

Family Violence Collaboration

Family-centered strategies must not put women and children at greater risk of violence. Because the child support program serves both parents, often around a crisis point, it has a unique responsibility—and a unique opportunity—to reduce the risk of family violence and help family violence survivors pursue child support safely. Collaborating with programs that address fatherhood, domestic violence, and child welfare can simultaneously reduce family violence, increase father involvement, and improve child support outcomes.



Why should the child support program collaborate to prevent family violence?

More than 90 percent of women with current or former abusive partners want to pursue child support if they can do so safely.¹ The majority of families participating in the child support program are current or former cash assistance recipients—and research from the late 1990s indicates that 20 to 30 percent of women receiving cash assistance were in an abusive relationship.² Research also shows that the birth of a child, the establishment of an order, as well as support enforcement activities can be triggers for violence.

Most fathers are not violent, and most mothers want them to be a positive part of their children's lives. Trying to shut fathers out is not the solution. Fathers are an integral part of the households, neighborhoods, and communities of the custodial families served by the child support program. By incorporating family violence collaboration into the child support program, it can safely contribute to the economic well-being of custodial families, and mothers and children can be both protected and empowered.

Fatherhood and parenting programs have successfully served families at risk of family violence.³ By screening for family violence, providing safe opportunities to disclose family violence, and discussing the need to prevent family violence at multiple points, programs have been able to prevent family violence and improve child well-being. Collaborating with these programs can lead to improved child support outcomes as well.

How does the child support program work to prevent family violence?

The prevention, assessment, and treatment of family violence require a range of responses that include fathers as part of the solution and require collaborative relationships between the child support program and fatherhood, domestic violence, and child welfare programs. A number of states have had demonstration projects and multi-partner collaboratives to provide specialized services to domestic violence survivors and to improve coordination with child welfare agencies. States also use their Access and Visitation Grant funds to provide supervised visitation and safe exchange services. These services are designed to prevent and reduce family violence. In FY 2009, nearly 13,000 supervised visitations occurred under this program and over 5,000 safe exchange services were provided.⁴

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In the late-1990s, child support programs in collaboration with advocates, developed three options for working with domestic violence survivors: fully enforce support orders and deal with the risks (“green light”), apply for good cause in TANF cases or forego child support services in non-TANF cases (“red light”), or work with the individual to develop an enforcement plan that is tailored to the risks facing the victim of abuse, including addressing protection and selective enforcement options (“yellow light”). This three-pronged approach was first tested in four states: Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, and Oregon.⁵ It has since been adopted by child support programs.

Child support programs can also help child welfare agencies locate and engage fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare case planning and placement decisions. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 gave child welfare agencies access to child support data to locate fathers, and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 expanded this authority to include siblings and other relatives. As a result, most state child support programs have improved their process of responding to child welfare agency requests. In a number of states, child support programs have partnered with child welfare agencies to individualize child support enforcement efforts to best meet the needs of children placed in foster care and support the child welfare case plan.

Examples of how state child support programs collaborate with other agencies and organizations to prevent family violence:

California—New domestic violence approach

What it does: The San Francisco Local Child Support Agency (LCSA) is undertaking a pilot project to identify and educate noncustodial parents who have been the perpetrators of family violence in collaboration with the Sheriff’s Department, Adult Probation, the District Attorney, Juvenile Probation, the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, Goodwill, Inc., and the SF Unified Family Court. The plan is to begin with a court order that requires the noncustodial parent to comply with anger management classes, parenting classes, and work force readiness programs if needed. The San Francisco LCSA co-locates with Probation Officers in its satellite office where noncustodial parents will receive their training from pilot partners and child support staff.

California (continued)

Results: The San Francisco LCSA has identified the caseworkers and attorney for this pilot and they have been trained in communication management by family violence experts. All of the partners mentioned above are on board and a mechanism to track the parents assigned to this pilot has been created.

Massachusetts—Domestic violence model

What it does: Massachusetts encourages parents to provide information about any safety concerns they might have so that staff can respond, explain child support services, and allow parents to make decisions about whether the services will be safe for them. All Massachusetts child support staff receive training on child support and safety issues, and staff with specialized training are available for consultation. In addition, Massachusetts works closely with the TANF agency and with community-based service providers to identify parents who might have safety concerns related to child support services.

Minnesota—Access and Visitation Program

What it does: Using Access and Visitation Grant funding, the Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Support Enforcement Division contracts with two non-profit organizations that provide supervised visitation and safe exchange services. The first organization receives nearly all of its referrals from the court system; the second receives referrals from child protection agencies and the courts.

Results: In FY 2010, these two organizations provided 359 supervised visits and served over 300 noncustodial mothers and fathers and their children.

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Nebraska—Better Service through Enhanced Partnering

What it did: The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Child Support Enforcement Office conducted a pilot project in collaboration with Nebraska’s Child Welfare Office to improve child support outcomes and reduce delays in establishing permanent placements for children by improving communication and information sharing between the two offices. Activities included employing dual system specialists, cross-training staff, refining and streamlining procedures, and improving work processes.

Results: The pilot resulted in fewer child support sanctions against parents for non-cooperation, increases in paternities established in one of the pilot sites, and a 10-percent reduction in the time until permanent placement.⁶

North Dakota—Child Support-Child Welfare Collaboration

What it did: North Dakota’s child support program identified several ways to improve results for families through increased collaboration with the state’s child welfare agency.⁷ A new automated process provides early notification to child support when a child is placed in foster care, ensuring child support payments are disbursed appropriately. The processing of child welfare requests for locating family members through the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) was automated and streamlined. Staff revised criteria for referring foster care cases to child support, including not requiring child support services when placements were short-term or when children were expected to be reunified with parents within 12 months. Guidelines for the use of foster care excesses—amounts of current child support payments that exceed foster care payments—were developed and included an emphasis on using an excess to support independent living activities when the excess is on behalf of an older child and to support reunification of a younger child.

Results: The child welfare agency significantly increased its usage of the FPLS for locate information.

Pennsylvania—Expanding child welfare agencies’ access to information

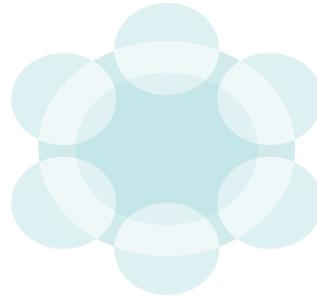
What it does: The Pennsylvania Bureau of Child Support Enforcement expanded its efforts to help child welfare agencies place vulnerable children with family members by giving the agencies access to its Paternity Tracking System. The system holds information on all voluntary paternity acknowledgment forms for children born out-of-wedlock in Pennsylvania since 1995.

Texas and Washington—Collaborations with domestic violence programs

What they do: Several state child support programs have collaborated with domestic violence organizations to make information available about how to pursue child support safely. The Office of the Attorney General of Texas partnered with the Texas Council on Family Violence to develop “Get Smart, Get Safe, Get Support”—an online tool to help domestic violence victims safely access child support services.⁸ In Washington, the state’s child support division collaborated with the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence to post child support information on the coalition’s website.⁹ Child support staff were provided domestic violence training in each field office, with additional online training for staff unable to attend in person.

District of Columbia—Domestic violence collaboration

What it does: A child support enforcement specialist works out of the District’s Domestic Violence Intake Center office so that he or she is available to speak to domestic violence victims about opening a child support or paternity establishment case in Superior Court.



References

Examples provided in the *Promoting Child Well-Being & Family Self-Sufficiency* Fact Sheet Series are funded using child support program matching funds and other funding sources.

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