

## Chapter 2

# Program Implementation

Victoria Mayer and Thomas Kaplan, with Andrea Robles

During the program implementation phase covered by this report, calendar year 2002, the child support pass-through policy and the W-2 program in which it was embedded were more stable and mature than they had been during our first implementation study two years earlier. The CSDE and W-2 have been operating since fall 1997. The W-2 agencies, which in Milwaukee were completely new to public assistance program administration when W-2 began, had four to five years to settle into a working routine before we began this second phase of the implementation study. The environment was not perfectly stable—two of the Milwaukee W-2 agencies (UMOS and Y-Works) assumed an additional service region at the beginning of 2002—but the agencies had operated W-2 long enough to fully understand state requirements and develop standard protocols.

We used two primary strategies to study implementation in this second phase. The first strategy involved a survey of W-2 case managers (Financial and Employment Planners, or FEPs) in all six Milwaukee County W-2 regions during April and May 2002. The survey was directly administered by IRP staff in the offices at each region, and respondents took an average of about 30 minutes to fill in their responses on a written form. The second strategy involved semi-structured interviews, conducted primarily during August and September 2002, with staff from child support and W-2 agencies located in two Milwaukee regions and in five smaller counties across the state; the total number of people interviewed was 43. The survey and the interviews occurred during different phases of CSDE policy. During the survey period, all new applicants to W-2 received the full pass-through, but applicants previously assigned to the partial pass-through continued under that policy regime. By the time of the interviews later in 2002, all W-2 participants—including those originally assigned to the partial pass-through group—received the full pass-through.

Our reasons for focusing the survey effort on Milwaukee County were (1) that some 80 percent of W-2 program participants reside in Milwaukee County, so an investigation of Milwaukee will address implementation as most W-2 participants in the state have experienced it, and (2) obtaining a reasonable survey response rate requires repeated visits to W-2 agencies, and we were only staffed to make those visits to the agencies in Milwaukee County. A total of 95 FEPs responded to the survey. Based on repeated queries of W-2 agency managers, we believe that there were 133 FEPs in the county at that time (April–May 2002). The 95 respondents thus represented a 71 percent response rate, although we believe this to be a low estimate because an unidentified number of the nonrespondents managed only a Food Stamp Employment and Training caseload and worked with neither the W-2 program nor the CSDE.<sup>9</sup>

For the Phase 1 study we had conducted a survey of Milwaukee FEPs in July 2000. That survey had a comparable response rate (91 of 125, or 73 percent). Although the two surveys were not intended to be identical, some of the same questions were asked, permitting us to measure changes over the intervening 22 months on some topics. We organize our discussion of the survey responses of FEPs

---

<sup>9</sup>By agency and region, the response rates were: Y-Works Region 1: 10 of 14 (71.4 percent); Y-Works Region 4: 17 of 24 (70.8 percent); Y-Works total: 27 of 38 (71.1 percent); UMOS Region 2: 14 of 18 (77.8 percent); UMOS Region 5: 13 of 25 (52.0 percent); UMOS total: 27 of 43 (62.8 percent); OIC Region 3: 23 of 25 (92.0 percent); MAXIMUS Region 6: 18 of 27 (66.7 percent).

under two headings, one covering survey responses that address the CSDE and the full pass-through and one covering survey responses concerning W-2 more generally. Readers who are interested only in the CSDE and full pass-through may wish to skip over the next section of this chapter, which covers FEP responses to questions about the W-2 program in which the CSDE and full pass-through were embedded.

### **Survey Responses of Milwaukee FEPs: The W-2 Program**

Given the busy schedule of FEPs and the rare opportunities to ask them to complete a survey form, we decided to ask general questions about W-2, as well as about the CSDE and the full pass-through. This section describes the responses of Milwaukee FEPs to questions concerning W-2. As noted above, we compare when possible FEP responses in the 2002 survey to responses to the survey administered in 2000.

#### Experience as a FEP

As might be expected, FEPs responding to the spring 2002 survey had more experience in their FEP role than was the case for respondents to the July 2000 survey: the mean amount of time as a FEP was 2.6 years among the second survey respondents, compared to 1.9 years in the first, a difference that was statistically significant.<sup>10</sup>

#### Caseload Size

Overall, the total mean caseload per FEP was approximately constant in the two surveys (56.4 in the first survey and 58.2 in the second). However, the composition of their caseloads was quite different: FEPs responding to the second survey had fewer Unsubsidized Job cases that were working or looking for work and receiving no financial subsidy (the mean number of such cases in the first survey was 17.0 and in the second survey was 10.1) but many more Community Service Job (CSJ) cases.<sup>11</sup> The number of full-time CSJ cases per FEP rose from a mean of 22 in the first survey to a mean of nearly 29 in the second survey, a difference that was statistically significant, while the number of part-time (one-third, one-half, or two-thirds time) CSJs also rose from around 1.7 per FEP in the first survey to 2.4 per FEP in the second survey. The number of cases in the Transition tier remained constant over the two surveys (a mean of 13.6 in the first survey and 12.6 in the second, but the difference was not statistically significant), and the mean number of cases receiving benefits as Caretaker of Newborn per FEP also remained approximately constant (about 3.5 per FEP in each survey). These caseloads reported in the survey are generally consistent with administrative data on program participants in various caseload categories. The number of Milwaukee W-2 participants who were coded in administrative data as Community Service Job participants grew from 3,000 in July 2000 to 5,271 in May 2002, and the number of Milwaukee cases in Unsubsidized Jobs declined from 3,107 to 2,230 in that period.

---

<sup>10</sup>Unless otherwise specified, all discussions of statistical significance in this chapter are at the .05 probability level.

<sup>11</sup>The question on case management caseloads asked respondents to indicate the approximate number of their cases that were coded CMF (Case Management-Followup), CMS (Case Management-Services), CMU (Case Management-Unsubsidized), and CMM (Case Management-Minor Parent).

### Caseload Needs

Although FEPs served more grant-receiving program participants (who presumably have greater needs than do those in the Unsubsidized Job tier), FEPs did not generally report that their cases had more needs in the second survey than in the first. Responding to a series of questions about their caseloads, about the same percentages in both surveys said that at least half their caseloads had weak or problematic work histories, weak English skills, had not graduated from high school, had “little or no desire to work,” had chronic physical or mental conditions, temporary personal or family conditions (such as legal obligations) that might interfere with work, or were caring for a family member with disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

### Supplemental Services

FEPs in the second survey did, however, report that a higher percentage of their caseload worked with specialists for various needs than had been the case in the first survey. Slightly more than 30 percent of FEPs in the 2002 survey reported that at least half their caseload “works with mental health specialists as part of their treatment plan,” whereas just 18 percent of FEPs said that in the 2000 survey. The proportion of FEPs who said that at least half their caseload “works with substance abuse specialists as part of their current W-2 plan” rose from 10 percent in 2000 to 20 percent in 2002. Although low in both surveys, the percentage of FEPs who said that at least half their caseload “works with domestic violence specialists as part of their current W-2 plan” rose from 1 percent in the first survey to 5 percent in the second survey.<sup>13</sup>

### FEP Activities

Because the second survey was fielded after W-2 training programs, policies, and practices had stabilized, the 2002 survey asked FEPs for their assessments of some W-2 policies and to report on their daily practice. We asked how much time FEPs spend on a variety of tasks in a “typical month.” Table 2.1 shows the results of this question. (The term “customer” is used in the tables because it is preferred by FEPs.)

