Cases with interviews by DTA only
In the 180 days post-DTA visit	44% (182)	37% (257)	40% (97)	35% (160)
In the 270 days post-DTA visit	45% (190)	37% (287)	44% (115)	33% (172)
In the 365 days post-DTA visit	43% (203)	37% (304)	43% (125)	34% (179)
In the 540 days post-DTA visit †	45% (211)	37% (322)	44% (133)	33% (189)

★ Excludes experimental cases interviewed by DOR in Phase III when only problem cases were referred to DOR.

† T-test difference between comparison and experimental is significant at .05 and T-test between experimental DOR and DTA is significantly different at .05 from experimental DTA only

Table 26 considers payment patterns for cases in the comparison and experimental groups once again, but focuses on the percentage paying nothing. Over time, complete nonpayment dropped from 43 to 29 percent for cases in the comparison group. For cases in the experimental group, however, total nonpayment dropped from only 49 to 42 percent. As in other comparisons, there were no differences in payment patterns for cases where the custodial parents were interviewed by DOR versus DTA workers.

Table 26. Percent Paying Nothing Among Cases With Orders

Percentage paying nothing toward child support that was due: (excludes cases with no child support due during this period of time)	Comparison	Experimental	Experimental cases with interviews by DOR and DTA ★	Experimental cases with interviews by DTA only
In the 180 days post-DTA visit	43% (182)	49% (257)	44% (97)	51% (160)
In the 270 days post-DTA visit †	37% (190)	46% (287)	44% (115)	47% (172)
In the 365 days post-DTA visit	38% (203)	43% (304)	39% (125)	46% (179)
In the 540 days post-DTA visit †	29% (211)	42% (322)	38% (133)	44% (189)

★ Excludes experimental cases interviewed by DOR in Phase III when only problem cases were referred to DOR.

† Chi square shows association between payment and experimental/control status at .05 .



Worker Reactions

We obtained worker reactions to the cooperation project and the effectiveness of different interview formats through focus groups conducted with workers at the conclusion of Phases I and II and a questionnaire administered to DOR and DTA workers at the conclusion of Phase III. The questionnaire and focus groups covered the pros and cons of having DOR workers at the public assistance agency and available to help with client interviews about the noncustodial parent and the efficacy of specific interview formats.

The questionnaire was completed by 12 DOR workers, nearly all of whom were case establishment workers who had spent at least 11 days at DTA conducting interviews, and 34 DTA workers who handle intake (18%), TAFDC (47%), food stamps (12%), and supervisors (15%). During the year-long project, the amount of times these workers had asked DOR interviewers for help varied, most often three to five times, which was reported by 39 percent of workers. At the same time, 27 percent reported never having asked for help or having asked only once or twice, and 33 percent had asked for help on six or more occasions. Focus groups were conducted with 6 DOR workers and 24 DTA workers during Phase I and 8 DOR and 19 DTA workers during Phase II.

Overall Helpfulness of Having Child Support Workers at the Public Assistance Agency

Overall, DOR workers felt that their presence at DTA had been helpful. Table 16 shows that 88 percent felt that having a DOR worker at DTA was “very” or “somewhat” helpful. Ninety percent reported that the visits were a “very” or “somewhat” good use of time, although their work at DTA had reduced their productivity at DOR. According to project staff, DOR involvement in the interview process increased the number of applications that were withdrawn and the rate of requests for good cause. DOR’s presence at DTA was perceived by project staff to make the link between public assistance and court-ordered child support very real to applicants.

Table 27. Opinions of DOR Workers Regarding Their Helpfulness at DTA (n=12)

Helpfulness of Having DOR Interviewer at DTA		
	Very Helpful	50%
	Somewhat Helpful	33%
	Somewhat or Very Unhelpful	8%

Nearly two-thirds of surveyed DTA workers (61%) felt that having DOR interviewers available at their agency was very or somewhat helpful, and only 12 percent felt their presence was somewhat or very unhelpful (see Table 17). Their written comments reflect that they saw value in maintaining a DOR presence at DTA. DTA workers believed that DOR's presence gave clients the sense that DTA supported them, and DOR's efforts to obtain a child support order, and it was helpful to have DOR assist with clients who were less than forthcoming.

