

## Making the Child Support-Child Welfare Connection Work for Kids



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Our most vulnerable children, those in the child welfare system, need an extra hand to help them thrive in the face of difficult circumstances. Perhaps surprisingly to some, that extra helping hand can come from the child support community. When a new home, temporary or permanent, is needed for a child, one of the first places child welfare workers look is to other family members who might be able to care for the child. Child support can be a tremendous resource for locating the child's other parent, usually the father, whose contact information may not be available from the child's mother. If the child's family has a current or former welfare case, if the parents have been divorced, if paternity has been established or if the child is on Medicaid,



the child support program probably has information about the child's other parent. It is worth the time and effort for child welfare and child support agencies to build relationships and develop procedures to make sure that, when appropriate, fathers and other paternal kin have the opportunity to take responsibility for their children in need.

### **Child welfare workers:**

- Are you being proactive in obtaining information about the mother, father and relatives of both parents when you initiate a child welfare case?
- Do you consult regularly with your counterparts in the child support agency to determine whether pursuit of child support will further the child welfare case plan?
- Have you discussed taking the Father Friendly Check-Up, available through the Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System, to identify what changes might be made to increase the father-friendliness of your agency?

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# Tips for Dads

## Managing Two Systems at Once: Child Welfare and Child Support

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Because the child welfare and child support systems may not always communicate well together, and because the county district attorney and court may choose whether to redirect child support payments under strict child-welfare termination timelines, it is important for fathers to know both the status of their child support orders and how to initiate redirection through their attorney or by themselves. Among non-resident fathers we have interviewed for participation in the QIC-NRF research project in Tarrant County, we have fathers who have never established legal paternity and fathers who have child support orders resulting either from family court orders or from paternity being established through a local branch of the Texas Office of the Attorney General.

Alex and Jerry are currently participating in education classes offered through the QIC-NRF project in Tarrant County, Texas. They are the fathers of two children removed from the same mother by child welfare services, and both have child support orders. Complicating this scenario is that even though each of these fathers pays child support, they were not found and notified of court dates until after removal and 14-day hearings. So did the court know these men exist? Did the court recognize there are current child support orders in place? If so, did the court stop or redirect garnished wages? What is the status of their child support now? What can they do to have it redirected appropriately?



### What happens to current child support orders after the state child welfare agency is granted temporary conservatorship by the courts?

The answer may depend on where the child support order originated.

**Family court:** if there are no arrears, the money continues to go to the mother unless there is a court order to stop payment. If there are arrears, money may still go to the mother until arrears are paid.

**Office of the attorney general:** If there are no arrears, child support money remains garnished until there is a court order to stop it or redirect it to a temporary caregiver, such as the state foster care system or other kin. If there are arrears, child support money remains garnished until arrears are paid to either the mother or the state if the mother was receiving public assistance.



### What can non-resident fathers do to verify that child support payments have been redirected?

Fathers can obtain copies of previous child support orders and any court orders resulting from child welfare hearings from the county clerk's office.

They should compare these documents to see if any changes were made during court hearings.



### What can be done to modify orders after initial child welfare court proceedings have taken place?

If an attorney has been appointed to represent the father, the father should request that the attorney verify the status of child support orders and pursue appropriate action. If no attorney was appointed to represent the father, he should hire an attorney, seek help through non-profit organizations such as Legal Aid of Northwest Texas ([www.lanwt.org](http://www.lanwt.org)), or file the correct forms for redirection himself with the county clerk's office. Many state forms are readily available on the Internet. In Texas, a child support "Modification Kit" is available at [www.texaslawhelp.org](http://www.texaslawhelp.org) in the Family Law and Domestic Violence section. This site provides an easy-to-read brochure, modification instructions and forms such as "Motion to Terminate Withholding for Child Support" and "Order to Terminate Withholding for Child Support."

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Fathers should note that this process will take time, require patience while walking through the steps, and require filing fees and court costs.



### What can non-resident fathers do to verify that a court order redirecting child support payments is being carried out?

