2020–2022 Child Support Policy Research Agreement Task 15

COVID-19 and Transitioning to a Virtual Workforce

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I.   INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the rapidly spreading coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected public health, economic, and social conditions worldwide. As of June 10, 2021, the United States had recorded over 33.4 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 599,000 deaths due to COVID-19, with over 675,000 cases and nearly 8,000 deaths in Wisconsin (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2021). As the pandemic unfolded in Wisconsin, changing public health conditions and a series of public health orders forced agencies that serve the public, including child support agencies, to consider whether and how to provide services to customers in new ways. With little time to prepare, agencies needed to make decisions with important consequences for the safety of customers and staff; the ability of customers to access information and help in a period of great uncertainty and economic hardship; and the well-being of a workforce experiencing significant changes in many domains of life and work. Agency leadership had to make these decisions with limited information and in local health and operational contexts that varied substantially across the state. Further, child support agencies do not work in isolation; their processes depend on other local entities that interact with customers, such as courts, and are also affected by public health and operational decisions made at the county and state levels. The approaches child support agencies took, and factors affecting their decisions, therefore likely differed across Wisconsin counties.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the potential for public health or other emergencies to demand rapid changes to where and how child support agency staff work, and has also provided important insights into how public-facing agencies can continue to serve customers in need when conditions make it difficult to do so using traditional means. Therefore,

understanding how Wisconsin child support agencies approached service provision in the era of COVID-19, the challenges and opportunities they encountered, and the changes they expect to persist in the post-COVID world can provide important insights for future policy and practice. Despite the importance of understanding child support agency adaptations and future plans, research on this topic is limited and emergent. This study aims to address this gap, by exploring the experiences of agency staff and leaders in Wisconsin, as part of the research agreement between the Bureau of Child Support (BCS) and the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP).

The outline of this report is as follows. We first provide information about the Wisconsin child support context. Next, we describe the public health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wisconsin; relevant directives provided to agencies about work and services; and the literature on use of virtual services. We then describe the current study and provide findings gathered through interviews with child support agency staff and leaders in five Wisconsin counties. We conclude with a discussion of implications for policy and practice, and recommendations on guidance and support that could help counties moving forward.

II.   BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT

Child support agencies play an important role in the economic well-being of many families. Most children in the U.S. children will spend some or all of their childhood living apart from a parent (Andersson, Thomson & Duntava, 2017), and in 2019, consistent with national trends (Hemez & Washington, 2021), 31 percent of Wisconsin children lived in single-parent families (Population Reference Bureau, 2020). The child support system seeks to ensure that parents living apart from children contribute to their financial well-being, while also aiming to reduce public expenditures for welfare programs (Committee on Ways and Means, 2018). Particularly in the face of significant cuts to programs that provide cash assistance to low-income

people, child support plays an important role in reducing childhood poverty (Sorensen, 2010; Cuesta & Meyer, 2018). In 2019, the child support program collected over 34 billion dollars in payments on behalf of over 14 million children nationally, including more than 17 million dollars for over 360,000 Wisconsin children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

A.   The Wisconsin Child Support Program

In Wisconsin, the child support program is supervised by the state and administered locally by 71 counties and 9 tribes. The state oversees the program and provides essential services. It develops policy; provides technical assistance and training; monitors compliance with federal and state guidelines; collects and distributes payments; and supports enforcement through centralized locating and matching services and the lien docket. Counties are responsible for enacting policy and operating local programs. They establish paternity and set and enforce orders for financial and medical support. Counties must operate within state and federal guidelines but are able to interpret and implement policy within their local contexts (Gentry, 2017).

Within Wisconsin counties, child support agencies and the courts both play important roles in child support functions and operations. Agencies coordinate genetic testing; perform locate services; prepare paperwork for child support-related court actions; review orders; take administrative enforcement actions such as license suspension and asset seizure; and provide a host of financial services, such as coordinating automatic income withholding with employers (Gentry, 2017; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2021a). In some counties, staff perform all services for a given case, from origination through closure; in others, staff specialize by function (Vogel, 2021). Child support orders are set via court order, and all order

modifications, including stipulated agreements, must be approved by the court (Gentry, 2017; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2021b).

In Wisconsin and more broadly, child support agencies and courts collaborate with local law enforcement providers and facilities to enforce court orders. When noncustodial parents (NCPs) do not pay their ordered support, and administrative remedies are not successful, child support agencies and courts can initiate civil contempt proceedings against them. These proceedings can result in arrest and jail time if NCPs fail to meet conditions in the specified timeframe (Cook & Noyes, 2011; Gentry, 2017). Similarly, if an NCP fails to appear for a contempt or paternity hearing, the court may issue a bench warrant for the NCP's arrest (Cook, 2012; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2021c). Therefore, the ability of child support agencies to perform essential functions depends in part on these legal system actors, and circumstances that affect legal partner operations have the potential to affect child support agency operations.

B.   The Wisconsin Child Support Service Context

As a county-administered child support system, the local contexts in which Wisconsin child support agencies provide services vary. For example, Wisconsin counties vary in size, as measured by population (ranging from 4,295 residents of Florence County to over 945,000 residents of Milwaukee County) and geographic area (from Pepin County's 232 squares miles to over 1500 square miles in Bayfield County) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Child support caseload sizes also differ by county. In 2019, the Florence County child support agency served 198 IV-D cases, whereas Milwaukee County served 123,000 IV-D cases (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2021d). Economic conditions also vary statewide. For example, median household income ranges from over 87,000 dollars in Waukesha County to under 41,000 dollars

in Menominee County. The proportion of individuals living in poverty is as high as 25 percent in

Menominee County and as low as 4.2 percent in Ozaukee County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

These geographic and economic differences have important implications for whether and

how Wisconsin residents can access services when in-person communication is difficult or not

possible. The extent to which Wisconsinites can access the internet, a necessary precondition for

accessing many forms of virtual services, varies substantially based on where they live and their

financial circumstances; access to the internet is strongly correlated with county population

density and income levels (Conroy et al., 2021; Reddick et al., 2020). Wisconsin lags behind the

nation in access to reliable broadband[1] (or "high-speed") internet providers (Knapp & Votava,

2020), though access varies considerably across and within Wisconsin counties; only 63 percent

of Wisconsin's rural residents have access to broadband internet, compared to over 95 percent in

urban areas. In many rural areas, satellite internet connections are the only service option;

compared to other broadband options, satellite service is slower, more costly and easily weather-

affected, and offers more limit data volume allocations. Accessibility is also a serious issue for

low-income individuals in urban and rural areas. Of urban households with earnings under

20,000 dollars per year, 44 percent have no internet access of any kind; in rural areas, 56 percent

of such households have no internet access (Conroy et al., 2021; Jones & Ewald, 2017).

C.   The COVID-19 Pandemic in Wisconsin

1.   Changing Public Health Conditions

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, human services agencies were forced to rapidly

contend with difficult questions about where and how their staff would work, how to keep

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[1]The Federal Communications Commission defines broadband as service that provides at least 25 Mbps (megabit per second) download and 3 Mbps upload speeds: https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/broadband-speed-guide

services accessible to customers amidst quickly-evolving public health conditions, and how to ensure the safety of staff and customers. In response to public health concerns, on March 12, 2020, Governor Tony Evers declared COVID-19 a public health emergency; Wisconsin schools were ordered closed the next day (Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2020a; 2020b). Closures expanded further with the Governor's issuance of Wisconsin's Safer at Home order on March 24, 2020 (Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2020c), which remained in place until a Wisconsin Supreme Court decision lifted it on May 13, 2020 (Supreme Court of Wisconsin, 2020b). Courts followed a similar pattern; the Wisconsin Supreme Court suspended all in-person hearings for Wisconsin appellate and circuit courts on March 22, 2020, and on May 22, 2020, allowed proceedings to resume contingent on local safety plan approval (Supreme Court of Wisconsin, 2020a; 2020c). In the early months of the pandemic, most of Wisconsin's confirmed COVID-19 cases were limited to only four counties: Brown, Kenosha, Milwaukee, and Racine (Knapp, 2021). However, by fall of 2020, COVID-19 infection rates grew significantly statewide; nearly every county in Wisconsin received a designation of "critically high" activity (i.e., more than 1,000 cases per 100,000 residents) by November 2020 (Knapp, 2021; Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2021). Figure 1 displays Wisconsin's new confirmed COVID-19 cases and seven-day case average.

Figure 1. Wisconsin's New Confirmed COVID-19 Cases and Seven Day Case Average
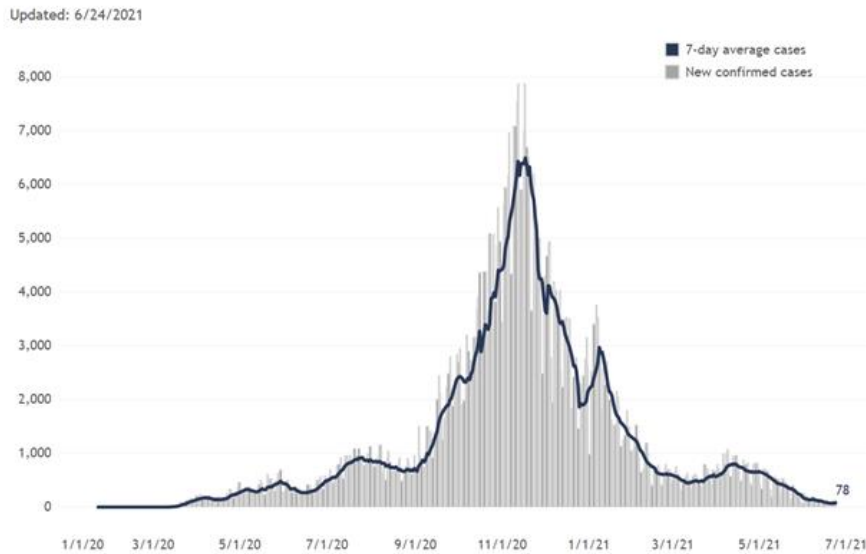
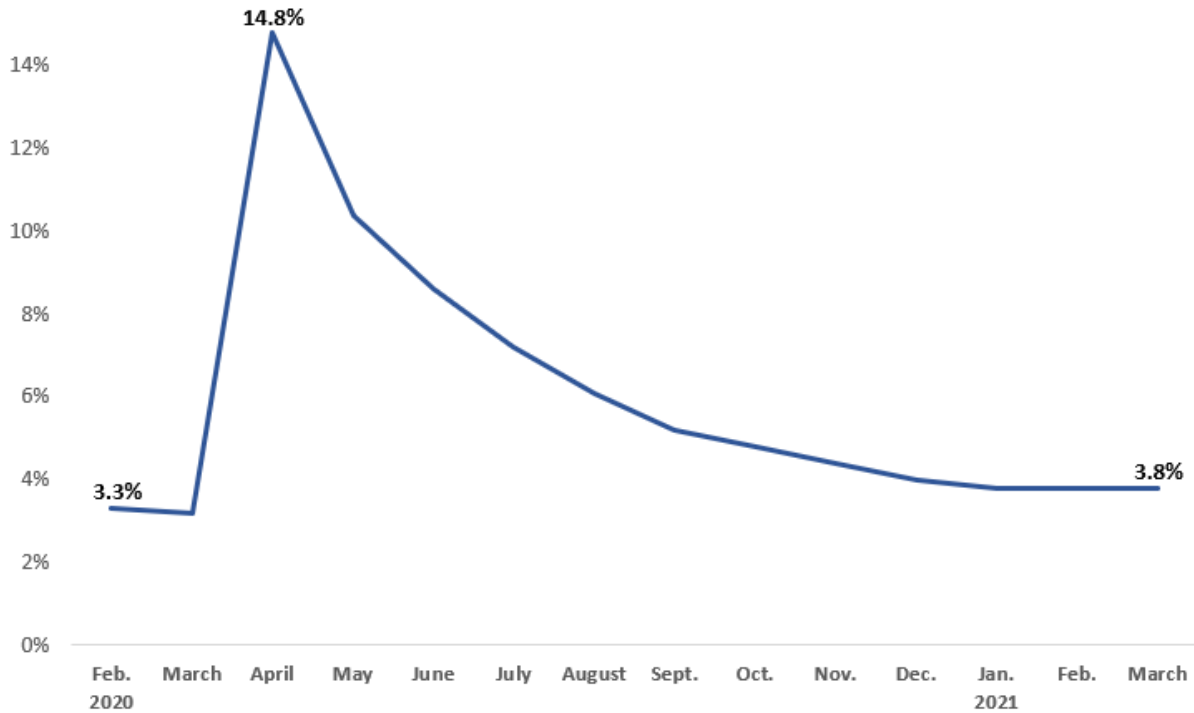Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services website, June 2021.

2.   Changing Economic Conditions

A well-established relationship exists between compliance with child support obligations

and NCP ability to pay the support that they owe (Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003). NCPs with low

earnings pay less in child support, and a lower proportion of the amount they owe, than their

better-off peers (Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003; Chen & Meyer, 2017; Goldberg, 2015; Huang et al.,

2015; Mincy & Sorensen, 1998; Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010) and often experience

difficulty meeting their own basic needs (Brito, 2012; Sorensen & Oliver, 2002; Ha et al., 2018;

Hodges & Vogel, 2020a; Vogel, 2020b). As the pandemic spread, many Wisconsinites

experienced unemployment and economic hardship. Therefore, as child support agencies were

grappling with difficult decisions about how to keep services accessible, many customers

simultaneously experienced financial hardships that could reasonably be expected to affect their

child support situations, making the ability to get information from child support of heightened

importance for some families. Between February and April 2020, Wisconsin lost 407,800 jobs,

and unemployment rates rose rapidly (Figure 2) (Wisconsin Department of Workforce

Development, 2020).