Table 28. Opinions of DTA Workers Regarding Helpfulness of Having DOR Workers At DTA (n=34)

Times Asked the DOR Interviewer for Help w/ Case		
	Never	15%
	1 or 2 Times	12%
	3 to 5 Times	39%
	6 to 10 Times	12%
	More than 11 Times	21%
Helpfulness of Having DOR Interviewer at DTA		
	Very Helpful	15%
	Somewhat Helpful	46%
	Somewhat or Very Unhelpful	12%
	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	27%

Workers from both agencies (DOR: 83%; DTA: 81%) agreed that DTA workers typically asked DOR for help with talking with clients directly about child support. This was viewed as helpful by 90 percent of DOR and 61 percent of DTA workers. Another common form of assistance was getting information on client's child support payments, which was reported to have happened by two-thirds of both DOR and DTA workers and was rated as helpful by three-quarters of both groups. A less common form of help was instructing DTA workers on how to interview clients about the noncustodial parent. Only 17 percent of DOR and 13 percent of DTA workers recalled this happening. Of those who did ask (or were asked), only 29 percent of DTA workers (but 66 percent of DOR workers) felt this assistance was somewhat or very helpful.

Changes in Workload, Behavior, and Interagency Relationships Due to the Project

DOR and DTA workers responded to a series of questions about changes they had experienced since the project started. Although some DTA workers disclosed in focus groups that Phase I of the project had sensitized them to the importance of capturing some items about the noncustodial parent, and that they had begun to ask about the names and addresses of paternal grandparents and enter the information on the drop-down box on BEACON, few DOR and DTA workers (DOR, 8%; DTA, 19%) indicated on the questionnaire that the presence of DOR workers had improved their ability to obtain more information about noncustodial parents. Most (DOR, 58%; DTA, 81%) felt as though DTA’s ability to elicit information stayed the same.

While many DOR and DTA workers felt that the project had resulted in no impact on their workload, 42 percent of DOR workers and 24 percent of DTA workers felt that their workload was worse. Part of the increased workload may be due to the increased interview time; 17 percent of DOR workers and 42 percent of DTA workers felt that it took more time to interview clients and that the situation was worse than before DOR began visiting and conducting interviews. Perhaps the most positive impact of the project noted by respondents dealt with relationships between the two agencies. More than half of DOR and DTA workers, 58 and 56 percent respectively, reported that relations between DOR and DTA had improved over the course of the project. Most DOR (50%) and DTA (75%) workers reported that their opinions about each other had stayed the same, although 42 percent of DOR workers reported that their opinions of DTA had improved (see Table 29).

Table 29. Changes Reported by DOR and DTA Workers Following Use of DOR Interviewers at DTA

	DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
How you or DTA workers explain the importance of child support to clients		
Better	25%	19%
Worse	0%	0%
Same	25%	81%
Do not know	50%	0%
The way you or DTA workers question clients about the NCP		
Better	17%	16%
Worse	33%	0%
Same	0%	84%
Do not know	50%	0%

Table 29. Changes Reported by DOR and DTA Workers Following Use of DOR Interviewers at DTA

	DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
The amount of information you or DTA workers get about NCPs		
Better	8%	19%
Worse	8%	0%
Same	58%	81%
Do not know	25%	0%
The amount of information you personally get about NCPs		
Better	33%	N/A
Worse	42%	
Same	0%	
Do not know	25%	0%
Getting answers to clients questions on child support		
Better	N/A	35%
Worse		0%
Same		65%
Do not know		0%
Relations between DOR and DTA		
Better	58%	56%
Worse	17%	6%
Same	17%	38%
Do not know	8%	0%
Your understanding of how DOR and DTA work a case		
Better	33%	27%
Worse	0%	3%
Same	58%	70%
Do not know	8%	0%
Your feelings about dealing w/ clients' child support issues/feelings about honesty of clients and their interest in getting child support		
Better	17%	24%
Worse	8%	6%
Same	67%	70%
Do not know	8%	0%

Table 29. Changes Reported by DOR and DTA Workers Following Use of DOR Interviewers at DTA

	DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
Your work load		
Better	8%	3%
Worse	42%	24%
Same	42%	73%
Do not know	8%	0%
Time spent doing interviews with applicants and recipients		
Better	17%	3%
Worse	17%	42%
Same	50%	55%
Do not know	17%	0%
Your opinion of DOR and DTA		
Better	42%	22%
Worse	0%	3%
Same	50%	75%
Do not know	8%	0%

Changes in Job Performance Due to the Project

Table 30 shows the responses of DOR and DTA workers to statements about changes in their job performance as a result of the project. Overall, workers in both agencies reported few differences or benefits. When asked to respond to the statement that DTA workers were more attentive to child support issues or noncustodial parent information since DOR came, most DOR and DTA workers provided a neutral response. Twenty-seven percent of DOR workers somewhat or strongly agreed that they had shown DTA workers how to do a better client interview, whereas only 12 percent of DTA workers agreed with that statement. Half of DOR workers felt they had answered questions for DTA workers so they would have to call customer service less often, but only 18 percent of DTA workers shared this view. As previously noted, most DTA workers felt as though the participation of DOR staff had made their interviews with clients longer and did not lead to any improvement in their interviewing skills.