---

<sup>12</sup>The possible response categories were “none,” “less than half,” “about half,” “more than half,” and “all.” For simplicity, we compare the percentage of respondents in the two surveys who checked “about half,” “more than half,” or “all,” but responses in the two surveys were similar in each of the individual categories as well as for the three categories combined.

<sup>13</sup>The difference concerning reported use of mental health specialists was significant at the .05 probability level; the difference concerning reported use of substance abuse treatment specialists was significant at the .10 probability level.

**TABLE 2.1**  
**FEP Activities in a “Typical” Month**

Activity	Mean Percentage of Time Devoted to the Activity
Meeting personally with customers	39.9%
Inputting CARES data when customers are not present	15.7
Meeting with other staff	13.7
Other paperwork without customers present	10.7
Talking with customers on the phone	10.3
Working on extensions and decisions not to extend	6.7
Other activities	3.0

**Source:** Survey of W-2 FEPs in Milwaukee County, Institute for Research on Poverty, April–May, 2002.

**Note:** Because FEPs also spend time inputting data when customers are present, this table understates the total attention devoted to inputting data into CARES.

As the table indicates, FEPs reported that they spent about half their time in direct contact with their customers, either in person or on the phone. They reported spending about 16 percent of their time inputting data into CARES when customers were not present, about 17 percent of their time on paperwork, including work on extensions or nonextensions for customers nearing time limits,<sup>14</sup> and about 14 percent of their time in meetings with staff in their own or other agencies. Given concerns expressed at the time over the burdens of the extension/nonextension process, we had expected that FEPs might report that process as consuming a higher share of time, although the nearly 7 percent reported is certainly not a trivial investment of effort.

In their time spent talking directly with customers, time limits and the employability plan appear to be the most frequently discussed subjects. Some 93 percent of the FEPs reported that they “always” or “frequently” discussed time limits with their customers, and 94 percent of the FEPs reported that they used meetings and discussions with customers after the initial intake interview to modify employability plans. However, family and other subjects less directly related to time limits and employment came up as well. Table 2.2 shows the percentage of FEPs who reported that they discussed the following family-related issues with at least half their customers.

---

<sup>14</sup>The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development requires W-2 agencies to submit written justifications for customers nearing the end of a time limit both if the agency wishes to extend the time limit and if the agency does not seek an extension.

**TABLE 2.2**  
**Family-Related Issues Arising in FEP Discussions with Customers**

Issue	Percentage of FEPs Reporting That They Spend Time Discussing the Issue with at Least Half Their Customers
School performance of customers' children	43.2%
Legal concerns faced by customers	42.1
Transportation to child care	33.7
Obtaining a driver's license	27.4
Youth programs for children	26.3
Preventing future pregnancies	23.2
Health care insurance or providers	22.1
Legal concerns faced by other members of customers' family	17.9
Getting married	10.5

**Source:** Survey of W-2 FEPs in Milwaukee County, Institute for Research on Poverty, April–May, 2002.

The most commonly discussed “family issues” are school performance and legal concerns.<sup>15</sup> Although several national political figures have expressed preferences for the development of TANF-funded programs aimed at increasing marriage among TANF participants, relatively few FEPs in Milwaukee appear to discuss that subject with their customers.

#### Assessment of Customer Needs

Milwaukee FEPs are in general confident that they know what their customers need to move toward economic self-sufficiency. Some 93 percent of respondents “strongly” or “moderately” agreed with the statement that “I generally know what services my customers need to move toward economic self-sufficiency.” About 77 percent “strongly” or “moderately” agreed that “I can generally obtain any assessment I need for my customers,” and 91 percent “strongly” or “moderately” agreed with a statement that the assessments they can obtain “are very helpful for determining whether my customers are job ready.”

We also asked FEPs about their level of satisfaction with various program resources, services, and training available to their customers. The results are shown in Table 2.3.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Health care might have been a more common topic of discussion except that Medicaid eligibility in Milwaukee is determined through interactions with county-employed Supportive Service Planners, not W-2 FEPs.

<sup>16</sup>Because this question was asked only in the survey administered in 2002, and not in the survey of 2000, it is not possible to show a comparison over time.

**TABLE 2.3**  
**FEP Assessments of Service Availability and Quality**

	Percentage Saying Service Is Frequently or Always Available When Needed	Percentage Saying They Are Satisfied or Moderately Satisfied with Service Quality
Adult basic education	84.2%	74.7%
Child care assistance	79.0	80.0
Employment search	74.7	60.0
GED training	71.6	72.6
Work experience	70.5	59.0
Transportation assistance for customers	68.4	82.1
Job readiness/motivational training	66.3	77.9
Employment counseling	63.2	63.2
Mental health counseling	63.2	76.8
Substance abuse counseling/treatment	56.8	75.8
Domestic violence counseling	52.6	71.6
Literacy skills training	51.6	62.2
Child care worker training	49.5	70.5
Housing assistance	48.4	57.9
Certified nurse assistance training	44.2	69.5
Clerical training	41.1	63.2
Parenting/life skills training	33.7	65.3
English as a second language training	28.4	47.4
Physical rehabilitation	27.4	53.7
Industrial work training	24.2	53.7
Transportation assistance for child care	24.2	59.0
Driver's education	23.2	46.3

**Source:** Survey of W-2 FEPs in Milwaukee County, Institute for Research on Poverty, April–May, 2002.

The least available services appear to be English as a second language, physical rehabilitation, industrial work training, transportation assistance for child care, and driver's education. FEPs are generally at least moderately satisfied with all the services, except that fewer than half of all respondents said they were at least moderately satisfied with English as a second language and driver's education services. Only 50 to 60 percent of FEPs were at least moderately satisfied with housing assistance, physical rehabilitation, industrial work training, work experience, and transportation assistance for child care.

## Survey Responses of Milwaukee FEPs: The CSDE and Full Pass-Through

### Knowledge of the CSDE

As did the first survey, the survey administered in 2002 asked about knowledge of, and attitudes toward, the CSDE. The same CSDE policies were operating at the time of both surveys: new applicants were all being assigned to receive the full pass-through, but those who had previously been assigned to the partial pass-through, including participants who left W-2 and then returned to the program, continued under the partial pass-through if they received a W-2 grant.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, by the time of the second survey, a longer time had elapsed since the state's intensive training on the pass-through in January 1999. Because one question on the survey asked respondents to indicate the year and month in which they became a FEP, we could estimate that over 60 percent of the FEPs responding to the second survey had been hired as FEPs after those intensive training sessions. With that level of relatively recent hires, it is perhaps not surprising that FEP understanding of the pass-through, never so great as would have been desirable for ideal implementation, declined between the two surveys. In July 2000, when asked whether participants who first applied for W-2 after June 1999 would receive all child support paid on their behalf or something less, 45 percent correctly answered the question. In the April–May 2002 survey, the percentage correctly answering the question declined to 26 percent.<sup>18</sup>

### Discussions Concerning the CSDE between FEPs and W-2 Program Participants

As was the case in the first survey, the pass-through was not a common subject of conversation between FEPs and program participants. In the 2002 survey, only 13 percent of FEPs reported that they had discussed the pass-through with any ongoing W-2 participant in the last month, and only about a third reported that a W-2 participant had *ever* asked about the pass-through policy. In the 2000 survey, responding to a question that was phrased slightly differently, 24 percent of FEPs reported that they had discussed the pass-through with any participant (new or ongoing) in the past month.