Figure 2. Unemployment Rates in Wisconsin (Seasonally Adjusted)

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

4.   State and Federal Guidance on Remote Work

For the most part, the federal and state governments left decision-making about

implementing remote work for staff up to counties. Wisconsin's Safer at Home order allowed

counties latitude to determine whether human services agencies, broadly defined with an explicit

goal of avoiding service interruptions, should remain open or close (Wisconsin Department of

Health Services, 2020c). Wisconsin BCS did not issue formal guidance on remote work to

county staff, though state staff helped troubleshoot issues related to remote access to

Consolidated Court Automation Programs (CCAP), surveyed counties on laptop access, and

provided email reminders to directors about data security when working remotely (personal communication, February 2021).

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) left decision-making about remote work for child support agencies to states and localities. Through a webpage FAQ, OCSE noted that the Internal Revenue Service allows teleworking for agency staff with access to Federal Tax Information, provided that federal data security requirements are met at offsite work locations. The FAQ also provided guidance on several topics related to virtual services; it explicated state authority to decide whether to allow verbal or electronic signatures in lieu of paper applications, and specified that agency processing of child support payments is an essential function (Administration for Children and Families, 2021). OCSE also issued several memoranda related to service adaptations due to COVID-19. A May, 2020, memo informed states that OCSE would consider requests to modify federal timeframes for certain child support activities (Administration for Children and Families, 2020a). OCSE later clarified that income withholding and withholding against unemployment insurance are mandatory and child support *obligations* cannot be suspended in public health emergencies, but state laws govern suspension of other administrative enforcement actions (Administration for Children and Families, 2020b).[2]

D.   Previous Research on Virtual Service Provision

1.   Virtual Service Options Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some fields had already started to incorporate virtual approaches to service delivery. Within the telehealth literature, a number of pre-pandemic studies demonstrated promising applications of virtual service options across a number of subfields,

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[2]Wisconsin state policy allows up to 50 percent of unemployment checks to be withheld for child support (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2021a).

such as general practice telehealth consults (Hah & Goldin, 2019; Newman et al., 2016), virtual provider visits with older adults (Husebø & Storm, 2014), and video-based psychological services (Fogler et al., 2020). Though evidence is limited, several pilot studies within human services also demonstrate potential benefits. Examples include pilot parenting interventions that use texting (Bigelow et al., 2008; Snell et al., 2020) and virtual home visiting programs (Mogil et al., 2015; National Home Visiting Resource Center; 2017). Virtual options have the potential to reach customers who live outside of service areas (including rural areas, if internet services are available), who move frequently, and who are not receptive to in-home visits (National Home Visiting Resource Center, 2017; Nilson, 2017; Semanchin-Jones, 2011; Hirko et al., 2020), and can help overcome other barriers to face-to-face service offerings, such as transportation issues, childcare barriers, anxiety, and other mental health difficulties. They can also help agencies offer a broader array of services, connect with customers more frequently, and potentially improve information-sharing between providers and customers (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Semanchin-Jones, 2011; Mogil et al., 2015; National Home Visiting Resource Center, 2017). Some studies have found high levels of satisfaction with virtual services among staff and customers (Bigelow et al., 2008; Finn et al., 2004; Finn & Schoech, 2008), particularly among younger populations (Lenhart, Madden & Hitlin, 2005; Hetling et al, 2014; Alford et al., 2019).

Despite the promise virtual service offerings hold, they also come with trade-offs and limitations, particularly for services that are paperwork-intensive and involve legal proceedings. Serving customers virtually raises a host of concerns about information security, confidentiality, and legal and ethical issues (Zack, 2008). Some evidence suggests that offering services in virtual formats can require significant effort on the part of providers (Fogler et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2021) and can make it difficult to assess client needs accurately (Bambling et al., 2019).

Additionally, technology itself can create difficulties; when it does not work as intended, such as due to connection quality or technology constraints, these problems can create frustration and technology avoidance (Kelso et al., 2009; Hah & Goldin, 2019; Rosen et al., 2021). Some evidence has also found that while some customers enjoy virtual options, others prefer face-to-face interactions (Fogler et al., 2020). Further, the aforementioned issues related to technology and broadband access, particularly for rural and low-income customers, raise practical difficulties for reaching many clients and ethical concerns about access inequities (Zack, 2008).

2.   *Adaptations During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

We are still learning how institutions adapted to new ways of working during the pandemic, and much remains unknown. Information on child support agencies specifically is scant, though group discussions with child support directors convened by the National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA) (Future of Child Support, 2020) offer helpful insights. Directors reported continuity of many service functions despite many offices closing and staff often working remotely, though paternity establishment processes were especially prone to delays due to disruptions in court processes and genetic testing. Directors reported challenges to transitioning to virtual services, including outdated technology, limited staff telework experience, court closures, and printing and mailing materials. Overall, however, they reported optimism about the future of virtual work and noted positive resultant program changes, including technology modernization, revisiting in-person requirements, new communication tools for staff and customers, and expanded service hours (The Future of Child Support, 2020).

The limited information available on court processes during the pandemic suggest that courts often found themselves in a position similar to child support agencies, with many courts experiencing closures during the pandemic and limited experience operating remotely. The

literature identifies a number of challenges resulting from virtual court processes, including confidentiality issues; technical limitations on the part of courts and parties; challenges to establishing and facilitating the attorney–client relationship; and the ability of self-represented litigants to access the resources necessary to engage in court hearings. However, virtual hearings can also offer convenience and time-savings for parties and can allow courts to hear more cases efficiently and provide the judiciary with more control over courtrooms (Bannon & Keith, 2021).

Within human services agencies more broadly, a small body of early evidence drawing on qualitative research with human services providers during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that incorporating virtual offerings helped some programs to maintain customer relationships, reach customers with barriers to accessing services in person (Emezue, 2020; Mishna et al., 2020; Oehme et al., 2021), meet with clients more often, and maintain more consistent engagement (Cruden et al., 2021; Font, 2021; Oehme et al., 2021). Additional insights come from a series of federally-commissioned qualitative interviews and focus groups with human services providers and customers, which found that some customers experienced improved staff responsiveness through virtual platforms, greater ease of access to staff, reduced administrative burden, and elimination of barriers such as transportation and child care (Benton et al., 2021a). Staff perspectives generally comported with participant reports, with staff describing increased frequency of communication and participation in group activities through virtual platforms, but also reduced opportunities for rapport-building (Benton et al., 2021b). On the other hand, customers also reported downsides to virtual services, such as difficulties with internet connectivity and speeds. Customer preferences for service modality were mixed, and many customers expressed a preference for both types of options moving forward (Benton et al., 2021a). Staff emphasized that virtual service offerings work especially well for some

populations, such as people with childcare, distance, or transportation barriers to in-person services, those with health concerns, and those who are comfortable with technology, but in-person services are often preferable for people with internet or technology limitations, people who have intellectual disabilities or language barriers or who lack privacy at home, older adults and young children, and people in immediate crisis (Benton et al., 2021c).

III.   THE CURRENT STUDY

1.   Sample

The sample for this study included child support agency leadership and frontline child support workers from five Wisconsin counties. The IRP research team selected counties in consultation with DCF leadership. Given that the prevalence and timing of COVID-19 infections varied across counties, and public health directives affected localities differently, we selected counties purposively to identify a broad array of experiences confronting the pandemic. As such, we considered three county-level characteristics when selecting counties for inclusion:

1) **Geographic Location.** We selected one county from each of Wisconsin's Bureau of Regional Operations (BRO) five regions—Southeastern, Northeastern, Northern, Western, and Southern.

2) **County Size.** We considered county size as designated by the BRO when selecting counties. Sampled counties included one large or extra-large county, two small counties, and two medium-sized counties.

3) **Confirmed positivity rate**. We compared each Wisconsin county's confirmed positivity rate (i.e., the number of confirmed positive cases per 100,000 people).[3] We selected one county with lower-than-average positivity rates, two counties whose positivity rate was near average, and two counties with high positivity rates.

Within each county, we interviewed the county's child support director and one or more child support case managers or supervisors. In total, 11 sample members completed an interview.

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[3]As of October 28, 2020, relative to the Wisconsin state average of 3,635 confirmed cases per 100,000 people.

B.   Recruitment and Data Collection

Prior to initiating recruitment, BCS leadership sent each sampled county's child support director an email informing them of the forthcoming invitation from the IRP research team. A researcher then initiated recruitment by emailing each county's child support director describing the purpose and goals of the study and informing them that participation was voluntary. The researcher then scheduled a time to interview the director by video, gathered staff contact information from the director, and invited staff to participate in a separate interview via email.

Interviews occurred in January and February 2021. We used a semi-structured interview protocols to guide the interview process. Interviews consisted of a core set of questions applicable to all respondents, as well as batteries of questions specific to the director and staff roles. The protocols included questions on changes to the physical office environment, staff work arrangements, service delivery methods, and court processes that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and changes over time; factors affecting county decision-making; actions taken, and resources procured, to help facilitate transitions to remote work; perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages associated with different service formats; challenges encountered and strategies to address them; and lessons learned and plans for the future. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each respondent provided consent to take part in the research and permission to audio-record their interview. All recruitment and data collection efforts were approved and overseen by the University of Wisconsin's Institutional Review Board.

C.   Analysis

Interviews were professionally transcribed, then read into NVivo 12 software for coding. Data were analyzed using a hybrid inductive-deductive (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). We

developed an initial codebook using a priori codes based on the research questions. We performed an initial round of transcripts using this scheme and new codes were added (as separate codes or subcodes) as needed when additional themes emerged (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Early transcripts were double-coded, and the research team engaged in memoing and peer debriefing throughout the coding, analysis, and writing process (Franklin & Ballan, 2001; Schrier, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017).

V.   FINDINGS

Broadly, findings from these interviews identified that child support agencies needed to make a host of decisions across a broad array of domains, with limited information early in the pandemic, and varying degrees of guidance from local administrators. Agencies had to adapt quickly and repeatedly, as public health conditions and local considerations evolved, and these adaptations played out differently in various local contexts. Agency directors had to take into consideration many factors when making adjustments, including local directives, available resources, and staff and customer needs. Agencies innovated to identify processes that would keep operations running and staff able to provide services. Though they encountered many challenges throughout the process, agencies also identified benefits to working in new ways.

This section begins with a discussion of agency adaptations to physical workspaces, then describes changes to staff work arrangements. Next, it describes adaptations to service delivery. Throughout, we discuss the factors affecting adaptations, challenges encountered, and benefits or opportunities identified. The section concludes with a discussion of agency expectations for the future and agency needs related to guidance and resources.

A. Adaptations to Child Support Agency Physical Workspaces

1. *Office Access and Closures*

A key decision directors needed to make early in the pandemic, and had to revisit as the pandemic unfolded, was whether or not agencies should close to the public and to staff. Office closures played out differently across county contexts and across time. Two agencies never closed fully to the public; one of these two moved to appointment-only status for customers with a goal of completing as many processes as possible remotely, and the other accepted customers, but enacted new screening processes at the building's entry. Two agencies closed to the public early on and reopened later; one completely closed, and one shifted to appointment-only. The fifth agency closed to the public in March 2020 and had not re-opened as of January 2021.

Local COVID positivity rates, consultation with local public health departments, and direction from county administration informed decision-making about public access to buildings throughout the pandemic. For example, one agency temporarily closed in response to a fall 2020 spike in confirmed cases, and two others enacted further limitations on the number of staff allowed in offices in response to local spikes in positivity rates. Directors often also reported conferring with other department heads within the county, in order to understand the approach other agencies within the county were taking. In some instances, agencies that shared building space with other offices, such as other human services agencies or courts, found that directives pertaining to the entire building directly shaped their closure status. For example, one agency operated in a building shared with other county human service providers; county administrators made decisions about the building's overall closure status for all agencies within the building. Another county, co-located with court offices, re-opened to the public simultaneously with court office re-openings to accommodate customers newly allowed into the building.

Even in counties where offices were closed to the public, directors also had to decide whether to allow staff access to agency offices. Directors and their staff quickly identified that certain functions, including those performed by administrative staff and paperwork-intensive processes, often required some level of office presence. Most counties reported that at the immediate outset of the pandemic, local administrators and health officials provided direction about whether staff could work in the office, though director autonomy to make decisions about staff presence in buildings, within public health guidelines, increased over time. Two counties reported receiving substantial direction from county administration about staff office presence; one received little direction and proactively developed a remote work policy independently; and two received guidance on office access in the early days of initial closures, but were left to determine plans for staff work arrangements from that point forward. One director described their county's current perspective on staff presence in the office as:

> There's no, like, set policy from the county. I mean, it's not like we've gotten a whole lot of direction, and that's not a criticism. It's just that, you know, we've been making it up as we go along and nobody really knows what's safe.

In one county, at the direction of local administration, the child support agency closed completely to all staff for several days, then had the flexibility to determine where staff would work moving forward; this agency quickly moved to a system of assigning each worker one day in the office per week, for a total of three per day, to attend to essential in-person functions. In other counties, initially all but one or a few staff members, such as receptionists, call center staff, or others whose jobs could not be performed remotely, were assigned to work from home. These counties gradually began rotating staff members into the office, typically increasing or decreasing in numbers as COVID-19 positivity rates changed. In all but one county, rotation

arrangements were still place at the time of data collection; in the other, county administration

ordered all staff to work in the office full-time after four weeks of mostly remote work.