Table 30 shows that workers from the two agencies continued to disagree about who does a better job interviewing clients. While all of DOR workers felt that they get more information from clients about noncustodial parents than DTA workers the vast majority of DTA workers were neutral or disagreed.

Nearly all DOR workers (80%) disagreed with the statement, “it doesn’t matter whether DOR or DTA workers do the interview.” In contrast, 39 percent of DTA workers somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement and most of the rest were neutral. In their written comments, many DOR and DTA workers expressed support for DOR taking over the interview function. Many felt that it would be beneficial for DOR workers to handle the child support issues, not only because DOR workers have more knowledge about child support, but also because DTA workers have numerous other issues to address during the interview. Another view expressed by some workers in the focus group was that the quality of information available about the noncustodial parent depended on the stage of the woman’s life rather than the interviewer, and that the most information is available when the client is pregnant or shortly after the child’s birth. Finally, some workers felt that the quality of information about the noncustodial parent was affected by the lack of their ability to verify the information immediately and to impose any sanctions for clients who gave vague or inconsistent information, as opposed to those who failed to provide any information about the noncustodial parent.

Table 30. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Impact of DOR Presence on Job Performance

	DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
As a result of having DOR workers stationed at DTA:		
DTA workers are more attentive to child support		
Disagree strongly or somewhat	16%	24%
Neutral	42%	55%
Agree strongly or somewhat	42%	21%
DTA workers focus more on the NCP info clients give		
Disagree strongly or somewhat	8%	27%
Neutral	67%	46%
Agree strongly or somewhat	25%	27%
DTA workers learned/were shown how to do a better interview about the NCP		
Disagree strongly or somewhat	0%	54%
Neutral	73%	33%
Agree strongly or somewhat	27%	12%
DTA workers called DOR customer service less		
Disagree strongly or somewhat	8%	30%
Neutral	42%	52%
Agree strongly or somewhat	50%	18%

Table 30. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Impact of DOR Presence on Job Performance

	DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
DTA interviews have gotten longer	Disagree strongly or somewhat	12%
	Neutral	28%
	Agree strongly or somewhat	60%
DTA relations with DOR are better	Disagree strongly or somewhat	25%
	Neutral	8%
	Agree strongly or somewhat	66%
Clients feel more intimidated by DOR	Disagree strongly or somewhat	0%
	Neutral	61%
	Agree strongly or somewhat	13%
In general, DOR workers get more information about NCPs from clients	Disagree strongly or somewhat	39%
	Neutral	49%
	Agree strongly or somewhat	12%
In general, DTA workers get more information about NCPs from clients	Disagree strongly or somewhat	22%
	Neutral	56%
	Agree strongly or somewhat	22%
In general, it doesn't matter whether DOR or DTA workers do the interview	Disagree strongly or somewhat	21%
	Neutral	39%
	Agree strongly or somewhat	39%

Reactions to Specific Interview Formats

Phases I through III involved variations of the interview process used by DTA and DOR workers. Table 31 shows workers opinions on the effectiveness of these variations and on other possible collaborative efforts. Workers from both agencies agreed that the format used during Phase I, when DOR and DTA workers were both present in the cubicle during the DOR child support interview with the client, was extremely awkward. Although clients did not complain about the DOR worker joining the interview, DTA workers felt that the interview flow was disrupted and that the switch to a child support interviewer to

ask the questions about the noncustodial parent added to the length of the interview. Some said that the DOR worker did not have an opportunity to establish rapport with the client. Finally, there was some confusion about whether the DTA worker was supposed to say anything while the DOR worker was interviewing the client.