### FEP Assessments of the CSDE

The lack of discussion does not appear to stem from more negative perceptions of the pass-through among FEPs. If anything, their assessment of the pass-through was slightly more positive than was the case among the 2000 sample, although the changes between 2000 and 2002 on the relevant questions were not statistically significant. Whereas 44 percent of the 2000 sample said it was completely or somewhat true that “receiving child support payments of more than \$50 per month helps CSJ participants to prepare for finding and keeping a job,” that proportion had increased to 55 percent in 2002. Similarly, whereas 39 percent of the 2000 sample said it was “completely” or “somewhat” true that “receiving child support payments of more than \$50 per month reduces the motivation of CSJ participants” to engage in their program, that proportion fell to 35 percent in 2002. As the last finding indicates, more than a third of FEPs in both surveys had some reservations about the pass-through, and

---

<sup>17</sup>By the time of the second survey in April–May 2002, however, the state had announced that the experiment would end in July 2002 and that participants assigned to the partial pass-through group would receive the full pass-through starting on July 1, 2002. Moreover, by the time of the second survey a smaller proportion of the total caseload was subject to the reduced pass-through.

<sup>18</sup>The difference between the percentage of correct respondents in the first and second surveys is statistically significant.

this concern was also expressed in answers to another survey question: in each survey, about 46 percent of FEPs said that “receiving child support payments of more than \$50 per month makes sanctions for nonparticipation less effective at promoting attendance.”

### **Interview-Based Research**

We also sought to understand program implementation through the use of a series of semi-structured interviews of 29 W-2 staff, 13 child support staff, and one family court commissioner. Most of the interviews were conducted during August and September 2002.

#### Who Was Interviewed?

Lengthy interviews were conducted with staff members of child support and W-2 agencies located in two Milwaukee regions and in five smaller counties. In each of the W-2 agencies outside of Milwaukee, we interviewed FEPs and the agency administrator.<sup>19</sup> The interviews with FEPs asked them to assess the effects of the CSDE experiment on their case management work and on the record keeping required to document that work. We also asked them to relate to us what they told program participants about child support and what kinds of questions or responses W-2 participants raised in these discussions. We wanted to know how they had handled questions or objections concerning the arrangement of child support payments and what sources of information they could utilize if they did not know the answer to a question. Finally, we asked them to evaluate the importance of establishing a child support order for the families they served.

We asked the W-2 administrators many of these same questions, and we also asked them to discuss the different sources of support utilized by the low-income families that come to their agency and describe what steps participants and agency staff undertake to coordinate the services available from these different sources.<sup>20</sup> Although we found some variation among agencies, the answers provided by administrators and FEPs to the same questions within the same agency were generally complementary if not identical.

In Milwaukee County, we also interviewed W-2 agency Resource Specialists and supervisors of county-employed Supportive Service Planners (SSPs), because these staff play potentially key roles in the implementation of the CSDE in Milwaukee. Outside of Milwaukee, county employees generally administer both W-2 and other support programs such as Food Stamps and Medicaid. In Milwaukee County, the state currently contracts with four private organizations to provide W-2 services in the county’s six W-2 regions.<sup>21</sup> Because federal law stipulates that only public employees may determine eligibility for Food Stamps and Medicaid, W-2 participants living in Milwaukee County must see both a county employee and a private agency FEP to establish and maintain their eligibility for W-2 and other

---

<sup>19</sup>We interviewed two or more FEPs at each W-2 agency, with the exception of two agencies in smaller counties where we spoke to one FEP and the program administrator.

<sup>20</sup>When possible we interviewed case managers (FEPs) and administrators separately; however, this was not possible in two of the agencies we visited.

<sup>21</sup>Private organizations administer the W-2 program in several other counties; however, they were not included in our study.



assistance programs. Before meeting with either a county SSP or a W-2 agency FEP, Milwaukee residents interested in applying for cash assistance first meet with an agency Resource Specialist. These staff members inform applicants of other resources available at the Job Center and throughout the community. They are also the first to explain the W-2 program requirements to applicants, including the obligation to cooperate with the local child support agency.

We also interviewed county child support administrators. From earlier work in phase one of the CSDE study, we had learned that many child support caseworkers have little contact with custodial parents once paternity is established. W-2 staff, rather than child support caseworkers, were expected to explain the appropriate child support pass-through policy to custodial parents applying for cash assistance. For this phase of the study, we focused our interviews with child support administrators on explorations of how the transition to the full pass-through had affected the processing of child support cases and the agency's workload: had the full pass-through affected the demand for the child support agency's services or the way that staff interacted with custodial or noncustodial parents? We also asked if the transition to the full pass-through had affected courtroom proceedings or the rulings of the judicial officials who hear the child support cases in their county. Finally, to check our findings from the earlier study, we asked child support administrators how custodial parents had been informed of the appropriate pass-through policy, and if they thought that most parents now expected to receive all current child support payments.

We devoted extra resources to interviewing Milwaukee County child support staff, in part because staff members in that agency handle nearly 42 percent of the total caseload of Wisconsin's public child support agencies. Knowing that some Milwaukee County child support staff members interacted with large numbers of custodial parents through telephone conversations or face-to-face appointments, we interviewed nonsupervisory staff as well as managers in that county, including the agency's chief legal counsel, a customer service phone operator, child support caseworkers stationed at the W-2 agencies' regional job centers, and the director and deputy director of the child support agency.

In each set of interviews, our primary objective was to investigate the implementation of the pass-through experiment. However, because an understanding of the larger policy environment helped us assess the impact of the transition to the full pass-through, we also used observations and interviews conducted during a two-week visit to a large job center in February 2002 to provide a fuller picture of the challenges and advantages of implementing the experiment within the structure of W-2. Finally, we interviewed a former president of the Association of Family Court Commissioners in October 2002 to explore how the county family court commissioners had perceived the effects of the change to the full pass-through.

For the most part interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.<sup>22</sup> We entered transcriptions and written notes of the interviewer into a software program designed to facilitate coding and retrieval of qualitative data. We coded the data using categories derived from the goals of the implementation study and topics of related interest raised by respondents. We include a diagram of the coding scheme we used in Appendix 5.

---

<sup>22</sup>We asked respondents for permission to tape record the interviews. In one case where the respondents preferred that we not tape the interview, we rely on written notes made by the interviewer.

### Staff Assessments of the Full Pass-Through Policy

Staff from W-2 and child support agencies unanimously recommended giving custodial parents all child support payments that the state collects from noncustodial parents. Those who expressed any misgivings about the CSDE did so primarily because the policy did not apply to all W-2 participants until the experiment ended in July 2002.

The assessments were positive despite the fact that the full pass-through affected relatively few custodial parents. As a result of the dramatic decline in cash assistance cases from 1987 through 1997, only a small percentage of low-income families receive cash benefits in Wisconsin. Of those families for whom the pass-through change was potentially relevant, an even smaller number received large enough child support payments to experience a direct economic effect of the change to passing through all child support money collected.<sup>23</sup> W-2 administrators working with poor families in economically depressed rural and urban areas noted that often, when custodial parents are unable to support their children without government support, the noncustodial parent's additional earning capacity is also low. One said:

You know, we try to stress the importance of getting child support collected, because certainly as a percentage of an income it's still significant, if you're low income regardless of what it is. But we see the other side of this so much also, with the noncustodial parent program, where you've got the same situation, you're [working with] more or less resource-bare people, and really needing to work with them in the same way a lot of times that you do with your W-2 people. There's no difference. You know, everybody needs the same thing. You need a job, you need some skills, it's all the same. And the kind of jobs that people are getting are, you know, are on the lower end of the employment scale.

