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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In the past several decades, changes in family structure have led to a substantial increase in single-parent households in the United States. As a result of high divorce rates and an increasing proportion of births to unmarried parents (Cancian et al. 2011), almost a third of children did not live with both parents in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). The child support system is designed to address the potential negative consequences for children living apart from one of their parents by ensuring that noncustodial parents contribute financially to their upbringing. However, many noncustodial parents, including a disproportionate share of those whose children are living in poverty, have limited earnings and ability to pay child support (see, for example, Garfinkel et al. 2009; Sorensen and Zibman 2001). Moreover, child support orders often constitute a high proportion of their limited income. Children in single-parent households could therefore benefit from a child support system that enables, as well as enforces, noncustodial parents' contributions to their support (Mincy and Sorensen 1998).

In fall 2012, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) launched the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Project (CSPED) to identify effective policy alternatives to address these needs. OCSE competitively awarded grants to child support agencies in eight states to provide enhanced child support, employment, parenting, and case management services to noncustodial parents who are having difficulty meeting their child support obligations.

Also in 2012, OCSE competitively awarded a cooperative agreement to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families to procure and manage an evaluation of CSPED through an independent third-party evaluator. The Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin, along with its partner Mathematica Policy Research, are conducting the evaluation. The evaluation's primary aim is to test rigorously whether CSPED increases the reliability of child support payments. In addition, the evaluation will generate extensive information on how these programs operate, what they cost, and whether benefits exceed their costs. It includes a random assignment impact evaluation, an implementation study, and a benefit-cost analysis. This interim implementation report provides an early look at the first two years of CSPED, consisting of a planning year and one year of program operations.

### **The CSPED program**

OCSE awarded five-year grants to all eight grantees; the grants began in fall 2012 with a one year planning period. All grantees except one began enrolling participants in the last quarter of 2013; one grantee began in June 2014. The demonstration will continue operating through September 2017. Each grantee aims to recruit 1,500 eligible noncustodial parents into CSPED. Half of the enrollees will be randomly assigned to receive CSPED services; half will be assigned to a control group and will not receive the extra services.

Child support agency leadership is a defining characteristic of CSPED. OCSE required CSPED grantees to be child support agencies, serving as fiscal agents for the grants and managing day-to-day operations. Each site was required to offer four core services: enhanced child support services, employment assistance, parenting education delivered in a peer support

format, and case management. The child support agency was expected to partner with community service providers for employment and parenting services; case management could be provided by child support or a partner agency. Grantees were also required to work with domestic violence consultants to develop a domestic violence plan. While OCSE provided grantees with guidance on design features and core services, it allowed the grantees to align their efforts with preexisting policies, procedures, and the local social service context.

### **Recruitment and engagement**

On average, grantees achieved 87 percent of planned first year enrollment, ranging from 45 to 120 percent across grantees. Recruiting sufficient numbers of participants was a significant challenge for grantees. Most refined their outreach approaches during the first year of operations, moving from more passive to more proactive strategies. Direct outreach by child support workers yielded the most referrals, but some child support workers were not comfortable in their new role as CSPED recruiter. Staff identified tailored messages, “warm handoffs,” and same-day enrollment as promising recruitment strategies.

After enrollment, the next hurdle was engaging CSPED participants in services and sustaining engagement over time. Typical barriers to participation included lack of transportation, lack of motivation to participate, child care responsibilities, and periods of incarceration. Staff reported that rapid engagement in services, developing trusting relationships, and intensive follow-up were promising strategies for keeping participants engaged in services over time. Grantees also provided a range of incentives and work supports to encourage program participation and employment. Enrolled participants faced multiple barriers to obtaining employment and paying child support, including criminal records, poor work histories, lack of transportation, and poor communication and organizational skills.

### **Service delivery**

Grantees provided services through individual contacts and group-based activities. Nearly all CSPED participants received at least one individual service contact during their first four months of enrollment; 53 percent attended at least one group session. On average, participants received 14 hours of CSPED services during their first four months of enrollment, including five hours of individual contacts and nine hours of group session. Of the hours received by participants, employment services accounted for half and parenting services accounted for almost a third, on average. Participants who attended at least one group session received 17 hours of group sessions and six hours of individual contacts, for a total of 23 hours, on average, during the first four months of enrollment.