Phase II was viewed as less cumbersome for workers, and few DTA workers expressed complaints or concerns about the interview process. Most were content to have DOR staff conduct separate interviews with clients and have the DOR interview take place first. A few workers complained that the initial interview with DOR personnel caused delay that resulted in more cases going unfinished at the end of the day because clients needed to leave DTA to pick up children or because the worker’s shift ended and it was time to go home. To improve efficiencies, several workers suggested that DOR interviewers be used more selectively in cases singled out by DTA workers because they were “difficult” or the information provided by clients was “sketchy.” Since DTA workers felt as though they were as adept as DOR workers in getting needed information with the many clients who cooperate readily, they preferred referring difficult cases to DOR interviewers before they were approved for public assistance. As Table 31 shows, workers felt it was more effective for DOR and DTA to interview the client separately than to interview the client together. Approximately two-thirds of all workers rated interviewing clients separately as somewhat or very effective. Only one-third of DOR workers and 9 percent of DTA workers felt it was somewhat or very effective to interview clients together. Seventy-five percent of DOR workers and 39 percent of DTA workers felt it would be somewhat or very effective to have DOR interview only when DTA needs help – the approach adopted in Phase III.

Table 31. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Various Approaches to Interviewing Clients

		DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
DOR & DTA routinely interviewing applicants and recipients together	Not Effective	67%	60%
	Neutral	0%	30%
	Effective	33%	9%
DOR & DTA routinely interviewing applicants and recipients separately	Not Effective	25%	15%
	Neutral	8%	19%
	Effective	67%	66%

Table 31. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Various Approaches to Interviewing Clients

		DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
DOR interviewing applicants and recipients only when DTA needs help	Not Effective	25%	27%
	Neutral	0%	33%
	Effective	75%	39%
DOR interviewing applicants and recipients instead of DTA	Not Effective	0%	6%
	Neutral	8%	31%
	Effective	91%	62%
DOR interviewing applicants and recipients before they meet with DTA	Not Effective	64%	9%
	Neutral	18%	34%
	Effective	18%	56%
DOR interviewing applicants and recipients after they meet with DTA	Not Effective	83%	32%
	Neutral	8%	39%
	Effective	8%	29%
Making the interview with DOR voluntary (no sanction for nonappearance)	Not Effective	83%	68%
	Neutral	8%	26%
	Effective	8%	6%
Having DOR worker at DTA on a full-time basis	Not Effective	16%	6%
	Neutral	17%	24%
	Effective	67%	70%
Having DOR worker at DTA on a part-time basis	Not Effective	8%	20%
	Neutral	8%	26%
	Effective	83%	55%
Not having a DOR worker at DTA on a regular basis at all	Not Effective	75%	69%
	Neutral	25%	31%
	Effective	0%	0%

Table 31. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Various Approaches to Interviewing Clients

		DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
Using DOR staff at DTA for a lot of things: interview, take questions, etc.			
	Not Effective	8%	12%
	Neutral	17%	28%
	Effective	75%	60%
Using DOR staff at DTA only for interviews about the NCP			
	Not Effective	0%	18%
	Neutral	17%	34%
	Effective	83%	47%

Co-Location and its Benefits

Table 32 shows that most workers felt it would be beneficial to have a DOR worker present at the DTA agency. Sixty-seven percent of DOR and 70 percent of DTA workers felt that having a DOR worker at the agency on a full-time basis would be somewhat or very effective. Eighty-three percent of DOR and 55 percent of DTA workers felt it would be somewhat or very effective to have a DOR worker available on a part-time basis. No worker supported the notion of DOR dispensing with making a regular appearance at the public assistance agency.

Table 32. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Interagency Collaboration

		DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
Having DOR worker at DTA on a full-time basis			
	Not Effective	16%	6%
	Neutral	17%	24%
	Effective	67%	70%
Having DOR worker at DTA on a part-time basis			
	Not Effective	8%	20%
	Neutral	8%	26%
	Effective	83%	55%

Table 32. Opinions of DOR and DTA Workers on Interagency Collaboration

		DOR Worker (n=12)	DTA Worker (n=34)
Not having a DOR worker at DTA on a regular basis at all	Not Effective	75%	69%
	Neutral	25%	31%
	Effective	0%	0%
Using DOR staff at DTA for a lot of things: interview, take questions, etc.	Not Effective	8%	12%
	Neutral	17%	28%
	Effective	75%	60%
Using DOR staff at DTA only for interviews about the NCP	Not Effective	0%	18%
	Neutral	17%	34%
	Effective	83%	47%

Workers in both agencies viewed the chief benefit of co-location to be improved relationships and communication. To make the experience more effective for DOR workers, it was suggested that workers posted at DTA have remote access to DOR computer systems. To enhance their effectiveness, several DTA workers suggested that DOR workers take a more active role in cases without child support, and try to educate clients about its importance.