Directors described that the state did not provide specific guidance about office openings

and closures, and several noted that doing so would have been difficult given local needs and

constraints. Stated one director, "Everybody has had to basically figure it out on a local level.

Each county is doing something different, because of what their county administrator wants or

what their local situation is with numbers." Several directors described participating in regional

conversations, facilitated by the state BRO, with other directors about circumstances locally.

Stated one director, "It's been really, really good because we were able to just share what worked

for us and what didn't. And other counties could maybe take just a little piece of that and make it

work for their county or whatever." One director noted that in addition to the BRO meetings, it

would have been helpful to have a forum coordinated by the state for counties to discuss their

approach to these types of issues with other counties of similar sizes.

2.   Adaptations to Staff and Customer-Facing Spaces

Across counties, directors emphasized that as they decided whether and how to allow

access to office spaces, safety and public health was a top priority. Described one director:

> We have to keep our people safe and we have to keep doing what we do. Because
> at the end of the day, the show must go on. We provide what I consider to be an
> essential service. Child support shuts down, we've got problems in society. So, it
> was a matter of making sure that the wheels kept rolling, but everybody had their
> seatbelts on, and the airbags were ready, and we were getting to the end goal that
> we needed to get to, but we needed to do it as safely as we could. And that's still,
> to this very day, what we're doing.

As such, directors made a broad array of adaptations to staff workspaces, as well as spaces where

customers access child support services. In staff work areas, these included changes to seating

arrangements to allow for six feet of distance in counties where frontline staff did not have

private offices with doors, and the addition of visual cues about distancing, such as laying down tape, to indicate six feet of distance between workspaces. Directors instructed staff not to congregate in halls, restrooms, at entrances and exits, or in common areas such as break rooms; one county closed the break room entirely. Directors and frontline staff also described sanitizing workspaces "constantly" and keeping papers and objects on staff work surfaces to a minimum.

Across counties, customer-facing spaces also experienced changes intended to reduce the risk of transmission. In building entryways, counties enacted processes such as creating no-touch pathways to offices, providing masks, hand sanitizer, or gloves for customers, and in one county, implementing a temperature self-check station prior to entry. Several counties, which shared offices with other agencies, employed gatekeepers at their building's entryway who took extra steps such as brief health screenings and calling up to the agency prior to allowing the customer upstairs. Several counties reported placing limitations on the number of customers allowed in common spaces such as restrooms and elevators and providing signage to clarify the rules.

Within their own agency reception areas, child support agencies made modifications to protect the health of reception staff and customers by limiting airborne transmission, such as adding plexiglass walls to separate customers and reception staff; closing off speech and pass-through openings within existing plexiglass walls; and limiting the number of customers who could wait in reception areas. Agencies also took steps to limit surface transition by removing high-touch surfaces such as phones and computers in lobbies; reducing the number of chairs in the lobby, spacing them out six feet, or eliminating them entirely; taking down fliers and paperwork and instead making them available by request; providing individually-wrapped pens for customers to keep instead of shared pens; and removing toys, games, and tables for children to use while waiting. Agencies typically posted signage about agency rules in waiting areas, such

as rules pertaining to masks, distancing, and capacity maximums, and some also provided visual cues such as tape to remind customers of distancing requirements. Within interview rooms, counties made adaptations such as obtaining and placing portable plexiglass shields between customers and staff; removing large desks and replacing them with space-efficient chairs; and adding phones to allow for phone meetings with staff in lieu of face-to-face meetings. Staff and directors described sanitizing these common areas very frequently.

In addition to physical space changes, counties enacted new processes and requirements to further promote safety for customers and staff. These included, across counties, mask requests of customers and mask requirements for staff; adding sanitizing stations and reminders about frequent handwashing; and enhanced cleaning protocols, particularly for high-traffic areas such as lobbies and restrooms. Most counties reported requiring staff with any COVID-like symptoms to work remotely, regardless of their regular schedule. Counties also enacted changes to genetic testing processes to improve safety. These included having lab vendors conduct testing instead of staff; switching to a self-swab model for customers, overseen by a child support staff member wearing personal protective equipment (PPE); reducing the number of staff involved in testing; moving testing to larger rooms; and limiting availability to specific days or by appointment only.

The main concern directors raised about health-related measures was the potential toll on staff morale, given that staff looked forward to opportunities to discuss issues face-to-face, or debrief on difficult situations together, in the pre-pandemic world. Several agencies noted that closing or limiting breakroom time limited staff interaction; while staff understood and accepted the change, directors worried about possible negative impacts on staff well-being. Stated one director:

> Everybody has to eat in their office. We don't have the break room as an option, which was a tough one for me, because that's the one time where they can close

the door and the staff can chat it up. But it's just, again, that opens up close contact.

A supervisor described reminding staff of the distancing requirements in place, describing,

The requirements and the safety of the staff is also, you know, only as good as people are willing to abide by those regulations. They've been really good. You know, we've had a couple of instances where it's mostly just reminding that when people come in, back in the office—they miss each other! And they want to chat and you're like, 'Okay, just remember, you need to space out.' You know, 'Call them, use Teams to chat if you want to'. We all miss each other and I'm happy to see you, but back up.

However, counties also noted several benefits and practice innovations that emerged from changes to physical spaces. For example, adding a plexiglass wall to the lobby helped one agency to address pre-pandemic confidentiality concerns about customers' abilities to access paperwork on the reception desk. Obtaining portable plexiglass dividers turned out to be doubly helpful for another county; in addition to using them for meetings with customers, the dividers provided a much-needed way for agencies to perform side-by-side training of new staff. In another agency, which closed completely to the public, agency staff worried that lack of access could impede customers' abilities to turn in required materials, and staff abilities to personally serve customers with required paperwork. This led the agency to add a fax machine to the building's entry so customers could transmit materials to staff; leadership of the agencies housed in this building also worked together to implement a practice change in which building's receptionist began acting conduit for customers to drop off materials for staff, and allowing staff to leave documents for customers to pick up without accessing the child support office directly. This county also worked with local court commissioners to waive notary requirements for certain types of paperwork—a service difficult to obtain during the pandemic, and a process change that the agency believes will help streamline service delivery even after the pandemic. Similarly, in two counties, agencies installed drop boxes to allow customers to drop off paperwork and make

payments; two other counties with drop boxes already in place for payments started also accepting paperwork and other materials through the drop box. Staff highlighted the flexibility afforded by drop boxes particularly for customers who make payments outside of automatic income withholding, a benefit they expected would persist after the pandemic's end.

B.   Adaptations to Staff Work Arrangements

In most counties, staff work arrangements changed dramatically on account of the pandemic, with staff working in new, and generally more flexible, ways. These adaptations were made possible through innovation and creative problem-solving on the part of leadership, and the flexibility and collaborative efforts of all agency staff. As staff started working remotely some or all of the time, directors had to quickly figure out how to schedule staff facing great disruption in their work and home lives; obtain the technology staff needed and prepare them to use it; find new ways for staff to work together; and develop new approaches to supervising and supporting staff through a difficult transition. Directors had to take many factors into account, some of which changed as the pandemic evolved. Though directors encountered an array of challenges in addressing these issues related to staff work conditions, they also identified strategies that helped to overcome challenges and unexpected benefits to adapting staff work arrangements.

1.   Staff Schedules

Creating work schedules for staff during the pandemic was a far more complex task than in the pre-pandemic world. Prior to the pandemic, staff typically worked a set schedule; some staff worked agency- or county-specific hours that applied across staff; others were allowed to choose their hours within several time range options available to agency staff. Exclusively or with rare exception, staff worked within an agency office. Described a supervisor:

We were 100 percent in the office all the time before this. So this was, I mean, not even just reinventing the wheel, but realizing there was a wheel to invent. It's just not something that we'd ever had to really consider. So much of this work is meant to be person to person. You're dealing with a lot of incoming paperwork all the time, so from the standpoint of trying to be lean, trying to be efficient, you know, you really want to get the work as it's coming in to try to stay on top of it because, you know, certainly for some of the work that we do there are important deadlines that need to be met.

Switching to a fully-remote or hybrid schedule was, across the board, a substantial change for county staff; in several counties, staff did not even have the technological tools required, such as laptops or secure connections to the agency network, to work from home. Summarized one director: "Working from home was entirely new to them. [Our agency] did have four laptops prior, but those were for people who went to court." Several directors shared that their agency or county leadership had considered allowing telework in the past, but the complex steps required to make it possible impeded prior implementation. Across the board, counties described the COVID-19 pandemic forced their agencies to problem-solve around the actions needed to make remote work a reality, and finding out that remote work really was possible opened up the possibility of continuing remote work after the pandemic. Described another director,

We never had a remote work program before March, ever. You know, we always talked about it, thinking, 'Yeah, it'd be a nice thing to do,' but then there was the—how do we monitor people? And we didn't have the equipment. So, it was always like a nice thing to do, and then [the pandemic] forced us to do it.

Directors considered a number of factors while setting staff schedules. Health considerations factored prominently in decision-making. Two counties rotated staff in groups on the same days to confine spread should a case be identified in the office. Most counties adjusted the number of staff in the office as COVID rates peaked and waned. All counties took into consideration where staff sat physically in relation to each other. In two counties, all staff had private offices, making it easier for staff to work in the office while distancing.

Directors also took into account staff needs when planning for staff office access; they sought to ensure that all staff had enough time in the office to handle essential in-office functions, such as paper-based tasks and filings, mail correspondence, printing, shredding, and managing paper files. Staff functions factored prominently into their decision-making, with receptionists and administrative staff in the office full-time or more frequently than other staff. Counties with hybrid options generally sought to ensure that other staff members had at least one day in the office; some counties assigned days to staff, and others built schedules taking into account staff-expressed preferences for particular days. In most counties, supervisory staff had more days in the office than other frontline workers, to allow them to answer questions, provide support, and train new staff. Supervisors in most counties had offices with doors, making it easier to allow them to work in the building without affecting the seating arrangements of frontline staff working in closer quarters. Described one supervisor:

> I would say that I'm currently in the office probably a little bit more than I am remote, just because I have the luxury of being in an office where I'm not out on the floor a lot… I also have staff that I'm training and it's just easier to do that, you know, when I have everything that I need around me.

Though schedules were generally set on a regular basis, leaders had to make decisions about whether and how to allow staff flexibility, either on a regular basis or as-needed due to emergent needs. Across counties, directors described being mindful of the challenges staff faced balancing work and other activities, particularly related to caregiving; they knew many staff had children at home participating in school virtually or whose childcare provided had closed. This often meant juggling children's needs with work responsibilities in new and challenging ways, especially, as directors noted, for single parents or parents whose partners lacked job flexibility. Other staff had caretaking duties for parents or other older adults that increased during the pandemic.

To help address this challenge, two counties allowed staff to work more flexible schedules than typically allowed prior to the pandemic, such as by working irregular hours, a split schedule, or making up time in the evenings or on weekends; two others allowed more kept work hours the same but allowed more flexibility on an as-needed basis. Described a director:

> A lot of our workers have young or school aged children, and now the [district] has been remote the entire school year. So you know, their kids are home and they're probably not old enough to be by themselves, and they have to make sure that they're on the remote school. People have some days they just can't come in and, you know, daycares aren't accepting new kids. We've had to work around that. We've tried to be realistic with that… Sometimes people are, you know, getting things done during the day. And so then, they might be putting an hour or two later on, you know, seven o'clock at night or working early, 6:30 in the morning or whatever. We've had to accommodate that a little bit.

Another director emphasized that flexibility in scheduling was important not only for allowing staff to get their work done given other commitments, but for staff morale:

> We do flex schedules here. It works. I just want them to hit their 80 hours. That's a—what's the word I'm looking for? Like a morale issue too. It's not a cookie cutter scenario anymore. You got to adapt to everything that they have going on, like some kids are in school, but they're little so they need help getting on virtual. So, they need to take off a little bit of time to make sure the kids get to where they need to be and all that stuff.

In another county, county administrators felt strongly about staff working the same schedule as the period prior to the pandemic, and staff experienced *less* flexibility than the pre-pandemic period, due to added documentation requirements for staff at times working out of the office. Several directors noted that the state expanded the hours that the state child support system was available to staff, and that this added accessibility helped support flexibility in scheduling. Directors described that flexibility had the potential to make monitoring more difficult, but also meant staff were able to complete their expected work rather than asking for time off, and had the added unanticipated benefit of giving customers access to staff at a broader array of times.

Directors described that arriving at a schedule that balanced staff needs, customer coverage, and public health considerations was a challenge, but one that generally resulted in successfully meeting these goals. Staff, for their part, recognized that directors in their counties sought to balance health considerations with the needs of staff to access the office periodically, and nearly universally described that directors were doing their best to support staff needs despite considerable uncertainty and constraints. Described one frontline worker:

> I think [early on] sometimes they were a little more, I don't want to say strict, but they were a little more stringent about days where they only wanted us to go in one day a week, to really reduce the number of people, really reduce the traffic in the office. But for the most part now, I would say they're flexible because some staff have expressed that it's a little stressful to try to accomplish all those things only on one day, which I can understand too. So now I think we have a little more leeway where some folks are going in like two or maybe three days a week.

