Federal Report Summarizes Programs and Research Designed to Assist Noncustodial Parents

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has released a report that summarizes more than 50 programs and research projects aimed at assisting noncustodial parents to become more able to provide child support to their children. The aim of the report is to assist service-providers and child support agencies by providing a central source of information on what has been implemented, and what has been learned from programs in the past, as well as to provide summaries of projects in progress that are funded by OCSE. Included are initiatives that address fatherhood, employment, incarceration, and child access and visitation. Below is a small sample of the report’s summaries of programs and findings.

- In Kansas, the Reliable Income for Kids Coalition (RIK) tested two interventions - free pro se legal facilitation, and a customized system of arrears forgiveness - for parents who were behind in child support payments. Legal services consisted of legal education provided through one-on-one meetings with a licensed attorney on contract with the project for up to two-and-a-half hours per participant. The arrears forgiveness intervention allowed participants to earn partial forgiveness of up to 30 percent of debt owed to the state for in-full, on-time and consistent payment of the ordered amount, starting with 3 months of payment earning 5 percent forgiveness.

  Parents were randomly assigned to one of four groups: legal services alone, legal services in combination with arrears forgiveness, arrears forgiveness alone, and a control group receiving no intervention. The two groups that received pro se facilitation either alone or in combination with arrears forgiveness had notably higher rates of payment over the control group and the group who received arrears forgiveness only. Pro se legal services were also found to increase parenting time for the noncustodial parents and to allow the parent to resolve other legal issues.

  The arrears forgiveness strategy was less successful, having no net impact on payments. Though not included as an element in the original evaluation, the project director noted that for parents with arrearages between $20,000 and $52,000 and whose wages were just over the minimum wage, earning partial debt forgiveness was not as meaningful an incentive because they could never imagine being able to pay off the debt.

- In California, the Enhanced Parental Involvement Collaboration (EPIC) attempted
to reverse the order establishment default rate in San Francisco through a pilot program and evaluation that compared enhanced customer service and outreach strategies to the county’s existing practices for notifying parents of order establishment hearings. Parents in the experimental group (the EPIC cases) were encouraged to attend the order establishment hearing by trained child support workers who used a protocol with six alternative steps that included direct communication and repeated attempts to reach the parent, while parents in the control group were subject to the standard practice for notification. The project’s findings:

  o For the 588 EPIC cases, 399 resulted in judgments (46 were by default, 116 were by court order, and 237 were stipulated). Eleven percent of the EPIC cases resulted in default judgments.
  o For the 581 non-EPIC cases, 439 cases resulted in judgments (284 were by default, 63 were by court order, and 92 were stipulated). Sixty-five percent of the non-EPIC cases resulted in default judgments.
  o Almost all judgments in the EPIC cases were based on income data; nearly 20 percent of the judgments in the non-EPIC cases were based on presumed income.
  o The alternative outreach strategies for the EPIC cases resulted in more than 70 percent of the parents participating in the order establishment process, thereby eliminating the need to serve notice. By contrast, the participation rate for non-EPIC cases was less than 8 percent. For 79 percent of the non-EPIC cases that received judgments (123 of the total 155 cases), it was only after being served that the parent became engaged in the establishment process.
  o Over a three-quarter tracking period in 2006, custodial parents in the EPIC treatment group received a combined total of $52,987.50 more than the custodial parents in non-EPIC cases.

  • Among the ongoing projects, a Colorado Division of Child Support Enforcement project being implemented in Denver and Laramer Counties from 2008-2011, will:

    o automatically modify orders for incarcerated obligors;
    o compromise arrears and promote payment in cases with continuing obligation; and
    o compromise and close cases when State debt is all that is owed and there are no current support obligations.

For incarcerated obligors sentenced to two years or more, a system will be put into place for the rapid establishment of minimum child support orders of $50 per month unless parties object. In addition, cases with proven uncollectible arrears owed to the State but with current obligations as well will be identified and payment terms and compromise policies will be developed. For cases with arrears-only obligations, procedures to arrange for payments and write-offs aimed at discharging uncollectible debt and closing cases will be established.