Fathers should call their local representative of the office of the attorney general (or other state entity which handles child support payments) to schedule an appointment to review payment history and see that the garnished wages are being properly directed or that wage withholding has been terminated.

Because every state's child support and child welfare agencies are different, these tips might not work in other states. But in every state there are similar ways in which fathers can navigate between the two systems with time and patience and with the help of a caring child welfare or child support staff person.

Alex and Jerry are still navigating these systems. Fortunately, the QIC-NRF curriculum and system representatives are providing great information and encouragement.

## Making the Child Support-Child Welfare Connection Work for Kids, continued from page 1

### Child support workers:

- Are you carefully reviewing your case file information so that you know when a new or existing case involves a child in the child welfare system?
- Do you consult regularly with your counterparts in the child welfare agency to determine if child support will further the child welfare case plan?
- Have you considered assessing the father-friendliness of your agency to determine how you might better serve the whole family?

As commissioner of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, I take cross-agency collaboration very seriously and will work very diligently and enthusiastically to increase effective communication between child support and child welfare agencies. Children in foster care need and deserve our best efforts and that means breaking down bureaucratic barriers between programs.

Small changes can make a huge difference. This newsletter provides examples of collaborative efforts between child welfare and child support that are underway in various parts of the country. Finding ways to make our separate systems talk to each other is challenging and there are real obstacles to overcome. But I know that by working together we can find solutions — we must find solutions — for the sake of our children.



NATIONAL QUALITY  
IMPROVEMENT CENTER  
ON NON-RESIDENT FATHERS AND  
THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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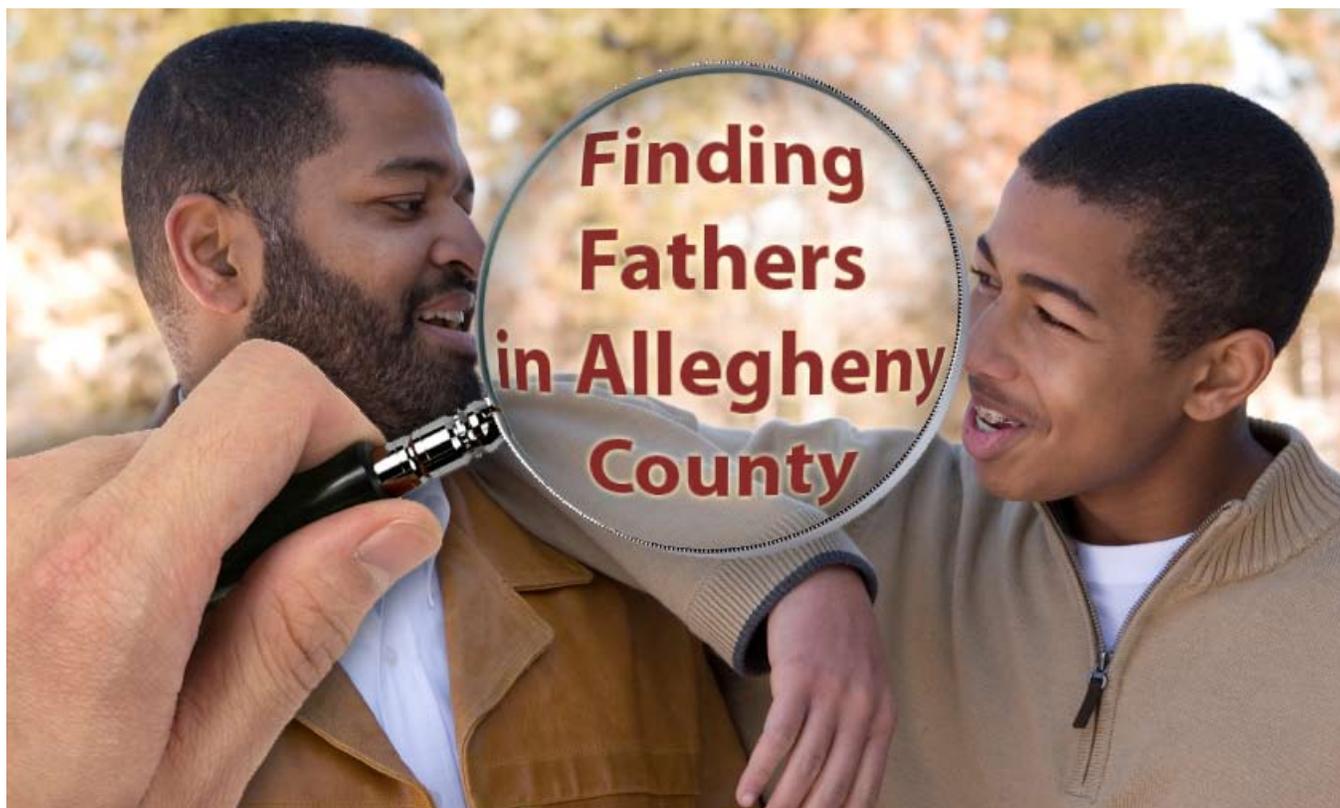
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Since early 2002, Allegheny County's Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth, and Families has been using the Pennsylvania Bureau of Child Support Enforcement and the state parent locator service via the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Family Division, which has access to the federal parent locator service. These services help find and notify a child's parents when there is any child protective service investigation, family service planning, permanency planning meeting or court proceeding.