System Issues and Other Remaining Concerns

Co-location, on the other hand, does not address all the frustrations that workers in the two agencies have with one another. For example, DTA workers are often confused about whom to call for questions about a noncustodial parent associated with their clients. At various times, a different DOR worker may be associated with the noncustodial parent, depending upon whether DOR is doing case initiation, litigation, or enforcement. Other cases may be assigned to an interstate worker. The process of identifying a relevant DOR worker gets more complicated for custodial parents who have multiple partners since each noncustodial parent may have a different set of workers.

Another source of frustration is the lack of feedback that DTA workers get about child support matters for clients in their caseload. They are not alerted when an order is established; they do not get feedback on why a noncustodial parent is not paying. Although DOR maintains that they could get child support

information by using an alternative system, “View Direct,” they would like the information to appear on BEACON in a “pop-up” fashion; because they find View Direct to be extremely awkward and time consuming.

In addition, DTA workers do not understand why it takes so long for clients to get child support orders and payments, especially those who provide good noncustodial parent information. They would like DOR to fast-track cases with good contact information, and are receptive to prioritizing cases with employment information and/or Social Security numbers and relaying them directly to DOR for immediate attention.

Finally, workers in both agencies are frustrated with BEACON. In addition to consuming too many screens that are difficult to navigate, workers have a number of specific complaints.

- The employment screen will only accept the name of an employer if the city is provided. Entries with a missing city or multiple cities are not accepted. Incomplete information must be entered as “unknown.”
- With the exception of a spot on the screen dealing with the noncustodial parent’s physical description, there is no adequate space to enter additional comments or leads, such as an area of expertise or profession.
- It is cumbersome to navigate between the employment, age, and location screens.
- BEACON requires a date of birth and will not accept an approximate age.
- BEACON will not accept information about the noncustodial parent until a child is born even though pregnant women may be the most motivated and in the best position to provide good information.
- The marriage date is a drop-down box on BEACON that is rarely completed by DTA workers.

While some of these problems are being addressed in system fixes, both groups of workers tend to support the idea of DOR workers conducting private, in-person interviews with applicants and recipients using a paper and pencil tool with the information conveyed to DTA afterwards for entry on the BEACON screens. DOR workers miss the old CA/CS form, where they could add notes and partial information.

Workers are also frustrated with COMETS. For example, they complain COMETS does not send DOR workers a notice of new information when it is updated by DTA workers. They are also concerned

about inaccuracies in the automated interface between BEACON and COMETS. Although there are fewer problems than there used to be, some information is believed to be dropped on a random basis in the interface between the two systems. Workers view system problems as very substantial and eagerly await the introduction of ETAG, which will allow them to view what is on BEACON.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

A project was conducted in Worcester, Massachusetts, to improve the quality of information that custodial parents give about noncustodial parents by placing child support workers at the public assistance agency and having them routinely interview applicants and recipients of public assistance. The evaluation assessed the impact of different interview formats and personnel on the generation of information about the noncustodial parents and the subsequent production of child support orders and payments. Exit interviews were conducted with groups of custodial parents to gauge their reactions to different interview formats and their understandings of the child support rules. Focus groups and surveys were conducted with workers in the child support and public assistance agencies to elicit their reactions to various interview formats and suggestions on how to improve the quality of information about noncustodial parents. Finally, information on noncustodial parents recorded on various paper and computerized systems was compared to assess data comparability and the potential loss of information in the process of transferring information electronically. The following is a summary of project findings.

Summary of Findings

DOR and DTA workers obtained similar information about noncustodial parents when they interviewed custodial parents and conveyed similar information to them about child support.

There was no consistent evidence that having child support workers conduct interviews with custodial parents improved the amount of information obtained about noncustodial parents. An analysis of the amount and type of information about the noncustodial parent obtained in interviews using public assistance versus child support personnel found few differences. There were also no consistent differences that could be associated directly with the agency affiliation of the interviewer. There was also no evidence that DOR interviewers did a better job than their DTA counterparts of explaining child support to custodial parents. Exit surveys conducted with applicants and recipients by independent researchers revealed that regardless of whether they were interviewed by DTA or DOR workers, roughly the same proportions of clients recalled being told basic facts about child support, its benefits, and the consequences of noncooperation.

Interviews with custodial parents conducted by both DTA and DOR workers during the project were significantly more likely to yield information about the noncustodial parent than interviews conducted in 2004.

While the agency affiliation of the interviewer was not associated increased information, custodial parents interviewed during the project with DTA workers alone or in combination with DOR, provided more information about the noncustodial parents than their counterparts did in 2004. During their visit to DTA, they were significantly more likely to provide information about the noncustodial parent's address, Social Security number, and date of birth. This suggests that the project may have raised awareness about the importance of collecting information about noncustodial parents among workers from both agencies and improved their interviewing behavior.