Nevertheless, W-2 case managers reported seeing real benefits of the policy change for families receiving regular child support payments. When we asked W-2 case managers and administrators to assess the economic significance of full child support payments for the families with whom they worked, respondents across the state discussed the importance of arranging child support in the new policy environment. Case managers described the strategic choices facing custodial parents who needed to combine multiple sources of support to provide for their families. Many reported that entry-level wages, W-2 cash benefits, or Social Security disability benefits were just too low to support a family even if the parent was receiving Food Stamps and housing assistance. Child support was viewed as necessary both to augment low income levels and to buffer the family's economic situation during periods of transition from work to W-2, from W-2 to work, or from one low-wage job to another. Respondents provided examples of how child support payments facilitated their case management work. Some described how child support payments had allowed participants to purchase items required for starting a new job, or to arrange care for a sick child so they could continue to meet their obligations; others described how child support helped participants to make ends meet while they were waiting for their first cash benefit or looking for a new job.

---

<sup>23</sup>In many cases the noncustodial parents of children living in very low income families do not make large child support payments and those custodial parents who do receive large child support payments regularly may be less likely to enroll in the W-2 program.

In short, even when the child support payment was too small to lift a family out of poverty or cover regular monthly expenses like rent or utility bills, several FEPs said that the full pass-through still helped custodial parents to create an important financial buffer against one-time expenses that might have otherwise put the family in crisis or discouraged the parent from taking a new job with greater potential rewards but also initial expenses for clothing or other items. Several FEPs also said that any reductions in the number of participants in financial crisis eased the overall demands on their time and allowed them to concentrate on helping more participants pursue long-term solutions to their economic problems.

Case managers outside Milwaukee were generally more optimistic about the potential receipt of child support, suggesting that many of the custodial parents they worked with would not be in such dire economic circumstances if the noncustodial parent were fulfilling his or her obligation to provide support for the children. This more optimistic assessment of the potential benefits that could be realized from child support payments was consistent with these respondents' higher estimates of the percentage of their customers who received such payments and also consistent with administrative data on child support collections in Milwaukee County and the rest of the state.<sup>24</sup> The difference in assessments might also reflect the different composition of cases being managed: FEPs in Milwaukee work only with women who have had to apply for W-2, whereas case managers in other regions also work with families who receive only Food Stamps, Medicaid, and other noncash benefits

W-2 FEPs and program administrators familiar with AFDC also favored the CSDE policy of excluding child support income from the calculation used to determine eligibility for W-2. They described how the necessity under AFDC to estimate volatile child support payments prospectively when calculating benefit levels (although the potential monthly range was only \$0 to \$50) had created budgeting problems for families receiving cash assistance and bookkeeping nightmares for income maintenance staff. This problem still arises in the Food Stamp program: income maintenance staff discussed the difficulty of estimating fluctuating child support payments to determine Food Stamp eligibility and benefit levels in an environment in which local public assistance agencies may be penalized for calculation errors. The most negative comment we heard about the full pass-through was that this problem of estimating child support is now more severe than it was before, since potential child support payments are not limited (for cash assistance cases) to \$50 per month.

In summary, the respondents we visited in this round of interviews unanimously supported the transition to the full pass-through. They also recommended disregarding child support payments when determining W-2 eligibility. Although the policy change may have had a direct economic effect on only a relatively small percentage of low-income families living in the state and sparked little comment from the press, our respondents reported that the change to the full-pass was important for the families that did receive additional money and that the full pass-through facilitated the work of W-2 case managers.

### CSDE Implementation Challenges

The implementation of the CSDE as an experiment was far from flawless. The experiment required that custodial parents applying for W-2 cash assistance be randomly assigned to one of two possible treatment groups. Ideally, the custodial parents would comprehend the consequences of that

---

<sup>24</sup>In 2001, 50.9 percent of the fathers connected to mothers on W-2 in Milwaukee County paid some child support; the comparable percentage of fathers paying child support in the remainder of the state was 64.0.

assignment for their families, and noncustodial parents would also be informed of the policy's consequences for their children. In the final report from the first phase of the CSDE, we noted several features of the experiment that had hindered the state's attempts to insure that these conditions were met. In this section we reassess the significance of each of these factors using retrospective accounts provided by our respondents, and we track new developments in these areas that appear to have occurred after the first phase of the study.

### *Policy Complexity and Staff Understanding*

In interviews conducted in the spring of 1998, we found that few Milwaukee W-2 case managers understood or discussed the full pass-through experiment with their cases. However, intensive training sessions were held in January 1999. By March and April of 1999, when we conducted a statewide survey, just over 50 percent of Milwaukee FEPs demonstrated a proficient knowledge of the program. Moreover, the Resource Specialists in these agencies had by that time started to discuss the child support demonstration evaluation and complete the notice of assignment forms with applicants.

Staff understanding was short-lived, however. When we conducted our recent round of interviews, in the fall of 2002, few case managers at either the Milwaukee agencies or the five other agencies in our sample were able to describe the experiment correctly. Respondents' attempts to recall the details of the program illustrated the memory problems created by the complexity of the experiment. The assignment of applicants to one of three different categories (control, experimental, and not originally eligible for the evaluation) but only one of two different treatment regimes (full pass-through or partial pass-through) appeared to confuse respondents' efforts to describe the appropriate policy treatment that went with each category. Subjecting participants in the control group to two different maximums (either \$50 or 41 percent of the amount paid, whichever was larger) also seemed to add to the confusion. Lack of understanding in the fall of 2002 was perhaps not surprising: assignment of new W-2 participants had ended four years earlier, and even those initially assigned to the partial pass-through group would become eligible to receive the full support payment after July 2002. Yet it is likely that the same complexities that hampered respondents' efforts to recall the program also served to complicate their attempts to explain the program to new applicants when individuals were first assigned in the late 1990s, and may also have limited clients' abilities to comprehend and remember the appropriate pass-through policy.

### *Communicating the Policy to W-2 Applicants*

The state prepared simple brochures that explain each treatment regime, and W-2 agency staff were to give each applicant the brochure appropriate to her pass-through status. Ideally, an applicant would receive the correct brochure, and only that brochure, but the ideal depended on the ability of agency staff to use the CARES system to determine each applicant's pass-through status. According to the 1999 Survey of W-2 FEPs, some 72 percent of the FEPs who were surveyed statewide (but only 54 percent in Milwaukee) could identify where in the CARES data system the assignment code could be found, and 72 percent of statewide FEPs (52 percent in Milwaukee) also knew the CARES code that indicated partial pass-through status. Although the percentages in Milwaukee were lower than in the rest of the state, Resource Specialists in the Milwaukee W-2 agencies were also assigned to discuss the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation and to notify prospective applicants of their pass-through status. As reported earlier, our interviews with Resource Specialists indicated that by early 1999 they were generally familiar with the CSDE and could explain the ramifications of the pass-through to potential applicants.