If any legal, alleged or biological parent's whereabouts are unknown or become unknown, the assigned caseworker conducts a diligent search to locate the person.

As part of the diligent search process, caseworkers routinely send letters to the Bureau of Child Support Enforcement (Pennsylvania's sole repository of paternity claims), where the paternity coordinator checks records for all acknowledgements or claims of paternity. They also fax a letter to the Allegheny County Court Family Division to access the state parent locator service for information from the federal parent locator service.

Once located, parents, including those who are incarcerated, routinely receive notification of child

protective service investigations, family service planning, permanency planning meetings and court proceedings.

On a case-by-case basis, when it is in the best interest of a child, incarcerated parents may engage in contact visits with their children at the Allegheny County Jail. Meetings and court hearings can be held in person (caseworkers visit the parent at the jail or parents may obtain transportation orders to attend court hearings) or via teleconference (a pilot project).

We have been successful in making some permanent placements with fathers. The following are two examples. A family came to the attention of the agency at the time of a mother's death. No one in the family was sure of the father's whereabouts, so the agency conducted a diligent search, including using the parent locator service. The children were able to be reunited with the father and are now in his custody.

A mother, with severe behavioral health problems had been hiding her children from their father for many years before the family became involved with the agency. The mother repeatedly refused to divulge any information about him and the children entered emergency foster care. Casework staff quickly used information obtained from the state and federal parent locator services to help locate the father, and the children are now living with him in another state.



## A Project to Enhance Agency Collaboration and Case Processing

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

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

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

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

### Action Plans for Participating Jurisdictions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## Lessons Learned



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

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

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

## Effective Collaboration Requires:

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

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

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

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

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



Team members from the Indianapolis, Ind., site with their local fathers' advisory council



The QIC-NRF federal project officer, Jason Bohn, leads a discussion with the national fathers' advisory council in Denver, Colo.

## Fathers' Advisory Council

*Stefanie Vincent, American Humane Association*

To advance its values of collaboration and partnership, the QIC-NRF established a national non-resident fathers' advisory council. The council is an integral part of the QIC-NRF process and will provide leadership and act in an advisory capacity for the duration of the project. The council is composed of fathers who have been previously connected to the child welfare system through their children. These fathers have shared their stories and ideas about how to help other fathers connect to or strengthen their relationships with their children. The council will also assist in developing directional and dissemination activities for the QIC-NRF.

In addition to the national advisory council, each of the project sites (located in Seattle, Wash., Colorado Springs, Colo., Fort Worth, Texas, and Indianapolis, Ind.) has created its own local non-resident fathers advisory council to provide support and advice for its respective jurisdiction. Many of the fathers from these local councils are also members of the national council.