In the county where staff had less flexibility working remotely than in person, staff described these constraints as an impediment. Described one staff member:

> If the county was a little bit more understanding of like, flexing the hours, if you're dropping the kids off at school and picking them up, if you're more flexible with that, I think it would really be good. Then we could really work with it and get it done.

In contrast, staff in counties that allowed flexibility to make up time expressed gratitude for this approach, which helped them to handle competing duties while minimizing the stress of an already difficult situation. Described a staff member:

> Our supervisors have been really flexible… many other people in our office have like a whole family that they have to deal with. For them, knowing how flexible our supervisors have been in terms of us like, you know, accomplishing our work, but still being able to juggle our lives. I think that that is really important because, you know, obviously everything even outside of work has been so stressful this past year. Work not being like an extra stressor is a really big deal.

2.   *Technological Adaptations for Staff*

Given that child support agency staff typically worked in an office setting prior to the pandemic, in order to facilitate staff working remotely all or some of the time, child support agencies had to provide staff with new equipment and tools that allowed them to work offsite. Not only was obtaining the necessary tools a substantial challenge for some agencies, with new tools came new questions about security and technology-related practices.

One of the first tools agencies needed to provide for staff to facilitate remote work was computers. Agency experiences obtaining computers varied substantially, depending on the equipment previously available to staff and the resources and support available for procuring new equipment. In one county, no agency staff had laptops prior to the pandemic; in another, enforcement staff and supervisors had laptops but other staff did not; in the other three, a minority of staff, and often only supervisors or attorneys had laptops prior to the pandemic. One county, which worked remotely only for a short while, was able to borrow laptops from the county information technology (IT) department in the short-term, whereas other counties had to buy what they needed. Two of these four counties were told procurement would take months. In one of the two, county IT staff purchased laptops from Walmart to fill this gap. In the other, staff were allowed to use home computers or old departmental computers until tablets arrived, but even with these steps, the agency did not have enough computers to accommodate all staff for a period of months, leading to prolonged unproductive time for these staff. The other two counties were able to procure laptops through county IT departments relatively quickly and use desktops in the interim. Two counties had to absorb all or part of the cost of these new computers themselves; the other two were able to access state and federal grant money to cover the majority of the costs.

In addition to obtaining new computers, county staff needed to work with local IT departments to ensure that new and existing computers were loaded with the software necessary to perform their work. All counties needed to obtain VPN software for computers through their county IT departments and described VPN tools as essential to accessing the systems necessary to perform their work. Counties also obtained collaboration and communication tools, typically through their local IT departments, such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom and WebEx. Most counties described not having or not often using such software for their work previously. Most counties also obtained a host of hardware tools to support work processes, such as docking stations for laptops, mice, keyboards, and headsets. One county quickly purchased cameras for all non-laptop computers, to ensure that staff had a way to visually check in and participate in meetings. Another purchased second monitors for staff to use at home, so that in combination with keyboards, docking stations, and mice, the staff home office experience functioned as closely as possible to their in-office experience. This agency felt the investment in this equipment helped to be productive, and also ensured a smooth transition from work to home for staff, who only needed to transport their laptops across locations.

Several counties also invested in new technology for office spaces. These included computer screens for interview rooms to allow customers to visit with staff from the agency even if staff were working offsite, and scanners to transmit mail to staff working remotely. Staff highlighted the substantial benefits to efficiency and time management afforded by having mail scanned and sent to them, particularly given limited office access, with one staff member stating:

> I mean, that is a game changer because when you have someone working at home, if they are wondering what's in their mail slot and they have a coworker who's in the office, they can essentially pull the hard copy mail out of their bin, scan it, and it will go straight to that person's email. So even though they don't have the paper copy, you know, they can see what's there waiting for them. So then at home, you know, they have an idea of, 'Okay, what can I do while I'm remote?' You know,

'What doesn't need my signature; what doesn't need this or that?' It also helps them plan for the next time they are in the office, because then they know what's waiting for them.

A problem that plagued all counties for various durations during the pandemic was telephone technology. In no counties did staff have work-provided cell phones before or during the pandemic; while staff in most counties described using their cell phones to text or call coworkers prior to the pandemic, staff were reluctant to use their personal phones to reach customers. Described one supervisor, "Particularly in this job, you know, you're making phone calls out to people who don't always want to hear from you. So, you know, not wanting your personal number recorded on somebody's phone, who is in your caseload, is understandable." In two counties, staff used their own cell phones and used the *67 feature to mask the number. In recognition of the costs deflected from agencies to staff by using personal cell phones, leadership in one county tried to obtain reimbursement from the county staff personal cell phone costs, but the request was denied. Broadly, staff noted that using *67 presented its own challenges, as many customers will not answer a phone number from an unknown caller.

In three counties, directors obtained soft phone technology for staff, allowing them to make phone calls through their computers. However, in all counties, obtaining soft phones took several months, creating frustration on the part of staff and customers, process delays, and impeding or preventing staff and customers to communicate through modes other than mail or email. These challenges were particularly pronounced early in the pandemic, when office access was highly limited. Staff described obtaining soft phones as "a complete game-changer."

3.   *Challenges to Transitioning to Virtual Work for Staff*

In addition to the aforementioned issues obtaining the necessary equipment, counties encountered a number of challenges transitioning staff to using remote tools. Staff in four

counties highlighted broadband access issues; staff who lived in more rural areas had poor or unstable internet connections or could not obtain internet at all. In one smaller county, every agency staff member needed to upgrade their home internet in order to do their jobs, and the county would not help with the associated costs. Described this county's director:

> There were days when I was kicked off seven times or eight times in a day. I felt like I was spending more time logging into my computer than work, you know, being able to get work done. Every one of us had had to make changes to our internet program or palette. You know, we had to upgrade, we all had to upgrade. I mean, we all had high-speed internet, but we all had to upgrade the limit or what our speed was, so that we could continue to function and work at home.

In another small county, some agency staff had no internet access at all at and needed to buy it; others had very slow satellite connections that greatly impeded functionality. Described the director, "I live out in the country. And I have satellite internet. So that was a big issue because it made it everything—it was so slow, like I almost couldn't even work sometimes." In two counties, directors described that even in parts of the county with adequate internet generally, the load of having so many users at home at once caused periodic disruptions.

Counties also highlighted the challenge of many processes taking longer, due to only being in the office to receive materials one or two days per week, or simply due to the number of new steps involved in completing work. Not having access to mail and printed materials at home remained a persistent issue for staff, as lack of access created delays and required additional tracking of documents sent to the printer from outside of the office. Additionally, several counties noted that some staff were not comfortable using new technology at first, and attempting to help staff learn new technology remotely was not an easy task.

4.   Facilitators of Transitioning Successfully to Virtual Work

Despite these challenges, counties generally reported that many aspects of remote work for staff were highly successful, particularly given the limited time and resources available to prepare for the transition. Counties described several factors that helped facilitate this transition to remote work, several of which were related to staff and relationships. First, counties without exception praised the dedication, helpfulness, and responsiveness of their county IT staff, despite many competing demands. County IT staff helped procure the necessary technology, ensure that confidentiality standards were in place on county devices, provided technical assistance to staff having difficulty, and sometimes provided documentation about how to use new tools.

Additionally, interview participants emphasized the role all agency staff played in facilitating the transition to remote work. Staff credited their agency's directors for being willing to try something new and providing support throughout the process; directors, for their part, cited staff flexibility, adaptiveness, and willingness to communicate throughout the transition. Described one director, "What's contributed to it the most is just the—flexibility of our staff to embrace it and to try it. And like give feedback of what's working for them and what's not, and just working together to overcome it." Across counties, directors also emphasized that strong communication with staff about their needs and providing information about virtual work expectations helped facilitate the transition to virtual tools. One agency, an early leader in transitioning to remote work within the county when the pandemic started, developed remote work agreements for staff laying out expectations and documenting equipment allocations.

Counties also shared that obtaining new resources, and embracing new processes, help facilitate the transition. Two counties highlighted the role that grant funding for procurement of COVID-related office needs, including technology; staff in one county emphasized the tenacity of their county's director in pursuing such opportunities. One county that had not previously

transitioned to e-filing did so during the early months of the pandemic, which allowed them to move key processes forward when doing so in-person was not possible. Several counties also shared technological adaptations underway in their counties pre-pandemic that helped them to make the transition, such as e-filing, scanning, and extensive use of email. Another county stressed that having previously taken part in a project that forced rapid cultural change within the agency helped the agency's staff be flexible in the face of change.

Counties also described the role of the state in facilitating staff transitions to using new tools. Several counties emphasized the efficiencies gained by the BCS decision to allow service of process to occur by email, though also noted that the state did not provide a process flow for the new practice, leaving them to develop policies locally. Additionally, several counties noted an email provided by the state to counties about technology requirements early in the pandemic was helpful. Several counties noted that they were grateful for BRO regional meetings, which allowed them to hear how other counties were making these and other transitions. Most counties felt that the state was responsive to questions and helpful when possible, though noted that the state's ability to provide advice or direction was limited due to rapidly-changing and uncertain circumstances; generally, counties felt that they were on their own to figure out how to implement virtual tools for staff. Described one director:

> So, they didn't give us a lot. But I guess I'm not saying that's a bad thing.
> Because then we were able to do what we needed to do in order to make it work.
> So, you know, if they would have some strict guidance on what we needed to
> follow, I'm not sure we would have been happy with that, either. Because if they
> would have said, 'No, you can't use your personal cellphone.' Well, that would
> have kind of been difficult. So I think we—as far as the guidance, I'm not saying
> it's a bad thing.

5. *Communication and Collaboration*

When staff were not all together in an office, communication had to take on new forms to allow work to continue. Further, even when staff were in the office on the same day, new communication tools remained important due to distancing requirements the desire to protect each other from potential exposure. Agencies adopted several synchronous and asynchronous communication practices for staff. To ensure that all staff received the same message in the same way, or for agency-wide announcements, agencies used group email messages; staff also emailed one-on-one for issues that did not require an immediate response. Across counties, staff noted that they texted each other prior to the pandemic, but their use of texting and email increased once the pandemic began. To facilitate instantaneous and synchronous communication, four counties started using Microsoft Teams for video chats with each other, as well as for group text-based chat spaces. Staff found these chat features very helpful for obtaining group input and quick responses. Described one supervisor:

> I have a separate chat that's all of my group. So, if they do need something, they just send a message out like, 'Is anybody there that can do…,' you know. And then someone will pipe in and say, 'Yeah, I'm here, I got it.' And, it's really great tool to be able to jump in and say, 'Hey, is anybody having issues with this or that?' And all of a sudden, you know, I'm getting all these responses. 'Nope, I'm good. Everything is good, everything is good. It's a little slow, you know.' So I'm really thankful for that resource.

In addition to communication among staff, directors and leaders emphasized the importance of communicating frequently about office operations, policy changes, and other issues that affect staff, particularly in such a period of great uncertainty. When staff first started working remotely, directors provided guidance about telework expectations and use of technology, either through formal documents (such as telework agreements or documents describing expectations for in-office tasks versus at-home tasks), or less formally through email

and conversation. Counties that did not provide formal instructions cited the urgent and rapid nature of the transition as a factor contributing to lack of formal guidance. As one director described: "We didn't have very much training as far as how to work at home. It's more like a free for all, fly by the seat of your pants kind of thing." Even in counties that did issue formal instructions, supervisors and staff described that the inherent uncertainty circumstances led to many questions along the way. One supervisor described:

> I think that we've done really well adapting as we needed to, but it was interesting having to adapt to this in real time. You know, we didn't have the opportunity to think about all of the kinks, right? There was no plan. We weren't planning to go off site, so there weren't all these, you know, great things in place for us to overcome some of these obvious barriers that we realized kind of after the fact. But we just needed to kind of identify those and roll with them as we could based on the circumstances.

Additionally, in most counties, directors convened large group staff meetings via Microsoft Teams. Group meetings allowed leaders to give all staff information simultaneously; gauge staff reactions via video; and provide a sense of normalcy for staff by replicating their usual in-person processes. Counties noted some challenges with this format, including bandwidth difficulties and slowdowns in rural counties, discomfort among some staff about being on video, and challenges occurring within staff home environments that made it difficult to fully engage.

Across counties, directors and staff emphasized that finding ways to communicate successfully was of great importance, due to the collaborative and inter-connected nature of their work. Before and during the pandemic, staff described frequently drawing on each other's experience and relying on each other as sounding boards for difficult situations. Particularly in counties that specialized by function, staff noted that even prior to the pandemic, they depended on each other to successfully serve cases. As one director described, "Our people are so reliant on one another. You know, we're so specialized. To just get to court, you essentially go through

almost every one of the support services units, and you hit the attorney on top of it." When staff

started working at home most of the time, their interdependence heightened, particularly due to

mailing and printing issues. Across counties, staff communicated frequently on these topics, with

most counties assigning someone in the office to keep up with mail, scan and send documents to

staff working outside of the office, and flagging priority issues. Staff also frequently sent

documents to the office printer remotely and relied on each other to process them appropriately;

this turned out to be no small feat, as one person often refereed many printing jobs, and staff

needed to communicate about which documents required signatures and where they were to be

routed. Though not without challenges and missteps, staff and directors lauded the collaborative

efforts of their staff to make this work possible. Described one supervisor, "I'm really proud of

everything that the team has done in terms of stepping up for each other and really, you know,

realizing that it takes the whole team to keep the train moving." Another concurred, stating:

> Staff has been wonderful with checking on things for each other. You know, if
> they have something that they know like, 'Oh, I'm waiting on a stipulation for
> this, or I need to have this filed and I'm not in the office to sign this affidavit' or
> whatever. Workers have been really wonderful about checking each other's mail
> bins if they have something urgent going on or stepping in for an appointment if
> they need to do that really quickly. I have to say, this could have been a lot more
> of a headache than what it was.