In addition to providing applicants with the appropriate brochure, W-2 agency staff were to supervise applicants' signature of a form that assigned their child support to the state and that indicated the applicant's pass-through status. The first set of forms distributed by the state, however, failed to discriminate among the different treatments, and some agencies did not receive the revised forms until spring 1999. Thus, although the majority of participants in the W-2 program who applied in 1999 were provided an explanation of the CSDE and notified of their pass-through status, communication of the appropriate treatment regime to those entering the program in late 1997 or 1998 was often not completed as planned.

Even in those agencies where applicants completed the correct form and received the correct brochure from the beginning, our respondents questioned whether program participants read and understood what they were signing. The respondents said that many individuals apply for W-2 only when they have reached a point of crisis, and often appear distracted by the problems that brought them to the agency. The notice of assignment and pass-through brochure are just two among a handful of documents that custodial parents receive at the time of application. Because these forms, unlike some of the other forms, do not specify immediate action that the custodial parent must take in order to enroll in the program, they probably receive less attention.

A further implementation complexity was the timing of the experiment, staged to start at the same time as the W-2 program. The beginning of the W-2 program posed new challenges and required additional effort across the state, but especially in Milwaukee, where the private agencies had to develop new organizational capacities, hire and train case managers in the intricacies of administering the new program and utilizing the CARES database, and enroll hundreds of participants in the new program.

Just as case managers needed to focus on learning the details of administering the new W-2 program, applicants were also faced with massive amounts of new information and new requirements. W-2 case managers and administrators described the difficulty of explaining the experiment to new applicants under these conditions. According to our respondents, if the pass-through policy was not immediately relevant to custodial parents, many of them forgot the details of their assignment status until they started to receive regular child support payments. Retrospective accounts related by W-2 case managers suggest that agencies managing smaller caseloads were better able to prepare custodial parents for the transition to the new program rules before they enrolled. Workers in these agencies described discussions they had with custodial parents who were receiving regular child support payments to advise them how the new pass-through rules would affect their child support if they were to enroll in the W-2 program. The Milwaukee agencies each had to transition hundreds of participants from AFDC to W-2, and these large numbers prevented the Milwaukee case managers from providing the individualized attention to families transitioning onto their W-2 caseloads that smaller counties could often provide.

Observing interactions between caseworkers and participants in one of the Milwaukee W-2 agencies in 2002, we noted that the amount of new information that had to be exchanged at each meeting dropped significantly once participants were enrolled in W-2. If FEPs had reviewed the pass-through policy again in subsequent meetings, participants might have developed a better understanding of the treatment group to which they had been assigned and its potential ramifications for their economic situation. Case managers in the other five counties we investigated, where FEPs handled other programs in addition to W-2, reported that they discussed child support regularly with the participants they supervised. The Milwaukee FEPs whom we interviewed, however, reported that they rarely discussed the pass-through in subsequent meetings unless participants were sanctioned for not cooperating with the child support agency or raised the issue themselves.

*Coordination Challenges in Milwaukee County*

It may be that the greater division of labor in implementing the CSDE in Milwaukee County contributed to the communication problems. During the initial phase of the experiment, workers from three different agencies had to coordinate their efforts to implement the CSDE. W-2 agency FEPs and Resource Specialists were supposed to inform applicants and participants about the pass-through treatment applicable to their families; child support workers (from the county Department of Child Support Enforcement) were supposed to bring participants into cooperation with the formal child support system or request a sanction when they could not; and county economic support workers (from the county Department of Human Services) were charged with entering and removing sanctions that prevented custodial parents from enrolling in public assistance programs should they fail to cooperate with the local child support agency. County economic support workers were also responsible for budgeting child support income to determine Food Stamp eligibility and benefit levels.

Moreover, in the other counties we visited, where public caseworkers managed both W-2 and economic support programs, FEPs had greater access to information that was stored in the CARES and KIDS databases. FEPs in the private Milwaukee agencies were allowed access to only a limited set of CARES screens. Although the state required W-2 agencies to have procedures by which FEPs would have direct access to KIDS, our interviews indicated that FEPs in Milwaukee did not know they had this access and instead requested KIDS information from the county worker who managed the economic support programs for participants on their W-2 caseload. In most counties, the consolidation of economic support and W-2 program case management by the same agency and often the same worker may thus have facilitated the implementation of the experiment.

Some consolidation of responsibilities occurred in Milwaukee County in 2002, when county economic support workers rather than W-2 agency Resource Specialists were given responsibility to assure that program participants completed the notice of assignment form. W-2 agency Resource Specialists still notify applicants that they are required to cooperate with the child support agency to establish a support order, but they no longer discuss the child support pass-through policy before individuals start the application process.

Although each of the Milwaukee W-2 agencies contains one “outstationed” county child support paralegal worker employed by the county Department of Child Support Enforcement, these staff have from the beginning of the CSDE played little role in that program. All applicants for W-2 who do not have a child support case established for their children are scheduled to meet with the outstationed child support worker, who specializes in collecting information and preparing the paperwork needed to start the paternity establishment process. The child support paralegals at the W-2 offices can also check the KIDS system to see if a child support payment has been received for a given month and can provide forms that parents must complete to establish a child support order. However, like the paralegals from the paternity establishment unit at the main Milwaukee County child support office, the paralegals stationed in W-2 agencies reported that they refer questions about many aspects of the child support process unrelated to paternity establishment to the child support agency’s customer service telephone staff.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>The customer service telephone staff member we interviewed was quite knowledgeable about the details of the CSDE.

With the exception of one of the more experienced workers, the paralegals housed in the W-2 agencies reported that they did not discuss the pass-through policy with the custodial parents they saw, both because they thought it was premature if the woman had not yet established paternity, and because they were unsure how to check her pass-through status. Some of these staff did not know that the experiment had ended for new W-2 applicants, although the most senior worker we interviewed was quite familiar with CSDE policies and mentioned discussing the full pass-through with the small number of participants who still expected that the state would keep most of the child support money.

### Participant Understanding of Their CSDE Assignment

The Survey of Wisconsin Works Families, conducted in 1999 and 2000, included two questions designed to assess parents' understanding of the CSDE policy that applied to their child support cases.<sup>26</sup> Only 26 percent of mothers surveyed in 1999 correctly answered both questions, and there was no increase in knowledge between 1999 and 2000.

That survey conducted in 1999 and 2000 indicated that understanding of the CSDE was generally low among custodial parents. However, case managers and administrators interviewed in 2002 suggested that parental knowledge ran the full spectrum from substantial understanding (most likely to be the case among those who had already received some W-2 payments and child support) to complete indifference (custodial parents who did not expect the noncustodial parent ever to make child support payments, perhaps owing to jail/prison time, chronic unemployment, or death). Interviews with staff from W-2 and child support agencies also suggest that many custodial parents first appreciated the treatment regime that would apply to them when they began to receive child support payments while assigned to a W-2 payment position. We constructed the typology illustrated in Table 2.4 to characterize the possible relationships between mothers' expectations and treatment status among those custodial parents on W-2 who had some expectation that the noncustodial parent would make child support payments in the future.

Table 2.4 identifies four key categories of custodial parents in this group. The rows of the matrix divide mothers on the basis of their expectations about whether they would receive the full amount of child support paid or only some of it should the noncustodial parent begin to make child support payments to the state. The columns of the matrix represent the pass-through assignment of the custodial parent.