The national council convened in June 2009 in Denver, Colo., to discuss and make recommendations on father engagement and retention strategies for the four sites. The fathers noted the importance of the program facilitator and the need for fathers to share their success stories. Additional recommendations from the fathers included emphasizing the strengths of fathers and discussing more cultural differences and stereotypes. The council also reviewed caseworker training on non-resident fathers developed by the QIC-NRF. Finally, the council focused on future plans and decided to reconvene in October 2009.

Following the meeting of the national council, the QIC-NRF held a grantee meeting in Colorado Springs. In attendance were members from each project site, representatives from American Humane and the National Fatherhood Initiative, and the project's federal officer, Jason Bohn. The grantee meeting was enriched by the attendance of a few members of the national council. The fathers updated project staff and representatives from the project sites on the council's progress and provided unique and beneficial perspectives on discussions and topics that came up during the grantee meeting.

The project staff, sites and ultimately, other fathers will undoubtedly continue to learn and progress from the wisdom these men bring to the QIC-NRF. The QIC-NRF would like to thank the fathers who dedicated their time to the national advisory council and provided invaluable knowledge to the project during the last meeting: Michael Mohn, Antoine Williams, Earnest Holly, Michael Edward Lee, Brian P. Jackson, Mike Rivera, Gregory L. Cox, Edward F. LeFlore and LaRon Burris.



Members of the fathers' advisory council and local site facilitators participating in the national meeting in Denver, Colo.

## Fatherhood Initiative: I HAD NO IDEA!

*Pamela R. Bowie, managing attorney, Oklahoma County Juvenile Court Child Support Office, Oklahoma Child Support Services, Pamela.Bowie@okdhs.org*

When I was hired in November 2005, I had no idea that I was getting involved in a very significant fatherhood initiative. I was hired as the managing attorney of the newly created Oklahoma County Juvenile Court Child Support Office. This office was created by the director of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, who was concerned that the average length of stay in foster care was increasing. Our mandate was to find a way to reduce that length of stay and we were responsible for developing our own road map to achieve this task.

We now know that paternity establishment in foster care cases is the key to this endeavor. Before the office was created, very little effort went into ascertaining children's paternity status or locating alleged or established fathers. Fathers were an afterthought. Also, many fathers' parental rights were terminated by publication notice in the newspaper when they could have been located with minimal effort. This resulted in many fathers losing their parental rights without proper notice, and diminished placement possibilities that the father and his relatives might have provided.

Using our information network, we provide the following information to the district attorney's office and child welfare agencies: the paternity status of each child, addresses for each parent or alleged parent and whether a prior domestic order exists regarding these parties. In Oklahoma, the district attorneys are responsible for preparing the dependency petitions and serving the proper parties with notice. Although we have been highly successful in obtaining child support and paternity

orders in these cases, we still struggle with some assistant district attorneys who don't want to "clutter" their cases with alleged fathers. However, in the courtrooms where the assistant district attorneys use the information we provide, placement resources multiply exponentially with father, alleged father and paternal relative information.



When we first started we found that genetic testing would be ordered for child welfare cases, but it took an inordinate amount of time to complete the process and sometimes it never got completed. This is not a criticism of child welfare staff, as they have other responsibilities, such as developing a treatment plan, finding a placement for the child, and numerous other things for which they are responsible in these cases. However, now we can use our expertise and resources to prepare for and take the detailed steps necessary to conduct genetic testing. We obtain genetic test orders and conduct testing in the juvenile court building every Monday afternoon. This results in the paternity establishment process taking much less time to complete.

I am pleased to report that the Department of Human Services has reported a drop in length of stay in foster care. However, a very important consequence of this office's activities is that we play an important role in connecting fathers with their children. This office has consistently been the most improved child support office in Oklahoma for the establishment of child support and paternity orders. We routinely establish more than 1,200 orders per year in deprived cases, and roughly half of those are for fathers. We are an integral part in the process of connecting fathers with their children, and we believe both fathers and children reap the benefits of this connection.