The project produced no improvements in the rate of child support order establishment and/or payment.

The project did not lead to improvements in the rate of order establishment or child support payment. A comparison of order establishments and payments for 2004 cases identified prior to the start of the project and the 2005-2006 cases handled during the three phases of the project yielded the same statistical results. About one-third of new cases in both groups that required orders obtained them in the one to two years following the custodial parent's visit to DTA. Among 2004 cases with orders, noncustodial parents paid 45 percent of what they owed, as compared with 37 percent for noncustodial parents in experimental cases, which was a statistically significant difference at 540 days following the applicant or recipient's visit to DTA.

The percentage of cases where the noncustodial parent paid nothing during the 6 to 18 months following the custodial parent's visit to DTA ranged from 29 to 43 percent for 2004 comparison cases, as compared with 42 to 49 percent for cases in the experimental group. Thus, non-payment was significantly higher in the experimental group.

These patterns are similar to rates of order establishment and payment observed in a 2003 Massachusetts project that attempted to improve information about the noncustodial parent through the use of child support liaisons in two public assistance offices in Boston. Staffing interventions in both projects failed to yield improvements in child support performance. A review of child support cases generated prior to and following the introduction of liaisons in DTA offices in Boston found that only 20 to

30.5 percent had a child support order. Among cases with orders, only 65 percent showed any current payment activity and 35 percent paid nothing (Pearson and Davis, 2003).

Most applicants and recipients wanted the noncustodial parent to help support the child and did not appear to withhold information about the noncustodial parent.

The study yielded little evidence that applicants and recipients withhold information about the noncustodial parent. Approximately two-thirds of clients in each interview group were judged by DTA and DOR interviewers to have provided all the information they knew. This was corroborated in exit interviews conducted with a sample of applicants and recipients, about one-third of whom reported that they did not know basic information like the noncustodial parent's address, the noncustodial parent's employer, the noncustodial parent's parents' name, and the noncustodial parent's parents' address. Up to two-thirds of clients told independent researchers that they did not know the noncustodial parent's Social Security number. More than half said that they would not know how to reach the noncustodial parent if there was an emergency related to the children.

Finally, the project showed that nearly all custodial parents interviewed by workers from DOR (90%) and DTA (75%) workers were judged to be "very" or "somewhat" interested in receiving child support from one (or more) noncustodial parents. Clients who were rated as being most interested in receiving support believed that the noncustodial parent could pay, while those who were least interested in support were certain that the noncustodial parent would be unable to pay or were unsure of the noncustodial parent's ability to pay due to limited employment options.

A limited number of custodial parents appeared to give incomplete information or less information than they possessed.

During Phase III, DTA workers were invited to refer custodial parents who provided incomplete or inconsistent information about the noncustodial parent, or who had questions or concerns best addressed by DOR, to an on-site DOR worker for an immediate, second interview. Only 18 percent of custodial parents were referred to the DOR worker for this interview. In addition, nearly half (46%) of these parents were subsequently judged by DOR workers to have been forthcoming and to have provided all the information that they could. This suggests that only about 10 percent of custodial parents in the experimental group were perceived to be deliberately disingenuous.

A substantial amount of information about the noncustodial parent appears to be lost in the automated interface between the DTA and DOR systems.

While the comparison of information about the noncustodial parent generated by DOR and DTA interviewers revealed few differences that could be attributed to the agency affiliation of the interviewer, a comparison of information on the same noncustodial parent contained in the automated systems for the child support and public assistance agencies revealed some troublesome differences. Although information is meant to automatically transfer from BEACON, the DTA system, to COMETS, the child support system, via the COMETS interface, a comparison of 21 items about noncustodial parents in 283 cases recorded on BEACON and the COMETS interface showed differences in many cases. For example, the two systems showed the same address of the noncustodial parent in only 53 percent of the cases. There was different information in 12 percent of the cases. In 36 percent of the cases, address information only appeared in BEACON and did not transfer to COMETS at all.

Another item with significant data discrepancies was the name of the noncustodial parent's employer. Information regarding the employer was the same in both systems in 57.6 percent of the cases, and in 40 percent of the cases information regarding the employer was available in BEACON only.

Overall, there was the same information on both systems in 75 percent of the cases for 16 of the 21 items. Only 10 of the 21 items in the study were the same at least 95 percent of the time. If the transfer of information from BEACON to COMETS is truly automatic, the information should be the same at least 95 percent of the time on all 21 items. It should be noted that, since the completion of this project, DOR has implemented a new interface with DTA that DOR believes has improved the transfer of information.