The matrix thus shows four groups:

1. Custodial parents assigned to the full pass-through who expected that they would receive all child support paid on behalf of their children.
2. Custodial parents assigned to the full pass-through who expected to receive up to \$50 per month.
3. Custodial parents assigned to the partial pass-through who expected to receive all child support paid on behalf of their children.

---

<sup>26</sup>The questions asked "if you were in a W-2 assignment where you received a check from W-2, would you receive all of the current child support paid by [name of the focal child's] father or would the state keep some of it?" and "if you were not receiving a check from W-2, would you receive all of the current child support paid by [name of the focal child's] father or would the state keep some of it?"

4. Custodial parents assigned to the partial pass-through who expected to receive up to \$50 per month.

**TABLE 2.4**  
**Typology of Incentive Expectations**

		CSDE Pass-Through Assignment	
		<i>Full Pass-Through Group</i>	<i>Partial Pass-Through Group</i>
Mothers' Child Support Expectations	<i>Expect to receive all child support collected</i>	1. Accurate expectation of larger child support pass-through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass-through matches mothers' expectations</li> <li>• Expectations fulfill experimental conditions</li> </ul>	3. Inaccurate expectation of larger child support pass-through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass-through less than mothers' expectations</li> <li>• Expectations do not fulfill experimental conditions</li> </ul>
	<i>Expect to receive up to \$50/month</i>	2. Inaccurate expectation of smaller child support pass-through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass-through surpasses mother's expectations</li> <li>• Lost incentive benefit for the experiment</li> </ul>	4. Accurate expectation of smaller child support pass-through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass-through matches mothers' expectations</li> <li>• Expectations fulfill experimental conditions</li> </ul>

As can be seen from Table 2.4, custodial parents in two of the four categories (1 and 4) would have held expectations that were consistent with the treatment their case should receive if child support were collected, whereas parents in the other two categories (2 and 3) would not have. Custodial parents assigned to receive the full pass-through but who thought they would receive only \$50 (Category 2) and those assigned to the partial pass-through group who had expected to receive all of the child support money collected (Category 3) would fail to understand the incentives that applied to them, creating a problem for the experiment. Category 3 participants would also create problems for caseworkers, who would find it difficult to explain why these participants were assigned to receive only part of their court-ordered child support payment. Because Category 3 participants would be more likely to contact the child support agency when they started to receive child support payments that did not match their expectations, reports from child support workers do not allow an accurate estimate of the percentage of custodial parents in each of the categories.

We re-analyzed the data from the 1999 Survey of Wisconsin Works Families for mothers who reported that they did not receive child support in 1998 to estimate the percentages of mothers who would fit into each of the four categories, based on their responses to this question: "If you were in a W-2 assignment where you received a check from W-2, would you receive all of the current child support <child's name> father paid or would the state keep some of it?" We report our findings from this analysis in Table 2.5, including an additional row to show the large number of respondents who answered "Do



Not Know” to this question.<sup>27</sup> As can be seen from the table of percentages, approximately 19% of the mothers assigned to receive the full-pass through expected that they would receive all current child support collected when surveyed in 1999, approximately 42% thinking that the state would keep some, and 39% answering that they did not know. This data suggests that there was a large lost incentive benefit for the experiment at that time. A larger percentage of mothers assigned to the partial pass-through group, approximately 52%, accurately expected a smaller child support pass-through. These survey results allow us to estimate the percentages of mothers in the different categories when they were surveyed in 1999.

**Table 2.5**  
**Child Support Expectations of Mothers Who Did Not Receive Child Support in 1998**  
**by CSDE Pass-Through Assignment (February-July 1999)**

Expectation as Indicated by Survey Response:	Full Pass-Through Group (N=682)	Partial Pass-Through Group (N= 702)
“Would Receive All”	19.2%	12.3%
“State Would Keep Some”	41.9	52.4
“Do Not Know”	39.0	35.3
Total	100.0	100.0

**Source:** 1999 Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

**Note:** Percentages are weighted.

The Full Pass-Through and Participant Cooperation with Child Support Requirements

Respondents were mixed in their assessments of the effectiveness of the full pass-through in increasing the willingness of custodial parents to cooperate with the formal child support system. Most FEPs whom we interviewed and the child support workers stationed in W-2 agencies in Milwaukee County thought that participants were more concerned about the possible loss of benefits that could result from being sanctioned for not cooperating with the child support agency than the possible advantages they might realize from the transition to the full pass-through.

The relationship between custodial parents and W-2 case managers is complex, but FEPs generally view a custodial parent’s provision of child support information about the noncustodial parent to be part of the information that agencies must gain to effectively serve clients. The CARES computer system requires that custodial parents provide detailed information about their financial situation, household composition, family relationships, health, education, job goals, and employment history. A

---

<sup>27</sup>Mothers assigned to receive the full pass-through who did not know that they would receive all current child support paid on their behalf failed to appreciate their full incentives, but they did not seem to us to be equivalent to mothers assigned to the full pass-through who expected to receive only some of the money collected. Hence, we have shown these mothers separately.

comment by one W-2 administrator illustrates how some view the collection of information about the noncustodial parent from the custodial parent as a natural extension of the process of information exchange:

[Child support] fits with W-2 because we are working with families. I think ... it fits because ... we are trying to, you know, the information we need about families, we need to find out...who the fathers are, who the mothers are, so I think it fits into the grand scheme of things as far as what we're looking for. Because then, what we can do is... help those customers more than they could on their own in pursuing child support ... if we know who to pursue.

Not all custodial parents are eager to cooperate with child support requirements. We did not ask FEPs to estimate the percentage of their participants who were reluctant to cooperate, but child support administrators estimated that between 5 and 25 percent of the child support agencies' public assistance cases consisted of custodial parents who were reluctant to pursue child support.<sup>28</sup> When asked to tell us more about discussions with custodial parents who did not want to pursue a formal child support order, W-2 case managers gave short accounts of their interactions with these parents, describing the concerns raised by the applicants and what they as case managers said to address these parents' concerns. We were able to identify two different sources of reluctance, and two accompanying types of case management response, in our interviews with W-2 staff members:

1. With women who were considered to be reluctant to pursue formal support because they did not want to have a relationship with the noncustodial parent, case managers followed one of two courses. If the resistance appeared to be related to issues of domestic violence, case managers referred the women to counseling services and discussed the option to apply for the "good-cause" exemption allowed under federal law if identifying the father could place the mother or children in danger. If domestic violence did not appear to be an issue, managers told the custodial parent that she had to put her own feelings aside.
2. Much more common, especially in Milwaukee, were interactions in which mothers said that they were reluctant to pursue child support because they did not want to alter their relationship with the father who, they reported, was already helping to care for the children. Case managers noted that applicants in this group often ask them why they "have to turn him in if he is helping me." In general, we found that case managers responded to this second type of objection with one or a combination of three strategies:
  - FEPs emphasized the need for financial security in an environment in which W-2 was time-limited. The custodial parent would need 18 years of support for each child, and W-2 would provide support for, at most, five years for all the children. Although the father might be cooperating with the mother for the present, only a court order could assure the permanence of that financial arrangement until the child became an adult.

---

<sup>28</sup>These estimates varied by county: the high of 25 percent was reported by administrators in Milwaukee County and the low of 5 percent was reported by an administrator from a less urban county.

- FEPs emphasized the required nature of the custodial parent's cooperation, thereby absolving her to some extent from the decision to involve the father in the formal child support system.
- FEPs suggested that if the father was already working with the mother, he should not be upset that she was cooperating because she could choose to redistribute all or part of the formal child support payment back to him.