As part of their jobs, staff and directors often must communicate with entities outside of

child support, such as the courts, caseworkers in other county offices, and other departmental

directors. For the most part, staff and directors reported few major disruptions to communication

with others. Staff and directors described calling and emailing other units to get the information

that they needed, more often than in the pre-COVID environment in which a quick office visit

would generally solve an issue, typically with a prompt response. However, several counties

noted that forums they have traditionally utilized to connect with customers and perform

outreach to the public had been diminished, such as job fairs and outreach to schools and other community partners. In several counties, regular meetings with community partners that help connect parents to employment supports were interrupted or converted to virtual formats.

Key to facilitating successful communication during the pandemic were strong relationships and communication prior to the pandemic. Across counties, staff typically texted with each other regularly prior to the pandemic and described generally feeling comfortable reaching out to each other in that way already. Most counties also described a strong sense of trust among and across staff and supervisors prior to the pandemic, which helped to facilitate strong communication when they could not be physically together. Stated one director:

> Things really work differently and better when you have trust and there's that mutual respect. And a level of understanding that the management team isn't going to do anything that's not in the best interest of the people, whether that's the team or whether that's the people we serve.

6.   *Supporting and Supervising Remote Staff*

Having staff offsite some or all of the time also required leadership to supervise staff in new ways. In addition to team meetings, leadership reported regular one-on-one communication between staff and supervisors, often weekly, via Teams, FaceTime, or telephone. Leadership described the purpose of the check-ins as to hear how staff were doing, talk about questions that arose during their work, and identify and discuss any needs or issues they might be having. In addition to regular check-ins by supervisors, one larger county's director also checked in with staff periodically by email to open lines of communication. Remote work, and the context of the pandemic itself, also made supervisors mindful of the need provide support to staff in new domains. Directors in several counties described making an effort to set a tone early that the months ahead would be challenging, and that teamwork and collaboration would be more important than ever in the months to come. Described one director:

I just kind of communicated a reminder to everyone that we're a team, and it's going to take the full team to make this work… We just really needed to have each other's backs and be flexible and understand that this is new for all of us, and that it is going to require changes on from everyone. Whether you remained in the office, whether you worked at home, it was going to take sacrifice and change. And ultimately, we still all have the same goal, and that is to help these individuals who are also going to be lost through this, not knowing, you know, what to do, where to go, and how to communicate.

Staff mentioned that leadership made concerted efforts to keep staff engaged, such as through encouraging emails and group meetings. One county in particular highlighted efforts related to mental well-being for staff, which included sharing articles and resources on mental health, having one-on-one check-ins with an emphasis on well-being and self-care, and surveying staff on needs and experiences. This county's administrator also secured $500 bonuses for county staff at the end of 2020 in acknowledgement of their efforts over the year prior.

When staff spent most or all of their time offsite, some typical means of monitoring staff performance—such as walking the halls to listen to interactions with customers or physically keeping an eye on staff work progress—were no longer possible. As a result, directors and supervisors had to engage new forms of monitoring or rely more heavily on previously available electronic methods. These included monitoring clock-in/clock-out times used by payroll software; spot-checking cases; monitoring worklists; generating reports through the Kids Information Data System (KIDS) system; and checking Microsoft Teams status indicators. While these new tools helped somewhat, overall, directors experienced remote monitoring of staff as a challenge. Noted one director: "From a management standpoint, straight up, is difficult to make sure that everybody's doing what they're supposed to be doing. Luckily, with KIDS, I'm able to go in look at certain reports. Look to see who's working on what, at how many cases have they touched each day." One supervisor also noted the limitations of these reports; while helpful for

some purposes, much of a caseworker's efforts go uncaptured by the reports. The supervisor described:

> There is a state report that tracks system activity, which captures certain events and activities performed in state systems, but doesn't account for more abstract work, like time spent doing case assessment, court prep, historical research on a case, etc. There are a lot of things that happen in case work that can't be measured like that, so some days it may look like not much was being accomplished when reviewing a system activity report, when in fact the employee may have been in virtual court hearings all afternoon, or working in a spreadsheet they created to monitor case timelines, etc.

Despite these limitations, directors and supervisors generally felt that staff productivity was high and most staff were doing their best under difficult conditions. Several counties noted low levels of customer complaints—typically an early sign that a caseworker has not been responsive. One supervisor underscored that to the extent productivity had changed, changes were at least in part due to disruptions to typical staff work routines, making regular check-ins important:

> Humans are habitual. They like their routine. They come into work, they do this, they do that. They have their little thing in their cube they look at it and, 'Oh yes! That's the information.'… You know, I heard from caseworkers through one-on-ones and things like that, where they were like, 'I just feel like I'm in a haze'. Like, 'I don't know what I'm not doing with everything not in front of me all the time.' And so it wasn't done unwillingness to be productive, but it was more of like, you didn't have those same triggers that you would always have if you were in the office keeping you on task. And, you know, when you interrupt someone's routine, it kind of throws a wrench in the whole way the mind works. So you have to build new routines.

7.   *Benefits and Downsides of Remote Work for Staff*

Staff and directors across counties were asked to describe the benefits and downsides of virtual work arrangements as they affect staff and agencies. Across counties, agency directors and staff described as a key benefit that having remote work options allowed county agencies to function during the pandemic, while also mitigating risks to employee and customer health. This meant not only continuing to provide services, but also to avoid furloughs—options that these

county agencies avoided, but were aware that other county agencies had needed to use. Staff and directors also emphasized the benefit of convenience for staff; virtual work options allowed staff to deal situations at home without needing to take time off work, as well as to eliminate commute times and parking costs. Several directors noted that these flexibilities functioned as "perks" for staff, and staff, for their part, generally concurred with that assessment. Noted one director:

> I think people like that flexibility. Retaining people, trying to retain staff long-term, has been one of our struggles overall, because of what it takes to train people and just to get good people in the office. We try to make it attractive for people, and this has helped.

Staff emphasized that having the opportunity to work remotely at times meant that they were able to catch up on certain tasks that required concentration; directors, for their part, noted that some staff have an easier time focusing at home than in the office. Stated one staff member:

> I think the morale is better for some people. For me especially, I seem to get more work done when I'm at home than when I'm in the office. I think people's spirits are a little bit lifted when they're able to work at home, or have the ability to. They're not as stressed out. You don't see the office politics that go on every day when you're working remotely.

Staff and directors also noted several downsides to remote work for staff, particularly when remote work was the only option available to staff, or when staff were not allowed to access the office as frequently as they liked. Prominent in these downsides was frustration stemming from the inability to perform certain functions while working remotely. When technology failed to work well, or to work as intended, it created substantial frustration for staff and impeded their work. This was a concern particularly highlighted in more rural counties that lacked adequate broadband access and was also mentioned as a concern early on when struggles to obtain soft phones and laptops were greatest. Additionally, several staff and directors highlighted the costs passed to employees as a result of remote work, from office supplies to electric bills to upgraded internet service plans. Further, directors and supervisors emphasized

downsides related to collaboration limitations, the effects on agency culture and camaraderie, and concerns about isolation. Directors and supervisors in most counties emphasized that these issues were of particular concern for new hires; on-site training typically occurs side-by-side, and directors lamented the difficulties associated with helping a new person learn tasks and understand an agency's culture and practices while working alone at home. Noted one director:

> I miss, like, just being able to pop in somebody's office and, 'Hey, what about this?' I mean, you can still do it, you could pick up the phone, but it's just not the same. And some people who are new or some people are struggling, I think really feel isolated.

Additionally, directors and some staff noted that while some people's homes are calmer and quieter than the office, others have distractions at home that can make remote work difficult.

C.   Modifications to Service Delivery

Child support agencies are public-facing entities whose customers are obligated by court order to comply with their services. Therefore, while providing staff with the tools that they needed to work offsite successfully was a crucial first step in the transition to virtual offerings, child support agencies also had to identify and implement strategies to connect with and made services available to customers when face-to-face offerings were limited or impossible. This need to make services available in new formats was particularly crucial considering the disruptions many NCPs and CPs faced to their employment and economic well-being as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the economy, and given that many child support and related legal processes, particularly paternity establishment and court hearings, typically occur in-person. In this section, we describe the methods through which child support agencies interacted with customers during the course of the pandemic; the pandemic's impact on service

continuity and court processes; new engagement strategies that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and implications for service accessibility.

1.   Methods of Interacting with Customers

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the child support agencies included in this analysis typically interacted with customers face-to-face, either through drop-ins or appointments made at the child support office or at court around the time of a hearing; by mail or process service; or by telephone, including outbound calls initiated by staff or inbound calls, often fielded by a call center in-house or centrally. The pandemic greatly interrupted these traditional means of interaction. For agencies that closed, face-to-face interactions became impossible; for those that remained open, additional layers of effort, such as making an appointment, were common, and staff found that some customers hesitated to visit the office in-person due to health concerns. The suspension of in-person court proceedings rendered that opportunity for face-to-face contact temporarily inaccessible. Mail processes still occurred, though were rendered more difficult due to limited in-office time for workers. And, the aforementioned telephone struggles made it difficult for customers and staff to connect, particularly in the early months of the pandemic.

And yet, agencies were aware that customers needed to reach them, perhaps now more than ever, as they experienced income loss, had stimulus checks intercepted, and encountered questions related to their unemployment benefits. As a result, agencies needed to innovate around approaches to communicating with customers, by leveraging previously available methods and creating new ones. For customers who needed to access the agency in person, as previously mentioned, agencies implemented or made broader use of drop boxes for payments and documents; provided expanded contact tools in the lobby of one closed agency, such as a fax machine and the ability to drop off or receive documents; and in some counties at varying times

during the pandemic, allowed customers to visit the reception desk, make an appointment with their caseworker, or have face-to-face meetings with workers with health precautions in place.

Even in counties that remained open to the public, agencies emphasized that they sought to provide alternate means to accomplish tasks; most commonly, these efforts included phone, email, and website options. Staff reported increased phone contact with customers, particularly once soft phones were available in counties that initially did not have them, and handling processes that were once completed in-person, such as establishment interviews, via telephone. All counties reported using email considerably more than the time before the pandemic and employing security features such as encryption to send emails, though counties used email somewhat differently. Three counties using a shared office email to communicate with customers, and two communicated with customers directly from a worker-specific email address. Some agencies used email primarily as an outreach tool to encourage customers to call their worker due to concerns about confidentiality tools and customer difficulties with the encryption software. One county, which had security processes established before the pandemic, started implementing service of process via email once BCS issued guidance allowing agencies to do so. While counties emphasized the helpfulness of email as an option, particularly during periods without phone access, workers in most counties emphasized that phone contact was preferable to email for sensitive matters or exchanging confidential information. Described one supervisor:

> There was a period of time, right as the pandemic hit and we all went off site where [email] was really like the only way people could get ahold of us quickly. I mean, because we didn't immediately have access to phones for everybody, customers couldn't come into the office, the building was closed. We were getting this influx of emails then, which, you know, we were happy to be able to communicate with people at all. And certainly, we had to kind of step outside of our comfort level with that, because we couldn't just say, 'Well, we're not going to email response to anybody.' I mean, this was really our only way to communicate. So we did have to kind of expand what we would normally allow for in terms of email communication. 'Try to keep it general; if you can't, you're

going to have to encrypt,' you know. So there was definitely much more emailing going on than what we would historically be doing. As soon as they got access to their phones, we did pull back on that and say, 'Just remember, the best way to reply is not through email,' unless, you know, the person is indicating that's the only or best way to reach them. Really picking up the phone is the best option.

Agencies also leveraged websites as a key communication tool during the pandemic. Three agencies reported having robust website options in place prior to the pandemic, containing paperwork and other information for customers; another, by coincidence, launched their agency's site during the pandemic, which allowed customers to send address and employment updates securely to the agency, provided information on how to make payments, and allowed customers to send questions to a generic agency email account. One agency that had a site in place already improved upon their website to include a number of fillable forms for customers, such as financial, job search, and medical capacity forms, that could be downloaded, emailed in, or dropped off upon completion. Agencies also modified their websites content to include information about COVID-19 related procedures and when applicable, to share information about making payments via drop box. Staff described encouraging customers to make use of their own websites, as well as other sites such as GovPayNet (https://www.govpaynet.com) and Child Support Online Services, or CSOS (https://csos.wisconsin.gov/login).

Staff used other options, like texting, video or text chat, and fax, less frequently or not at all. Most agencies did not text; one used it only for customers involved in a particular program, and another temporarily sent one-way texts reminding customers of hearings and providing notice of closures for several months. Counties generally did not meet with customers by video, either due to agency practice, bandwidth constraints for customers, or simply due to lack of customer demand. Though fax was generally an option for reaching agencies, staff noted that

few people had access to one; one county added a fax machine to their lobby to give customers this option.

Child support agency staff also recognized that, as options for interacting with the child support agency changed, they needed to communicate these changes and current agency status information to customers. In addition to website postings, agencies used a host of virtual tools, from providing information on voicemail systems, information in the local newspaper or on radio stations, through press releases or Facebook posts from the broader county, and via telephone. Agencies also used physical tools to share information about the agency's status, such as fliers and postings on buildings and by including information in mailings to customers.