The Center for Labor Market Studies has released a report that outlines the employment, earnings, incarceration rates, teen and young adult parenting experiences and family incomes of the nation’s young adult high school dropouts, comparing this to their better-educated peers in 2006 to 2008.

- In 2008, the average jobless rate for high school dropouts was 54 percent. Their employment rate of 46 percent was 22 percent below that for high school graduates, and 41 percent below that for college graduates.
- Black dropouts were the least likely to be employed (31 percent), followed by Asians (43 percent), Whites (46 percent), and Hispanics (53 percent).
- Mean annual earnings for young dropouts in 2007 were only $8,358, well below the average of $15,149 for all young adults. Young adults with a bachelor’s degree obtained mean earnings of approximately $24,800, three times as high as that of young high school dropouts.
- Young female dropouts were more than six times as likely to have given birth, and nearly nine times as likely to have become single mothers, as their peers who were college students or graduates.
- Nearly 1 of every 10 young male high school dropouts was institutionalized on a given day in 2006-2007, compared to a rate of less than 1 of 33 high school graduates, 1 of 100 of out-of-school young men who completed 1-3 years of post-secondary schooling, and 1 of 500 men who held a bachelor’s or higher degree. Nearly 93 percent of these institutionalized young adults were residing in correctional facilities (jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers).
- Approximately 23 of every 100 young African American male adults who had dropped out of high school were institutionalized, compared to a rate of 6 to 7 of every 100 for Asians, Hispanics, and Whites.
- For all young males, high school dropouts were 47 times more likely to be incarcerated than their similar-aged peers who held a four-year college degree.
- The lifetime net fiscal contribution for young adults aged 18-26 is negative for the average high school dropout, costing the economy nearly $5,200, due to lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs, and incarceration costs. By contrast, a high school graduate will generate a positive lifetime net fiscal contribution of $287,000. The lifetime fiscal contribution of a college graduate is estimated to be $793,079.

Child Support in the News

• State Supreme Courts in West Virginia and Alabama have both recently ruled that parents who relinquish their parental rights are still obligated to pay child support, setting a legal precedent in both states. In Alabama, the ruling overruled a state appeals court decision that stated a parent who lost rights to a child was no longer required to pay child support. The court felt that neglectful parents could be rewarded for their behavior if they were not required to support the children they no longer had legal rights to see.

• An increasing number of requests for modifications to child support orders brought on by the current economy, and the inability of noncustodial parents to meet their current child support obligations, has led the Arizona Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) to implement a new modification system. DCSE is scheduling four workshops in a single day each month at which up to ten couples appear. DCSE contacts those who have submitted modification requests, and schedules the appearances. When both parties to a case show up, staff can obtain a stipulated modification and file it with the court. If only one party attends or if the parties cannot reach an agreement, any relevant information is gathered and the parties are asked to sign an acceptance of service by mail to reduce service of process costs; staff then file a modification request with the court.

In an example of the workshop’s results, one Maricopa County office workshop scheduled 35 cases, filed an action with the court for 30 cases of which 10 were stipulations, 18 were requests to modify, one resulted in a termination request, and one in the establishment of a child support order. One was still pending, and the remaining four were not appropriate for a modification. At no additional cost, 34 of 35 requests were resolved within two weeks.

• A Smith County, Texas probation department employee has been sentenced to eight years in state prison for felony theft by a public servant. The employee, Glenda Everett-Olvera worked with Spanish-speaking fathers who had to pay their child support as a condition of probation. Instead of processing their payments made via money orders, Ms. Everett-Olvera made them payable to herself, resulting in financial hardship for the affected mothers and children, and to false accusations of nonpayment against the fathers. At least 26 money orders were altered, and nine men and their families were affected.

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