### The Full Pass-Through and Relations between Child Support Agencies and Noncustodial Parents

As noted in the final report for CSDE Phase 1, with the start of the new program noncustodial parents paying support were initially sent a general notice informing them of the change in child support policy. Although this notice described the experiment generally, it provided no information about specific group assignments. Starting in June 1998, noncustodial parents whose children were assigned to the full pass-through began to receive a mailing telling them of their status; noncustodial parents whose children were assigned to the partial pass-through received no specific information, because the treatment of their child support payments depended on whether or not the custodial parent received a W-2 grant (was in one of the two lower tiers).

Noncustodial parents could thus have known about their pass-through status either from the letter (if they were in the full pass-through group) or from the custodial parent. Organizing the flow of information between the child support agency and noncustodial parents through custodial parents may be a reasonable response to the difficulty of initiating and maintaining direct contact with noncustodial parents who, unlike custodial parents receiving public assistance, are not required to make regular visits to a local government agency to maintain eligibility for public benefits. But respondents whom we interviewed also noted some costs of this form of indirect communication. One W-2 administrator suggested that noncustodial parents might harbor less bitterness toward the child support agency if government agents could talk with them directly and convince them that "they were interacting with a system and with people who were trying to help the family."

Improved direct communication with the noncustodial parent might also reduce the stress experienced by the custodial parent who has been pressed into service as a go-between. A child support administrator who raised this issue described how she had her staff encourage custodial parents to bring noncustodial parents with them to the agency, so that case managers can explain program requirements and processes to both parents simultaneously. As did child support administrators in other counties, she also pointed to the value of the relatively new administrative procedure for stipulating paternity at the hospital when a child is born. This procedure not only may reduce tension between the parents about identifying the father, but can also be viewed as facilitating direct communication between the father and the child support agency.

We asked respondents whether they thought that the change to the full pass-through was an important factor in increasing the willingness of noncustodial parents to pay child support. Apart from the small subset of our respondents who also provided case management services for participants in the Food Stamp Employment and Training or Children First programs (which mostly or entirely serve noncustodial parents), few of the W-2 case managers or administrators we talked to had much contact with noncustodial parents. Several child support administrators identified a variety of factors they thought affected willingness to pay: some believed that the legal obligation to pay support was enough to cause most noncustodial parents to pay, some believed that the way the noncustodial parent felt about the

custodial parent was an important determinant of willingness to pay, and some thought that the transition to the full-pass through also affected willingness to pay. Some interview respondents also focused on ability to pay. Those in counties where unemployment rates were rising at the time of our interviews were most likely to talk about the importance of the demand for unskilled or semiskilled workers in the local labor market. All of our respondents who worked in counties that had Children First programs or other employment programs for noncustodial parents expressed their support for these programs.

### Effects of the New Financial Relationships of W-2 and the Full Pass-Through on the Child Support Process

With the transition from AFDC to W-2, many women became eligible to receive all of the child support collected on behalf of their children, either because they stopped receiving cash assistance or because they were assigned to receive the full pass-through. The receipt of child support payments also took on a new urgency, for reasons discussed above. Child support administrators reported large increases in the volume of calls from women interested in finding out about the status of their cases. Many noted that the burst of increased demand for services from custodial parents died down as these parents became less optimistic about their chances of receiving the full amount ordered, but others said they had added staff to address the higher demand.

The largest change occurred in Milwaukee County, where child support administrators and the agency's chief legal counsel described a lasting shift in the way that agency staff interacted with custodial parents as a result of the change in the pass-through policy. According to these respondents, child support staff, custodial parents, and some of the family court commissioners viewed the full pass-through as affording parents a larger voice in the processes of establishing and enforcing support orders. Under AFDC, custodial parents rarely came to court, but under the new regime, respondents reported, women began to take a much more active interest in their child support cases because of a new sense of ownership generated by the transition to the full pass-through. Custodial parents were much more likely to appear at court hearings, and their increased participation required some adjustments on the part of agency staff, who were used to functioning with little input from the families for whom they arranged the transfer of support. Mothers' increased participation often included efforts to expand the discussions to include visitation and issues regarding their interactions with the noncustodial parent, in addition to the more formulaic calculation of support levels. This change required more attention from child support staff, but it was also thought to facilitate the transfer of important information and may have improved relationships between the child support staff and many of the custodial parents with whom they worked.

Although most custodial parents were perceived to be much more supportive of the child support agency's efforts to establish support, Milwaukee County child support administrators and legal counsel also reported that a sizable minority, estimated at between 15 and 25 percent, were not. Women in this group interpreted the new sense of ownership afforded by the full pass-through policy as providing them license to ask the child support agency and the family court commissioners to refrain from setting a new order or enforcing an existing one, or perhaps to incorporate a preexisting, informal support arrangement worked out by the parents themselves. These requests met with resistance from the child support agency staff, in part because their federal mandate requires them to establish and enforce support orders for children whose families are receiving government assistance. Some family court commissioners, however, proved to be more sympathetic. Although the commissioners were generally thought by our respondents to order support if the women were receiving cash assistance, our respondents believed that these commissioners did so grudgingly and only after they forced the agency lawyer to specify that it was necessary, despite the custodial parent's objection, because she was receiving cash assistance or a child

care subsidy. The agency was sometimes less successful in securing order establishment or enforcement against the objections of the custodial parent if the family was only receiving Food Stamps. One child support official who related these interactions suggested that this difference might result from the statutory difference between Food Stamps and other forms of assistance.<sup>29</sup>

Attempts by a minority of custodial parents to exercise greater control over their social relations within the child support system may have required more effort from the agency to meet its performance standards for current collections, but our respondents in the agency still endorsed the policy change, noting its economic importance for the families who receive child support and its greater significance for the relationship between the department and those it serves:

I would recommend the pass-through. ... It's been a transition period. ...but I think it's a good thing for the relationship between government and its people. It's made... our department, in general, better at what we do, more sensitive to individuals, more realistic, less paternalistic. (Chief Legal Counsel, Milwaukee County Department of Child Support Enforcement)

The findings for Milwaukee prompted us to ask if these effects of the pass-through were also present, though less apparent, in other counties in which recipients of W-2 cash payments represented a much smaller percentage of the larger population served by the county child support agency.<sup>30</sup> Analyzing the content of our interviews with child support administrators, we identified several different patterns in the other counties in our sample.

#### *Pattern 1: Subtle Change in Child Support Practice*

Although no other respondents reported the dramatic changes in the character of their interactions with custodial parents that we heard about in Milwaukee, we noticed that some administrators expressed ambivalence about sanctioning custodial parents who were reluctant to arrange the flow of child support through the child support agency but who appeared for their appointments. We did not interview these administrators before the experiment, and so we cannot attribute this ambivalence to the transition to the full pass-through. It would, however, be consistent with a change in the perceived purpose of their agency from collecting child support to reimburse the state to collecting support for the families of noncustodial parents.

---

<sup>29</sup>The Wisconsin statutes require parents who participate in the W-2 program or receive a Job Access Loan, child care subsidies, or Food Stamps to cooperate in good faith with efforts directed at establishing paternity of a minor child and obtaining support payments. The statutes also require W-2 recipients and recipients of job access loans and child care subsidies—but not of Food Stamps—to assign to the state any child support paid on behalf of a resident minor child.