2.   *Changes to Court Processes*

Courts, like child support agencies, had to change operating procedures during the pandemic with little time to prepare. Across counties, in-person child support court hearings ceased in March 2020, then transitioned to offering virtual court hearings over a varying number of months. All counties continued to have virtual child support hearings in place at the time of data collection; across counties and for most types of hearings, these occurred by Zoom with an option to dial in by telephone. Staff reported that, while some customers needed support or instructions to access Zoom, the process worked well for most customers as well as for court staff, and show rates have maintained or improved. Described one staff member:

> The court sends them notice through the mail of the instructions for how to appear by Zoom. Like there's a link in there for them to type in their computer so that they can connect remotely like through video, or the opportunity for a phone dial in. … The courts have liked it because we used to have people bring their children to the hearings, and the paternity and support establishment hearings are recorded. So, if the child is crying, it's difficult for them to take testimony and all that. The Zoom for that has really helped.

Related to these delays in court proceedings, across counties, law enforcement agencies sought to reduce the potential for COVID-19 exposures in jails and through routine law enforcement interactions. This meant that sheriffs ceased service of process and arrests of customers on child support-related warrants, to keep numbers of prisoners in jail at a minimum; courts, in turn, typically stopped issuing warrants or commitments. These limitations remained mostly in place at the time of data collection, though one county had recently resumed normal warrant and commitment procedures, and one had returned to using them on a limited basis.

These process changes had a number of implications for child support agency operations. During the period in which no hearings occurred, child support agencies had to work with courts to communicate changes, such as postponed hearings, to customers—sometimes multiple times. Temporarily, the gap also contributed to delays in paternity establishment. From an enforcement perspective, this also meant that when enforcement processes resumed, jail time was often not available as a potential sanction. From the perspective of some staff, this led some customers to take contempt less seriously. Described one director:

> Normally, we would have [the commissioner] issue a contempt order. Give them 30 days, if they don't comply, then the warrant gets issued, you know, stuff like that. But we're not doing any of that right now. So, that has led to some frustration from the caseworkers because their most difficult cases, they feel like well, as soon as Joe Smith finds out, he's not going to jail, he's not going to pay. So now what do we do?

As a positive consequence to these changes to legal processes, child support agencies in several counties reported working with their court partners closely to collaboratively consider how to make the best use of court time given current conditions. This led to several innovations in the realm of court proceedings. First, in the county whose director noted above that the removal of jail as a potential sanction meant that some parents become less likely to pay, the agency and courts developed an innovative new approach to enforcement court proceedings in

lieu of contempt court hearings, targeted strategically at early intervention cases. In these proceedings, noncompliant parents are served, appear before a commissioner via Zoom, discuss factors contributing to noncompliance with the commissioner, and are given purge conditions related to communicating with the agency, employment-related efforts, and making payments. The county noted that they had been actively seeking alternatives to traditional contempt even prior to the pandemic, and the pandemic provided the necessary catalyst to drive this innovation forward. In another county, moving to virtual court processes drove the agency and courts to collaboratively innovate on new virtual pre-court meetings between child support workers and customers, to ensure that customers understand how hearing processes work virtually, discuss paperwork in advance, provide an opportunity for stipulated agreements, and answer questions. This county expressed excitement to have identified a method to streamline hearings, as well as to improve customer understanding of and engagement in court processes.

3.   Service Continuity

By identifying alternate means of engaging customers and facilitating limited in-person options for customers who needed them, agencies reported that they were generally able to maintain service continuity across domains, albeit with some gaps and slowdowns. A service area that experienced significant challenges was paternity establishment, which suffered interruptions due to court delays, delays as counties implemented safety procedures and alternate plans to conduct genetic testing, and notary requirements. Described one frontline worker:

> We used to do appointments for people to sign the voluntary paternity acknowledgement, where they agreed that the dad was the dad and, you know, we would fill it out for them and have them sign it and then we would notarize it. Well, with COVID, they couldn't even take a form to a bank or library to have it notarized. So we couldn't do the voluntary paternity acknowledgments with them, so every paternity case that we had was having to go on the court calendar. It kind of like clogged up our court times a little bit.

Ultimately, however, by the time of data collection, all counties had resumed genetic testing and paternity proceedings, by appointment only in most counties, and several counties had identified ways to streamline the process. For example, one county made paternity interview forms available for download via their website and allowed the forms to be returned by email.

Enforcement processes also experienced some changes; though staff continued communicate about enforcement by phone and email, when contempt proceedings paused, staff spent less time on contempt processes. Directors and staff also reported taking enforcement actions cautiously during the pandemic, given the significant economic hardship many customers were experiencing and difficulties communicating with customers directly. Counties engaged in innovations to address enforcement issues effectively during the pandemic; for example, a county started allowing customers to deal with vehicle liens by mail than in-person, and some made enforcement-related documents, such as job search forms, available online for download.

A function of particular concern for agencies across counties was ensuring that customers could make payments. To accomplish this, counties sought to ensure that income withholdings were quickly attached to new employment by initiating communication with customers in response to job changes, and providing customers with methods to report job losses or changes virtually, such as through websites. Agencies also directed customers who pay directly instead of via income withholding to online payment options and continued taking payments physically.

4.   *New Engagement Opportunities*

Just as the pandemic drove innovations in court processes seen as beneficial, child support agencies also identified several agency practice modifications that resulted from the pandemic, broadly viewed as positive. Most prominently, agencies identified that changes due to the pandemic led to more proactive outreach from caseworkers to customers—a change that

directors hoped would persist after the pandemic's end. This increase in outreach efforts occurred as the result of several factors. First, staff described that workers had more time for outreach due to lower enforcement levels and reduced contempt filings. Described one director:

> Because we don't have our 100 percent of our enforcement ability, they're not prepping as many cases for [court]. So, what are they doing instead?... More communication with NCPs, CPs, more emails, more phone contact. Reach out to people early; take five minutes explain their court order where they've never had that before, because our people have 700 or 800 cases per caseload.

Additionally, staff described that proactive outreach became more important due to the pandemic because a means through which agencies traditionally interacted with customers about questions or issues—in-person court proceedings—were no longer occurring. This meant that workers had to connect with customers by phone or email on issues such as lack of income withholding or job search forms not turned in, which directors perceived as a significant bonus for the customer-caseworker relationship. Described one director:

> And then the establishment workers, you know, they've had to call people more, and email people more to say, 'Hey, Joe Smith, I see that we don't have an income holding you in place anymore. What's shaking?' So normally, we would have found that out in court, but since we weren't doing court for a long time, it forces them communicate, which I love. I've preached that since I've been here. You've got to reach out to these people. Because if you talk their language, they're going to be more willing to respond and communicate. So, that's been good.

Another positive practice change brought about by the pandemic described by staff was the opportunity to reimagine how to make processes less burdensome, or to work through processes in new ways. This led directors, for example, to examine opportunities to serve documents in new ways, to consider alternatives to signature requirements, and to assess which processes could be accomplished by mail or phone instead of in person. In several counties, staff encouraged parents to take pro se actions in lieu of court actions when appropriate for their circumstances, due to delays in court hearings. One supervisor cited modification requests as an

example, which is a process that takes months in normal circumstances and substantially longer

in the context of the pandemic. She described walking customers through all available options

when they contacted the agency in need of a modification:

> We had a number of people calling me wanting to have their order modified right
> away. In situations like a pandemic, where somebody's circumstances are
> changed overnight, you know, you have people being laid off... The process is not
> built for that at the agency level. We don't have the authority to just stop the
> order. We don't have the authority to change the balances on the account. Even if
> you both agree, we can't just do that; there needs to be court intervention. So,
> situations like that where we can tell them, 'Look, if you're really concerned
> about getting this stopped as quickly as possible, this is what you can do,' and
> provide them with the options. 'You can file a motion with the court. Does the
> other person agree? If the other person agrees that will be helpful. We don't have
> to go through the whole review process.' You know, 'We can just temporarily
> suspend it until this, until whatever time we think this is all going to be done.'
> Those kinds of things where maybe there isn't something that the agency can do
> to snap our fingers and help someone, but we can point them in a direction that
> might be helpful for them.

Agency leadership emphasized that these modified approaches to engaging customers

helped to catalyze another important change already underway within some agencies; that is,

changing the culture around how child support staff, and enforcement workers in particular, view

and interact with noncustodial parents. Experiencing the pandemic and the hardships imposed by

its fallout collectively as a community, in the eyes of directors, helped workers to be more

understanding when customers were having a hard time meeting their obligations. As a result,

workers often shared information on resources, even beyond child support, that could help

address needs. Described one supervisor:

> When you go through something like this, there's the understanding that, you
> know, these are hard times, and everybody's struggling, and things aren't
> normal… So knowing that particularly for enforcement, it was kind of like, 'Well,
> should we be enforcing these cases?' 'What are we supposed to be doing right
> now if we're not enforcing the cases?' And so, you know, wanting to be sure that
> to the extent that we could reach people, can we find out about what their
> circumstances are, right? What do they need? This is where the information about
> community resources became really important.

5.   Implications for Service Accessibility

Regarding the benefits of virtual service offerings, staff highlighted a number of customer service advantages. First, staff noted that many customers experience barriers to engaging with child support services and court processes in-person, and new methods of interacting helped some customers overcome those barriers. Barriers to in-person services cited by staff included lack of transportation or not having a driver's license; lack of child care; needing to take time off of work, particularly for indeterminately long court processes; mental health difficulties; and reluctance or anxiousness about going to court or appearing in the agency in-person. Commenting on higher show-rates for virtual hearings, one director described:

> I think there's been better rates of appearance for court within virtual. I think because people, you know, if they're at work, if they have transportation issues, that becomes a non-barrier when you're appearing virtually… you could essentially use a 15-minute break or a half-hour lunch or whatever to appear for court if you needed to. You can be wherever you happen to be to appear.

Virtual options expanded the ability of customers to receive the help or service that they needed, and as a result, helped agencies to increase cooperation from a group of customers they otherwise might have struggled to engage. Staff also noted that for certain types of customers, virtual options were especially helpful, accessible, or safety-enhancing. First, staff described that for custodial parents with young children, not having to attend processes in-person could make it much easier to access court processes. Described one director:

> Especially with our paternity cases, I think our show rate has if anything improved… For people who have really young kids or multiple kids—and obviously if you're coming in for a paternity case, you've got young kids—it's just not realistic. They're not able to line up babysitters, so they bring kids in or they just don't show up because we tell them, 'Don't bring your kids.' So now, that barrier has disappeared a little bit, which is good.

Staff noted that virtual options can also be helpful in cases where a customer lives far away or lacks transportation, and highlighted the usefulness of virtual options for customers with mental health issues and anxiety in particular. Described one staff member,

> We had a fair share of people who had anxiety, especially being in a courtroom or being in a courthouse …being able to just make that phone call and not have to show their face, because sometimes just even being in a public arena causes a level of anxiety, it has dropped.

Similarly, for victims of domestic violence, court processes provided the benefit of being able to take part in hearings from the safety and privacy of home. Noted one staff member, "I would say anyone with restraining orders or any domestic issues, they really enjoy the phone and Zoom. They don't have to come in and face that person… they can dial in a number. And they can sit in the comfort of their own home."

Staff noted that, particularly for tech-savvy and sometimes younger customers, accessing services virtually was comfortable, familiar, and for some, preferable. A supervisor described:

> For people who are tech savvy, they love access to everything online. If you can go to the [agency] website, and you can click and download your review paperwork, if you can fill it out electronically and send it back, you can have that done much quicker, you don't have to come to the office. You know, if you're comfortable just calling and talking on the phone about a situation, and it's really not important to you to have that that face-to-face relationship, I mean, that can be really slick.

Staff noted that many customers on their caseloads had phones and many had smartphones, particularly given that the demographic served by agencies is predominantly middle-aged and younger. Agencies noted that they had started collecting emails from customers more frequently, and with positive response; even in counties that had encountered resistance to email contact previously, the pandemic had helped to shift customer willingness to engage via email.

Staff also highlighted that some processes are particularly well-suited for virtual interactions, such as completing and returning relatively simple forms, getting a quick answer

from a caseworker, or making payments. Accomplishing these actions virtually can help some customers help case-related processes move forward more quickly. Described one director:

> Texting, email, phone, all those things are a lot quicker than walking down here, driving down here, or whatever, waiting for a response. We'll be able to process through cases quicker, and that'll get them into court faster. And then mom, dad, whoever has custody of the child after the paternity is established can get money into that household quicker.

However, interview participants also noted that virtual services do not work equally well for all customers, or across all service contexts. Staff noted that certain customers need or prefer in-person interaction, due to potential language barriers, discomfort with technology, or simply personal preference for face-to-face interaction. Noted one director:

> Some [customers] are very, 'I want to be in person. I want to know what's going on. I want to be there and talk to you face to face.' I would say a lot of the younger generation are all for Zoom and the phone. And I would say, you know, the older generation, they definitely want to talk face to face, have the letters and not rely so much on technology.

Other customers, particularly those in rural areas, sometimes had trouble accessing a reliable internet connection, particularly as libraries and other public spaces in many communities, which customers might rely on for internet, had shut down due to the pandemic. Described one staff member: "A lot go to the library, and the libraries have been closed. And just, they're not going to—they can't afford internet. They don't want to pay for internet. They don't have access to it."