Workers liked having DOR workers available at DTA and felt that the project improved relationships between the two agencies. At the same time, most only want help with interviews when applicants and recipients provide incomplete or inaccurate information.

Questionnaires and focus groups with DOR and DTA workers underscore the patterns revealed in the more quantitative aspects of this project. Both groups of workers felt that the project had improved relationships between the two agencies and that co-location was helpful. At the same time, they did not feel that they needed additional help or training with interviewing applicants and recipients on a routine basis.

DTA workers valued having DOR workers at the public assistance office to answer questions about cases and convey the message that child support was critical to self-sufficiency. They also favored using

DOR workers to interview clients who provided incomplete or inaccurate location information. DOR workers reported that while their work at DTA had reduced their productivity (remote access to COMETS was not available until Phase III of the project), they felt as though they had provided useful input to DTA workers and clients and that child support should continue to have a presence at the public assistance agency. They, too, favored the use of child support personnel to interview clients who fail to provide complete and accurate information about the noncustodial parent.

Workers were frustrated with the automated systems they use.

Perhaps the biggest frustrations expressed by workers in both agencies had to do with their automated systems. DOR workers were extremely frustrated when they had to conduct interviews using the screens on BEACON that address the noncustodial parent. They missed the flexibility of a paper form and their ability to ask questions in any order, add notes, and record partial information. They also wondered whether information on noncustodial parents was being dropped on a random basis during the interface from BEACON to COMETS, a suspicion that was confirmed in the analysis noted above.

DTA workers were frustrated that information on the child support status of clients in their caseload does not automatically pop up in the BEACON system. They consider it very burdensome to have to use a separate system (“View Direct”) to obtain some basic information about child support, which deters DTA workers from accessing information about child support. They were also frustrated by the lengthy nature of the order establishment and collection process, even for clients who provide complete information about the noncustodial parent.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings suggest the following conclusions and recommendations.

Bring staff in the two agencies together.

Conducting a demonstration project that involved the child support and public assistance programs necessitated that both agencies focus on coordination and that staff engage in sustained interactions. Administrators from the two agencies held meetings and conference calls to design the project and implement different approaches to conducting interviews. Line staff was assembled for focus groups and other debriefing activities following each project phase. The net result was an exchange of phone numbers and e-mail addresses between workers in the two agencies to facilitate contact on cases as needed. Another outcome was increased understanding and awareness of the mission of each agency.

Still another benefit was the cultivation of personal relationships. DOR workers were made aware of the tremendous amount of information that is secured at the time of the initial TANF interview by public assistance workers. DTA workers became more aware of why DOR needs Social Security numbers, parental addresses, and other information items.

These outcomes mirror those reported by other jurisdictions that have brought together staff across both agencies. For example, Los Angeles held a Blue Ribbon Summit on cross-program collaboration that involved 400 staff from both departments who handle the programs on a day-to-day basis. The rationale for coordination was reviewed along with practical recommendations for improving program performance on both sides through closer collaboration (OCSE, 2007). Other jurisdictions, such as Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and the State of Pennsylvania have also had positive experiences improving IV-A/IV-D collaboration through routine meetings at all staffing levels.

Enhance the cooperative relationship between DOR and DTA

The project underscored the importance of DOR and DTA working together to maximize the information obtained about noncustodial parents. This may include maintaining the periodic presence of on-site DOR liaisons at the public assistance agency to provide information about child support to applicants and recipients. While no one favored both types of workers conducting joint interviews of clients, there was strong support for DOR collecting noncustodial parent information in cases where the client gives incomplete information or appears to be less than candid.

Other jurisdictions have found it productive to use child support workers to directly question applicants and recipients in cases with missing information. For example, as a result of direct questioning in those cases with a missing Social Security number for the noncustodial parent in Minneapolis, 7 to 11 percent of the custodial parents were able to provide the number when asked directly or told how to find it on documents they had with them. Of the clients who had not provided address information about the noncustodial parent, 22 to 27 percent provided information when questioned directly by the child support agency worker (Griswold and Pearson, 2001). A co-location experiment in two County Assistance Offices in Philadelphia resulted in child support obtaining Social Security numbers on 83 percent of the alleged noncustodial parents in TANF cases and dates of birth on 91 percent of these parents (OCSE, 2007). DOR has designated staff in each regional office to visit local DTA offices on a regular basis.

Improve data quality and exchange.