<sup>30</sup>In September 2002, the Milwaukee child support agency managed 141,376 child support cases, and 7,928 of those families (or 5.6 percent) received a W-2 cash payment. Child support agencies in the remainder of the state managed 198,473 child support cases, of which 2,065 families (or 1.0 percent) received a W-2 cash payment. These percentages are only approximate estimates, in that they do not adjust for the number of families who are represented by more than one child support case. The child support caseload totals were reported by the Wisconsin Bureau of Child Support.

Comments by Roger LeGrand, former president of the Association of Family Court Commissioners, supported our understanding that the pass-through had affected the self-perceived mission of the child support workers, at least in some local agencies. The commissioner described how the transition to W-2, including the introduction of the full pass-through, coincided with a shift in the sense of purpose exhibited by local child support agency representatives from a concern with collecting revenue for the state to a focus on addressing the needs of children. For him, this was a decided improvement. He also pointed out that this change in mission was especially important because it came at a time when larger policy changes had increased the economic vulnerability of poor children living with a single parent. At first he told us that the transition to the full pass-through had not altered the way that he ran his hearings, but, after further reflection, he told us that he thought he was more willing to entertain alternative support arrangements suggested by parents because the state no longer had a direct financial interest in the child support orders.<sup>31</sup>

### *Pattern 2: No Change in Child Support Practice*

The next set of child support agency respondents accorded little significance to the shift from AFDC to W-2 in their work at the child support agency. These administrators could be further divided into two categories. Either they and their child support case managers already addressed a larger agenda of issues with their participants before the transition to W-2, or they continued to view their agency's work in relatively narrow terms, as they had done before. Administrators who expressed a broader perspective on their work and on the process of setting a court order encouraged custodial parents to attend the hearings to set support, whereas those with a narrower focus suggested that it was unnecessary for custodial parents to attend unless they disagreed with the agency's position. Both groups of administrators noted the importance of the relationship between the custodial parent and the noncustodial parent, including the character of the negotiations to resolve visitation or custody issues, for the payment of child support orders, but they differed in how they thought the state should assist in those negotiations. Administrators who expressed a broader perspective on the work of their agency described these negotiations as needing to take place within the context of the hearings that the agency had scheduled to establish the child support order, even though the agency attorney did not participate in this part of the discussion, whereas administrators with a narrower focus thought these negotiations should be facilitated in a separate hearing or mediation process requested by the parents.

### *Pattern 3: A Renewed Focus on Parents' Financial Responsibility*

The final category of child support administrators interpreted the transition from AFDC to W-2 as signaling a philosophical change with important ramifications for their agency. For these respondents, the transition constituted a shift in the responsibility to provide economic support to poor families from public to private actors. These respondents saw their work as an important part of that process, emphasizing their role in assuring that the noncustodial parent assume responsibility for supporting his/her biological children: "So in some respects, apart from Medical Assistance cases only, the type of assistance becomes a non-issue, the point is to transfer the responsibility back on the noncustodial parent from the state."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>Wisconsin no longer retains current child support payments under the full pass-through policy. However, because the state share of support that is passed through is included as part of the state's TANF MOE (maintenance of effort) obligation, the state maintains a financial interest in child support orders.

<sup>32</sup>This was the comment of a child support administrator in a county outside of Milwaukee.

This group of administrators drew a clear distinction between their public assistance and their non-public-assistance cases. One respondent approvingly described the use of new administrative procedures that allow both parents to take a more active role in arriving at mutually acceptable care and support measures for their children, but objected to court stipulations that reduced cash child support obligations below the standard guidelines when a custodial parent was receiving government support. Respondents in this group argued that if a family is receiving public assistance, then more private income should be coming into the home. They suggested that because these custodial parents have chosen to involve the state in their lives, the parents must also accept the intervention by the child support agency to establish and regulate the flow of private money from the noncustodial parent to the child.

We divided child support administrators into different groups in order to describe the broad patterns we observed, but we also found that administrators sometimes shifted positions or held multiple positions depending on the question we asked. We interpret the combination or movement among these different positions within a single interview as an indication of the complexity of trying to serve hundreds or thousands of families with different family dynamics through a single government program.

We asked child support administrators to discuss the interactions that take place in the courtroom as well as those within their agency. Child support agencies are required by federal mandate to seek a support order if a family is receiving government assistance, but respondents suggested that family court commissioners and judges are able to exercise more discretion than child support staff when they set child support and custody arrangements. Just as we found differences among child support agencies, accounts of court proceedings provided by child support administrators also revealed variation in court rulings across counties and among officials within a single county. It appeared that some judicial officials always followed the child support agency's recommendation to set or enforce a support order, but that others might decide to disregard the agency's recommendations at the request of the parents.

### **Potential Lessons for Other Jurisdictions Interested in Implementing a Full Pass-Through**

Several findings of this CSDE implementation study may offer lessons for other states that wish to implement a full pass-through.

1. The change to the full pass-through was generally popular among staff in Wisconsin TANF (W-2) and child support agencies. Local TANF staff reported that even relatively small increases in child support buffer custodial parents against one-time expenses that might otherwise put the family in crisis or discourage a parent from taking a new job with greater potential rewards. Staff also said that the full pass-through helps the overall operations of TANF agencies by reducing the number of participants coming to the TANF agency in financial crisis. Local child support officials believed that, because the full pass-through increased the utility of child support for TANF recipients, the policy was consistent with a broad shift in U.S. social policy from public to private economic support for poor families.

2. Policy simplicity is likely to promote successful implementation. A simple policy, such as a 100 percent pass-through, reduces the challenges of communicating the new policy to staff and to prospective program participants and helps TANF program participants assess the significance of the new policy for their families. Passing through 100 percent of child support payments also allows agency staff to inform noncustodial parents that their children will receive all the child support they pay, regardless of whether the custodial parent is receiving government assistance. By fostering direct communication between child support agencies and noncustodial parents, the pass-through may reduce

negative attitudes toward formal child support among noncustodial parents and diminish the need for custodial parents to serve as intermediaries.

3. Monthly child support payments for a particular family can fluctuate greatly. The exclusion of child support income under a full pass-through policy from calculations used to determine eligibility for and benefits in TANF reduces budgeting problems for families and administrative difficulties for TANF agencies. Without such an exclusion under a full pass-through policy, families could be without TANF eligibility in months when they also receive no child support.

4. Child support pass-through policies for families receiving TANF cash assistance are best implemented when local child support and TANF agencies communicate closely with each other. For optimal operation, staff in both agencies need to have full access to the child support and TANF electronic databases and to avail themselves of this access. If, as in Milwaukee County, direct access to some TANF files is deemed to be inappropriate for case managers employed by private nonprofit and for-profit TANF agencies, the stationing of county employees with full data access at the TANF agencies can be useful.

5. A full description of the pass-through policy should again be given to TANF participants after the initial TANF application and placement process have been completed. Doing so will permit participants to receive the description at a time when less new information is competing for their attention.

6. Movement to a full pass-through may influence the perceptions of child support and family court staff concerning the basic purpose of their work. Under a full pass-through policy, some child support and court staff may be more likely to think of their work as primarily directed at providing economic support for custodial parents and children and slightly less likely to think of their work as aimed primarily at reducing governmental public assistance expenditures. Some custodial parents may also be more aggressive in arguing for reduced or no court orders, or court orders that include factors other than the amount of financial support.