Staff also noted that for certain types of services, in-person options are often preferable and customer service experiences are likely to be of higher quality. For example, staff shared that when customers have a big change occurring on their case (such as a modification or a placement change), or when having a record of the action they took that day is especially important (such as having made a payment that the customer needs recorded), customers sometimes prefer to visit the agency in-person to accomplish the task. Further, actions that require notarization of

paperwork are often easier for some customers to complete in person, because offices generally have notary services available onsite. Staff also highlighted the constraints of sharing information via email and issues related to confidentiality, as well as some customers' difficulty using email encryption. On the topic of court experiences, staff were mixed; most felt that the quality of court processes was as high virtually as in person, whereas others felt that the virtual format reduced the opportunity to ask questions and engage with staff.

Resoundingly, agencies emphasized that having a broader array of options for customers and staff to communicate, that provided both in-person and virtual offerings, provided an opportunity to engage customers as broadly as possible. Most counties expressed that they would not want services to be available online only; as human services providers, they felt maintaining in-office services was crucial for meeting the needs of their customer base. But, they also generally felt that offering services through a broader array of formats meant that they could be more responsive to the needs and interaction styles of their customers. Described one director:

> That's why we wanted to offer a bunch of different options. To try to incentivize everybody to communicate with us, and work with us, and make it as easy as possible for them to get something back to us. Make a payment. All of those things are always on my radar. You know, like, this age group loves to text. So, we need to cater to them, because we're going to get higher participation in court, if they get a text back saying, 'Oh, yup, I've got court. But some of our individuals have no smartphone, their Tracphone just ran out of money.' They don't have their bicycle anymore, so they're walking here. I mean, it's really a wide gamut here of who we need to think about and keep in mind. And so, I think we've pretty much got it nailed in a good way to let everybody have options.

Directors and supervisors noted that having more virtual offerings was not without difficulties. Some noted the need to tailor letters and emails to include instructions specific to modality, and others emphasized the need to provide staff with training and support on workflow and email management when they had more ways of interacting with customers available to them. Some felt that it was harder to ensure that services were being provided at a high level of quality

53

virtually relative to traditional offerings; some cautioned that while a broader array of offerings meant more opportunity to connect in the format of the customer's preference, it also meant workers needed to become aware of preferences and not default to providing the service in the format easiest or most convenient for the staff member. Summarized one supervisor:

> I think it is somewhere in between, depending on the person, right? Because I might think that the best way to deliver a service is over the phone. It might be easier; you know, it's faster, it's more efficient, I can answer all of the questions that they have. But if the other person is someone who retains information better when you're sitting across from them, who just wants more of that person to person relationship, or wants to be able to see the document I'm talking about, because that's just how they understand it better. That's been one of the struggles with all of this is that, you know, are we delivering the service? Yes, and I'm so grateful for the way we've been able to continue to deliver service. But, is it as meaningful to the person if it's not the way that they would normally receive it? I don't know. That's been one of the hard things. I think it depends on what the service is and it depends on how the person is used to receiving it.

D.   Celebrating Successes and Looking Forward

As child support agencies look to the post-pandemic future, reflecting on the experience of providing child support services under these conditions offers a host of learning opportunities. In this section, we highlight agency successes providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned; expectations for the future of virtual service offerings; and guidance and resources counties need as they look to the future.

1.   Successes and Lessons Learned

Directors and staff emphasized a number of successes in their provision of virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost, interview participants acknowledged and celebrated the fact that despite a long history of providing in-office services, very little time to prepare for the transition, and myriad challenges encountered along the way, they were able to continuing providing essential services to families during a time of great need. Stated one supervisor,

I think our ability to still provide information to people. Even if we couldn't always tell them what they wanted to hear, or even if we couldn't always provide the service as quickly as we normally would, I think that we did a really good job identifying ways that we could provide information to people.

Staff and leadership often described being unsure, prior to the pandemic, if a service model that involved staff working offsite was possible. This represented a monumental and foundational change in operations, and required the cooperation of many actors. And yet, challenges notwithstanding, agencies were able to continue serving customers.

The pandemic also caused child support agencies to invest in tools and infrastructure that would allow them to continue providing services in a more flexible manner moving forward. Staff and directors celebrated that they had learned and embraced new technologies, improved their websites and virtual offerings, and modernized infrastructure. This helped agencies to feel more prepared for meeting customer needs in the future. A director summarized:

I guess it was the fact that we were able to do something that we never thought— okay, the world's changing tomorrow, you know, literally! And you never prepared for this and maybe we should have been better prepared, but who knew. And the fact that we were able to really still, I mean not perfectly, but still keep going through all of it. And just the fact that—I mean the biggest success is that we made all these changes. So now we're kind of set up for that, so when [the pandemic] goes away, hopefully we can get back in the office a lot more, but we're able to, you know, do things virtually and work from home. You know, when we—you weren't able to do that at all before.

Staff also counted as a success that they were able to "think outside of the box" and approach services differently than before. By streamlining services, improving accessibility, innovating on new procedures, and helping customers to become more aware available options, agencies not only kept services going, but identified and capitalized on opportunities to take a new approach.

Directors and staff also cited collaboration and communication among their teams as considerable successes. Agency staff needed each other more than ever to do their jobs successfully, and from the perspective of interview participants, agency personnel rose to the

occasion. They developed new processes and tools to facilitate workflow across staff in the

office and staff working at home. This required a higher degree of coordination and collaboration

than ever; it was no longer sufficient to expect to work one's own caseload autonomously

throughout the day. Described one staff member, "I guess my first would be the collaboration…

it almost caused a refreshing and a renewal, because people had to learn new ways of

collaborating with one another and new ways to communicate and to work with one another."

From a communication perspective, directors described that the pandemic forced them to

communicate more clearly and more broadly via email, given the limited opportunities for in-

person large-group interaction with staff. While this presented challenges, several directors noted

that it also required them to think through messaging and document processes in greater detail,

which were ultimately beneficial for ensuring that all staff received consistent information.

Further, agencies needed to collaborate with others outside of their agency, from county

administrators and human resources, to public health departments, to courts, in order to ensure

that the steps they were taking were safe and appropriate. While challenging at times and dealing

with great uncertainty, agencies successfully worked with others to make plans that allowed

services to continue. Described one director:

> I guess one of the things that has given me the ability to overcome is having the
> staff that is flexible and working together as a team. And it's not even just my
> staff. It is the agencies around me who, you know, if I call and say, 'Hey, I'm
> really stuck on this and I can't figure this one out,' then be willing to help—you
> know, lending a hand. And so knowing that all of the agencies across the state
> have each other's back, knowing that my staff is there to support me and I'm there
> to support them, collaborating with other departments and other agencies, it's
> taking us all to a new level of appreciation and understanding of one another, and
> knowing that I can't do my job without you.

Directors and staff also celebrated successes in identifying and embracing opportunities

to build staff morale, as well as supporting each other. Virtual supervision brought a host of

challenges to child support agencies, but according to some directors and staff, also brought

teams closer together. This required substantial effort on the part of directors and supervisors,

whose own jobs had also become increasingly complex due to the pandemic, yet maintained a

focus on staff needs, resources and support. One director described:

> I think [a success] is probably just finding ways to think outside of the box and communicate effectively. Get them the information they need. Try to incentivize them to make payments and do what they're supposed to be doing. Keeping the staff happy and engaged and content as much as they can be with all the anxiety and unknown. It's been tricky. But by doing one-on-one check ins, and surveys, and emails, and keeping my door open all the time, and talking about it at staff meetings, like, 'It's all right if you have a bad day. If anybody needs to chat, we're always here. If you aren't doing great, you need to reach out and get some help like, both on a personal level and professional level.'

Staff, for their part, cited the dedication of agency directors to making this possible, frequently

noting the accessibility, responsiveness, and supportiveness of their directors. Directors

emphasized that building team cohesion, and relationships between staff and supervisors, needed

to happen before a crisis began in order for transitions to occur as smoothly as possible. Stated

one director, "You've got to be kind of taking care of [staff] all along... you've got to make sure

that people are have enough of buy-in and are happy enough. So that they'll—that when you do

need them to step up, you know, during a crisis, they will."

Several directors also highlighted as a that, as far as they were aware, they were able to

continue providing customers without harming their health. Described one director,

> No one's gotten sick because of us, because of child support, because of their job, because of their need to come to the agency. That really, at the end of the day…if you would have asked me the one thing I wanted to accomplish, it would have been that.

Staff and directors also reflected on the lessons they learned during the pandemic, and

advice they would give to other agencies looking to the future. Across the board, directors and

staff emphasized the importance of advance planning and considering a range of scenarios that

57

could occur, with a goal of ensuring all agency personnel have the support and information that they need. Several directors advocated for written, documented contingency plans that could be used as a reference in a crisis. Such plans, they noted, might document the supplies, tools, and information needed in the face of a crisis; the roles and back-up roles played by all staff; and which staff must be physically present in a crisis. Staff emphasized that such advance planning is needed not only pandemics, but for a range of short-term and longer-term crises, such as weather emergencies or security threats, at both the state and county levels. Elaborated one director:

> Figure out your priorities. What do you need to accomplish? Have a contingency plan. Have the equipment; you know, don't wait until you come up for replacement for your equipment to get laptops and WebEx set up and Teams chat. Be ready, practice. We do a tornado drill; let's do a pandemic drill. Make sure that your mental muscle is ready. Make sure you have policies in place so that you can move quickly. Have an essential worker plan so that everybody knows, 'You need to stay but you can go.' Cover that when people accept positions, you know, make sure people know what they're buying on for.

Related to continency planning, staff and directors stressed the importance of ensuring that agencies have the technological infrastructure to continue to allow remote work to happen in a crisis; having a plan for distributing equipment to the people who need it; and ensuring that all staff know how to use it effectively. Directors emphasized the importance of working with county IT departments in advance of a crisis, to establish relationships and protocols, and ensuring that staff understand security and technology requirements in advance of offsite work.

Similarly, staff and directors highlighted the importance of ensuring that staff understand what processes can be completed offsite, which must be completed within the agency itself, and providing staff with tools and resources to stay efficient and problem-solve when traditional methods of work are not available. Described one staff member, "I think the biggest one is taking stock of, what do you really have to do in your office and what can you really do from home? And, if you're going to perhaps have a mix of in the office or offsite time, you know, what are

your people going to need from home? What are they going to need in the office?" Supervisors suggested creating handouts and lists reminding staff of the functions they are expected to perform when working outside the office. Directors and supervisors also recommended ensuring that staff are fully trained on processes such as e-filing in advance of needing to work remotely.

Finally, staff and directors stressed the importance of having clear communication plans for customers and staff. Suggestions included communication for customers about how to best reach staff when in-office options are not available; how to complete processes via email and web; information on the closure status of county offices; and precautions in place for those visiting the office in person. For staff, interview participants suggested having clear plans in place that ensure staff know how to communicate, the tools available for communication, and expectations for staying in touch with colleagues and supervisors. Described one staff member:

> Equipment wise, make sure everyone has what they need to work from home. And, build that communication and just make sure everyone is on the same track for everything. And then, I guess really making sure that the customers know how to access or reach you, maybe like an information card or something as to, your email and your website, and things you can and can't do virtually. Like a "how to"—how we're going to do this and what services we're going to do virtually versus what services you have to come in for.

Further, staff recommended providing forums for staff to provide feedback on how new processes are working and advised directors to be willing to listen and respond to staff input.

2.   *Expectations for the Future*

The child support agencies included in this study had enacted several process changes in the course of the pandemic that they hoped would persist in the future. These included streamlined administrative processes, such as new ways of processing paperwork, as well as innovative new court-related processes, such as pre-court meetings and hearings that act as

alternatives to contempt. Staff also noted that they hoped enhanced outreach efforts and gains in understanding of customer circumstances among workers would persist into the future.

From the perspective of virtual service offerings, broadly, agencies acknowledged that virtual ways of interacting were increasingly ubiquitous across many aspects of society and would likely continue to grow as child support agencies continue to modernize. Noted one director, "I think customers are probably also learning how to use different virtual platforms and technology themselves. So, I think over time, it's going to be a lot easier. And I think you're going to see more people want to communicate that way." A supervisor added:

> We should have a child support app. 'Click to pay your child support.' You know, how do you do that? It seems like there's an app for everything, right? You can transfer money in Venmo or wherever… if you can quick send a payment through and it'll hit your child support account, and show, you know, there's not fees, it's just easy... When you think about technology and the possibilities of what could be available virtually, there's a lot of potential. I think if the policies, and all of the paperwork, and some of those things could catch up, I think it would work a lot better than what it's currently designed for.

Some staff noted that email communication with customers would likely persist; several counties expressed interest in pursuing texting options and video conferencing options for customers. Agencies that enhanced or built websites found the improvements beneficial and expected to continue supporting them. Agencies had mixed impressions of whether court hearings would remain virtual; most staff expected virtual options to remain available, if not the default.

Regarding virtual work arrangements, counties were mixed in their future plans. No agencies expressed an expectation or desire to have staff work remotely full-time or give up a physical office space entirely; counties emphasized that from a pragmatic standpoint, many processes still required a physical presence in an office at least some of the time, and from a cultural standpoint, they felt it was important to spend time with each other and be available to

customers in person. Summarized one director, "We're a resource agency. And we can't be resourceful if we're not there to be able to do it." A supervisor concurred, elaborating:

> I think in the olden days of casework where a lot of it really was paper pushing and there really wasn't a lot of interaction, [being fully virtual] might've been okay, you know, if you had people in the office to send stuff out in the mail. But I feel like the way that we're trying to move towards in terms of customer service, being more customer service focused, that you really need, as a customer, a place they can go and talk to someone… They want to go into a place and get the payment coupon, or get the review paperwork, or get the whatever, so that they can leave having that document that they want. It's that kind of like sense of security of like, 'I went there, I did the thing and now I'm done.' If you were 100 percent remote, you know, how do you offer that to someone?