Workers in both agencies were frustrated by their inability to transfer and share information and, in addition, recent automation developments have created new problems. Like other large-scale systems projects, it has been very challenging to remedy some of the technical difficulties that have accompanied the introduction of BEACON. The low rates of data congruence, between information contained in the automated systems for public assistance and child support suggest that the underlying programming should be examined. Having technical staff from both agencies work together along with program staff to identify system problems and develop appropriate upgrades and corrections is critical. As noted above, DOR implemented a new interface with DTA after the completion of this project that DOR believes has improved the transfer of information.

A recent report by OCSE highlights some “fixes” implemented in other settings that would be of interest to staff in Massachusetts. For example, Rhode Island’s integrated system (INRHODES) produces a IV-D screen for every TANF case with an established child support order. The automated screen shows the caseworker the amount of the child support order, what percentage of the case assistance grant this represents, and whether the payments have been made regularly within the previous three months. According to authors of the report, caseworkers can use the screen to show parents that work plus child support equal their best option for maintaining self-sufficiency (OCSE, 2007).

Another relevant example highlighted in OCSE’s recent report on IV-A/IV-D collaboration comes from Nebraska, where a pop-up window for the noncustodial parent’s address will appear when the noncustodial parent is added to the IV-A system, N-FOCUS. This serves to remind workers that the noncustodial parent’s address information is needed. In order to capture partial information that the TANF worker elicits in interviews and other non-standardized items about the noncustodial parent, a text field is available where pertinent information, such as other alleged fathers, can be added to alert the IV-D worker. Finally, comparison reports are created to identify active TANF cases without a IV-D referral to ensure that there is a corresponding referral for each applicable TANF case. An alert is sent to the TANF worker as a reminder if the IV-D referral has not been sent.

Still another enhancement would permit workers in the two agencies to send case information to one another electronically or make corrections on one another’s computer systems if new information about the noncustodial parent comes to light.

Test additional strategies to increase information collection.

DOR and DTA staff favor the use of more aggressive measures with the small proportion of custodial parents believed to withhold information about the noncustodial parent or to provide misleading or incomplete information. Few of the 1,015 custodial parents in this study experienced a sanction for noncooperation with child support. In Massachusetts, the sanction may be equal to the custodial parent's share of the family's grant or up to 25% of the entire grant, whichever is greater. While this study did not expressly test means of eliciting cooperation beyond varying the type of worker conducting the interview, many DOR workers believe that financial penalties should be used to induce recalcitrant clients to cooperate. Another approach worth considering with applicants who appear to withhold information is to delay the onset of benefits until DOR has conducted a thorough interview. This was used to advantage in Bay County, Florida. Finally, it was suggested that workers in both agencies use rapid verification procedures to identify incorrect information more quickly so that appropriate measures can be taken.

Target cases with good information and process them quickly.

Many TANF workers are frustrated with the slow pace of case processing at the child support agency. The analysis of child support outcomes for project cases lends support to these perceptions. Slow case processing patterns reduce the importance of child support as a potential source of income and make the agency lose credibility in the eyes of DTA workers.

Targeting cases to help ensure that families that have the best chance of getting child support is one way to address case processing lags. While child support agencies strive to handle all cases as quickly as possible, many jurisdictions are realizing that they need to establish specific protocols and time frames to identify TANF families nearing their time limit or other cases that could be closed with reliable receipt of child support (OCSE, 2007). While most attention has focused on identifying cases nearing the end of their TANF time limits, another group suitable for fast-track treatment is those that have complete and "fresh" information about noncustodial parents. Generating child support payments in such cases would boost confidence in the child support agency, reinforce the importance of careful collection of information about the noncustodial parent, and produce tangible benefits for families that struggle to achieve self-sufficiency.

Improve rates of order establishment and payment.

The findings on child support actions and outcomes for cases in the 2004 comparison group and project cases generated during Phases I through III during 2005-2006 underscore the need to improve

case processing patterns. It often takes many months for child support cases to acquire a court order, and many of those with orders fail to realize any payments. These patterns erode confidence in the child support agency and undermine efforts to demonstrate the importance of child support to clients and DTA staff. They are consistent with the findings of a 1998 GAO study showing that improvements in the child support program are necessary or there is potential for many families to leave welfare without an order and without regular child support payments.

DOR has recently undertaken a number of agency-wide changes aimed at improving case processing, including case ownership arrangements so that establishment and enforcement workers are assigned and retain specific caseloads, and early intervention initiatives that involve contacting noncustodial parents as soon as a payment is missed or received in less than the full amount. It is hoped that these re-organization features will soon translate into better performance patterns.

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