Case management services included intake assessments, individualized plans, connecting participants to services, and monitoring participants’ progress. Enhanced child support services included order reviews, modifications, suspending enforcement activities, reinstating driver’s licenses, and compromising state-owed arrears. Employment services providers varied in their focus on job search assistance, job development, job readiness training, and job training. Parenting sessions focused on parenting responsibilities and skills, co-parenting, and the importance of parental involvement.

Staff identified several gaps in services: help with parenting time, substance use and mental health treatment, subsidized employment, and help reinstating or obtaining driver's licenses.

### **Early implementation challenges**

Grantees and their partners experienced a steep learning curve during the first year of CSPED operations. The demonstration required child support agencies to shift to new strategies for increasing payments from low-income noncustodial parents that required new ways of working and new partnerships. CSPED grantees grappled with several challenges including:

- Reorienting child support staff and systems toward helping low-income noncustodial parents obtain employment
- Recruiting noncustodial parents to enroll in CSPED
- Keeping participants engaged in services
- Addressing participants' multiple barriers to employment such as criminal records, lack of work history, and low levels of education
- Establishing partnerships and meshing different organizational cultures
- Helping participants with parenting time issues

### **Early lessons learned**

This report covers an early period of CSPED operations and reflects grantees' initial efforts to implement the demonstration and overcome implementation challenges. Staff are likely to learn much more about implementation as the demonstration proceeds. Nevertheless, these early lessons represent observations of staff shared during site visits and synthesis of implementation data collected to date.

**Deploy child support workers who support CSPED's goals to identify and recruit participants.** Although grantees tested a range of strategies for recruiting noncustodial parents to participate in CSPED, child support workers proved to be the best source of eligible applicants. However, not all child support workers welcomed this new task because some did not feel comfortable in the role of recruiter. Promising strategies for addressing these concerns included providing child support workers with training on how to recruit participants, information about how CSPED benefits the child support program, and success stories about noncustodial parents who have obtained employment and are paying child support.

**Develop services that take into account the challenges faced by the target population.** During the first year of implementation, grantees learned much more about the challenges faced by CSPED participants. In particular, most participants face substantial barriers to employment and difficulties accessing their children. Staff found that many participants needed job readiness instruction, individualized help to prepare résumés and learn how to complete job applications, and placement in jobs identified for them by job developers. Some employment partners also sought new resources such as programs that offered help with criminal record expungement, employment services for individuals with criminal records, and help reinstating or obtaining driver's licenses. Staff also sought to develop trusting rapport to keep participants motivated;

support from peers in their job readiness and parenting group also motivated participants to stay engaged. Grantees reported that they did not have sufficient resources or authority to address parenting time issues and cited this as a gap in services.

**Design services to promote sustained participant engagement.** Grantees identified several promising strategies for promoting participation in services. First, grantees aimed to engage participants quickly, within a few days of enrollment, either by meeting with them one-on-one, providing an orientation session, or getting them involved quickly in job readiness and parenting classes. Some designed their service offerings for ease of access, such as by co-locating services, front-loading group activities in the initial weeks after enrollment, and scheduling activities in consistent time blocks. In addition, staff scheduled quick turnaround appointments no more than a few days in advance and coupled the appointments with reminder calls. Grantees also put systems in place to follow up with participants as soon as possible when they did not attend a scheduled appointment or group session. Finally, grantees provided gas cards and bus passes to participants that did not have transportation.

**Invest in strong partnerships and communication systems.** Especially due to the complexity of CSPED, clear systems for referring participants to services, tracking participation, and coordinating follow-up contacts was essential to keep participants from falling through the cracks. In addition, partners needed strong working relationships to resolve problems that inevitably arose related to recruitment, engagement, and service delivery. Promising strategies for establishing these relationships included co-location, which fostered familiarity and regular communication; regular meetings to discuss progress; clear delineation of roles and responsibilities for follow-up and documentation of services; and strong communication protocols across agencies.

### **Next steps**

Grantees will continue to implement CSPED for three years beyond the time period covered by this interim report. A final implementation report will examine the full implementation period and provide a more comprehensive assessment of the types and dosage of services participants received. The report will focus on the infrastructure and supports that facilitated implementation, program features that appear to promote higher levels of participant engagement, promising strategies for helping participants obtain employment and make regular child support payments, and strategies for overcoming common implementation hurdles. A final report will examine CSPED's impacts on participants' outcomes and include a benefit-cost analysis.