Several counties felt that hybrid schedules, with staff in the office most days but having the option to work at home several days each week, were likely to persist, given positive experiences and benefits for staff morale; these agencies sought to maintain the benefits afforded to staff by offering periodic virtual work, while also providing opportunities for staff to engage with each other and build camaraderie in person. Regardless of whether they expected regular remote options for staff, however, directors generally noted that having the equipment to work remotely provided agencies with helpful flexibility for intermittent remote work options in the future. For example, if an agency were to close due to inclement weather, or if a staff member experienced an injury, remote work for a period of time is now possible. Several directors and supervisors speculated that staff will want or expect more remote options in the future.

3.   Guidance and Resources Needed

Counties expressed recognition that the state, like the counties themselves, had to navigate considerable uncertainty during the pandemic, which limited the information and guidance the state could provide to the counties during this time. As one director described, "[The state was] going through this right with us. We all were just kind of doing our best and that

includes them." This led to some anxieties on the part of some directors, who appreciated the flexibilities afforded by the state in operations, but also expressed varying degrees of worry that the flexibilities granted could mean that counties were making decisions that the state or federal governments might disagree with. To help allay these anxieties and facilitate a smooth transition out of the pandemic, directors described information and support desired from the state, which fall into four main domains.

First, counties were concerned about performance measures and implications for future funding, particularly given county variation in remote work capabilities during the pandemic. Most directors acknowledged that their collections had fallen during the pandemic and noted that timelines were more difficult to achieve. Whereas some directors expected that the federal government would overlook performance issues when determining funding due to exceptional circumstances, others were less certain of the implications and desired more information.

Next, and of particular importance to future remote work options, all counties expressed a need for additional guidance around confidentiality policies, data safeguards, and information technology security. Counties particularly wanted to know the steps they needed to take to ensure that when staff work remotely, they are in compliance with requirements. Directors acknowledged that this guidance was likely difficult to generate and enforce during the pandemic, but moving forward, information on policies and requirements is of crucial importance to them. Counties noted awareness of the potential of an IRS audit, and sought information that would help them proactively avoid being noncompliant. Described one director:

> I think what we're looking for is, you know, [during the pandemic], we had these security concerns and they said, 'Well, you know, we're going to kind of let things slip, be kind of slack on enforcement, because we're in a crisis time. We know that you have to do what you have to do.' Well, okay. But this is going to go away and we're still going to want to work virtually. At some point we're not going to have that excuse where, 'Well, gee, it's COVID and we're letting things

slide a little bit.' You know, we're going to have to comply, so we need to know how we can safely and securely work from home... I think most counties are probably going to work, at least partially virtually. And we need to know how we can do that. I mean you have to know, is the IRS going to knock on your door for an audit? You know, that sort of thing, we've got to get those things clarified.

Directors sought information about requirements related to staff workspaces when working virtually, documents and printing, computer security, documentation agencies needed to collect, such as photographs, or site visit requirements for staff home workspaces, and any other directives related to confidentiality, security and compliance. Added one supervisor about the guidance she hoped to obtain, "What will and will not be marked against us, and the idea of an audit or our performance and things like that. It's just not really been concrete answers on—and I'm sure it has to do with the fact that they can't, but it's just frustrating. So, what they're looking for, documentation they need, that kind of thing."

Third, staff sought guidance from the state around what is allowable or not allowable for remote work arrangements broadly. Beyond requirements about security and confidentiality, counties sought clarity around whether remote work was acceptable or allowable from the state's perspective and whether the state had expectations that all counties maintain an in-office presence. In this domain, counties were looking not for specific directives on how agencies were to operate at the county level; rather, counties sought parameters around what is allowable or required related to work arrangements broadly. Directors emphasized that this information would allow them to avoid making decisions in contravention to the state's goals, but would also give counties a basis for making requests from their county's administrators related to things like physical office space and the number of supervisors needed on staff. Described one director:

I have [county leadership] saying, 'Shrink the footprint; do telework as much as you can.' Then I have some of the staff saying, 'Well, why would you take [telework] away from us? And then I have all the stuff I'm responsible to ensure, and the people I care about and continue to serve. I need to know what the

bookends are from the state's perspective, because then I can go back to [county leadership] and say, 'Yeah, but here's the thing. BCS is saying, I need to meet this threshold, this threshold. I need two more supervisors. And here's why.

Fourth, some directors hoped that in the future, the state would provide public health guidance that could help inform their decisions in a future crisis. Whereas some directors received robust guidance from local human resources and public health officials during the pandemic, others reported receiving little information, and therefore having to essentially make the best calls they could on topics such as mask requirements and capacity limits. In a similar vein, finally, counties expressed a desire for more information and support regarding how child support staff are viewed in the context of a future health crisis. Specifically, directors wanted to know whether the state considered child support agency staff essential personnel, and sought support for granting staff early eligibility for vaccination due to their role in genetic testing.

Additionally, counties described six primary domains in which they would like additional resources or supports from the state moving forward. First, counties appreciated that the state provided virtual training to staff during the pandemic and expressed a desire for virtual training options to continue; these options reduced transportation and cost-related barriers to participation. Next, counties expressed a desire for BCS to, in times of crisis, host more forums for sharing information statewide, to give counties of comparable size an opportunity to share information, in addition to regional calls. Related to this request, third, counties expressed a desire for more robust, regularly-maintained COVID-specific web-based resources (or in the future, web-based resources specific to the crisis at hand) to allow counties to read about the approaches other counties are taking, tips and tricks for supporting staff during a crisis, parameters, and guidance related to remote work. Directors noted that such a centralized resource could help promote information-sharing and consistency across counties.

Next, counties expressed a desire for state support for accessing or funding technological resources, such as those that could support remote work moving forward. For example, several counties are interested in incorporating texting into their routine practice but have concerns about the cost, and soft phones have been essential for facilitating virtual work in some counties. Several counties noted that state support, facilitation, or funding of these resources could help improve access. Further, given that staff and agencies in several counties had to absorb nontrivial costs of transitioning to remote work, directors noted that technology supports that help offset costs to individuals could be beneficial for staff and support remote work.

Fifth, and related to these issues, directors in rural counties emphasized that broadband access in the period of the pandemic was a significant challenge for customers and staff, and that while this issue goes beyond DCF, advocacy for improved broadband access in rural areas at the state level could help facilitate future remote offerings. Described one director, "Some of it, like I said, is beyond their control… But it could be great for somebody to advocate for enhanced broadband in different communities that currently don't have a lot of access."

Finally, counties expressed a desire for additional state resources specifically related to how to work remotely. For customers, agencies suggested letter templates for customers that could be customized by counties to explain virtual offerings and how to access virtual tools, a topic on which some counties did not feel fully well-versed. For staff, agencies sought documentation or directions on printing off-site, how to e-file, and other resource supports or handouts that could help support staff working outside of the office. For directors, they sought resource sheets describing how to monitor staff remote work effectively, remote work agreement templates, health guidance that could be posted or shared within an office, or other forms and

documents used commonly across counties that could help directors avoid having to "reinvent the wheel."

V.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic upended many aspects of life and work, in Wisconsin and beyond. For child support agencies, entities that typically relied on in-office procedures to provide services that families count on, the pandemic forced rapid and dramatic changes to operations and service provision. This report represents an attempt to document child support agency experiences transitioning to new ways of working during the COVID 19 pandemic; describe how staff work arrangements and service offerings changed during the course of the pandemic; and explore agency expectations and needs as they look to the future of service delivery.

Findings from interviews with agency leaders and staff in five Wisconsin counties suggest the agencies that took part in these interviews experienced numerous successes as they navigated these new waters. Though not without challenges and adaptations, the agencies included in this analysis were ultimately able to continue providing services. Adaptability and openness to change on the part of agency leadership and staff; creativity and flexibility in developing innovative solutions to complex problems; and dedicating effort to communication and collaborative efforts helped agencies to provide service continuity. Adaptations were also made possible thanks to leadership and staff's dedication to supporting each other and their customers during an exceptionally difficult period.

These interviews also suggest that counties experienced the pandemic differently, given local and agency-specific context. Counties experienced different levels of input from local administrators, which shaped the decisions agency leaders made within their respective agencies.

Further, local conditions, such as infection rates and outbreaks, differed across time and counties. Decision-making about what was safe and appropriate for customers and staff therefore differed across time and county contexts. Additionally, these findings highlight the particular challenges faced by smaller, rural counties in times of crises that make face-to-face interactions difficult. This study found that broadband access issues introduced challenges for staff as they worked to keep their agencies operating, as well as customers in accessing essential services.

While findings from these interviews provide insight into county adaptations and potential areas for future consideration, the analysis has several important limitations. These data were collected at a specific point-in-time (Winter of 2021), and conditions have quickly changed since data collection occurred. Additionally, the study was conducted in just five of Wisconsin's 72 counties. The counties that participated in interviews are not representative of all Wisconsin counties, nor are the staff who took part representative of all staff within their agencies or Wisconsin. While some consistent themes, and therefore implications, emerged, they are based on a small and non-representative sample. Future studies could draw on these findings as a starting point to gather data from a broader array of counties, or systematically across all counties, to provide a more complete picture of county experiences.

The interviews conducted for this analysis suggest several steps for further consideration and areas for future exploration. First, findings from these interviews suggest that using a broader array of communication modalities with customers, including more traditional strategies and newer, technology-facilitated approaches, can help to provide child support agencies with the opportunity to engage with as broad a customer base as possible. These interviews highlight that customers, their needs, and the tasks they seek to accomplish in working with the agency are different, and therefore, providing staff with a broad array of tools that best helps to "meet the

customer where they are" represents an opportunity to expand the agency's reach. To the extent that local agencies continue to explore options for making services and information accessible through multiple methods, and streamlining and reducing administrative requirements, these opportunities will only continue to grow. In turn, the state could support these efforts by continuing to modernize state systems and tools; making more services and functions electronically accessible to workers and customers; providing counties with resources and incentives to implement creative new approaches; and providing forums for counties to share information about successes and challenges with each other. To the extent possible, the state could also investigate opportunities to procure technological services and resources that counties could access at a lower cost than they might be able to independently. Future research should examine the evolution of these strategies within Wisconsin counties in the years to come.

Additionally, and consistent with previous IRP work with county agencies (Vogel, 2021), a key finding that emerged from this study was that proactive outreach from agencies to customers, even when nonpayment has yet to become an issue, can help build relationships and identify customer needs. The pandemic helped to provide opportunities for staff to strengthen outreach efforts, allowing staff to help customers obtain the information and support that they needed, and helping facilitate transitions towards customer-focused, supportive approaches to service delivery. Continuing to expand upon these gains will require sufficient staff capacity moving forward, as well as leadership directives regarding outreach expectations.

Next, regarding staff work arrangements, findings from these interviews suggest there is no one-size-fits-all approach to moving forward that will meet the needs of all agencies. Given the current technological and process environment that child support agencies function within, some tasks and functions will likely need to continue to be performed in-person for the

foreseeable future. However, being able work remotely confers a host of benefits to agencies, including the ability to continue providing services to customers even in the midst of a societal crisis and allowing staff a way to work even when their life circumstances temporarily do not allow them to do so in an office. Whether agencies choose to make hybrid virtual and in-person work arrangements regularly available to staff, or only to allow them on an intermittent, as-needed basis (for example, during a weather event), having the infrastructure and resources in place to facilitate remote work grants child support agencies considerable flexibility. Agencies have made substantial gains in such infrastructure and processes throughout the pandemic; building on and institutionalizing these successes will help them to carry forward into the future. To help counties ensure that their staff are working within state parameters and federal requirements, the state could develop additional guidance and resources related to confidentiality, security, and virtual work expectations, taking into account feedback provided by agencies on their needs. Further, given variation in local contexts and resources, to the extent that the state can facilitate information-sharing across counties and identify ways to help counties address resource and technology gaps, these actions could help to mitigate inequities and facilitate greater consistency in service. As guidance and information becomes available, agencies could consider continuing to explore which staff functions must be performed in an office and which are possible to perform virtually, given new parameters. Future research efforts could examine how staff work arrangements continue take shape across Wisconsin.

Next, findings from these interviews indicate a need for contingency planning across a broad array of scenarios, and infrastructure building to help mitigate future crises. State and county governments have acquired invaluable experience and information about how to adapt in the face of the pandemic. Continuing these efforts forward by assessing for future short-term and

long-term threats, making plans for staffing and resources, and coordinating across counties and with the state is worthy of consideration at the state and county levels. Findings from these interviews also underscore the need to build relationships with key partners, such as IT providers and health departments, prior to crises. Counties could continue to build these relationships locally, and the state could facilitate connections and share resources to help guide their efforts.

Finally, a crucial theme that emerged from these interviews is a need for state, regional, and local investment in broadband. Difficulty accessing broadband places low-income customers, and those in rural areas, at a disadvantage for obtaining essential services and limits the capability of staff to perform essential duties from off-site locations. The pandemic has helped to expose the considerable inequity in broadband access across many domains, from school to work to participation in social services. While solving this problem certainly cannot fall to state or county administrators alone, leaders could help bring attention to this issue through advocacy and exploration of opportunities to fund expansion.

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