
Child Support Agencies as Connectors

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Any views expressed here are ours alone and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institution
Background (1)

- Child support is an important resource for many families
  - But most CPs (54%) do not receive full payments
- For many NCPs, inability to pay impedes compliance
- Traditional enforcement tools can be ineffective when NCPs lack financial resources
- Recent efforts focus on alternatives, aimed at improving earning NCP capacity and addressing barriers to work
Background (2)

• Wisconsin is a leader in innovation, adaptation
  – SPSK and CSPED; ELEVATE; Children First; W-2 liaison
  – Small-scale qualitative studies identify shifting approaches

• Prior work indicates new approaches involve challenges, including:
  – Building and sustaining collaborations (especially given “silos”)
  – Preparing, and making space for, staff to work in new ways

• Much remains to be learned about:
  – How CSAs perceive their role in helping NCPs address barriers
  – Current practices, resources, and constraints across WI CSAs
  – Guidance and information that could help
(A Subset of Our) Research Questions

1. What barriers to work and paying do WI child support agencies observe among NCPs?

2. What do leaders see as the agency’s role in addressing barriers?

3. To what types of services do agencies connect NCPs? What services could help, but aren’t available?

4. What factors impede collaboration?

5. What information and resources could support local efforts?
Design

• **Phase 1**
  – **Sample:** Directors and frontline staff (n=15); 5 counties selected for variation in region, size, service offerings
  – **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews (video, 60-90 minutes); December 2021 to February 2022
  – **Analysis:** Thematic analysis (NVivo12)

• **Phase 2**
  – **Sample:** Directors from all Wisconsin county CSAs (RR = 86%)
  – **Data Collection:** Qualtrics survey (55 questions); April-May 2022
  – **Analysis:** Descriptive statistics, checks for differences by county size (Stata 16)
Findings

• Perceptions of employment barriers
• The child support agency’s role
• Service connections and gaps
• Collaboration challenges
• Supporting local efforts
NCPs experience a broad array of barriers to work

Factors that directors perceive make it “very” or “extremely” hard for NCPs to find and keep work:

- Problems with alcohol or drugs: 75%
- Lack of desire to work: 69%
- Having criminal record: 68%
- Lack of adequate employment history: 48%
- Transportation issues: 48%
- Mental health issues: 37%
- Reluctance or hesitation to ask for help: 31%
- Not having job skills that are in demand: 23%
- Trouble getting along with others/controlling anger: 22%
- Physical health issues: 20%
- Not having a steady place to live: 15%
- Caretaking responsibilities: 10%
Employment barriers are often complex, inter-related

• Barriers and related service needs vary across NCPs

“They may get that job, but then again, they may only have it for a day because they might get angry and walk out of the job. They might not show up for work or their car didn't work, so then they couldn't get to work, and then they lost their job. There are so many different reasons why somebody might not keep that job... every case is so different from the next one. So, it just depends upon the payer.” – Director

• Foundational barriers impede NCPs’ abilities to find and keep work

“If they have something like a drug addiction, they have to take care of that first. That's the biggest thing. They have to take care of that before they can try to maintain a job because it's not going to work.” – Case manager
Findings

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Child support agencies should be expected to...

- Refer NCPs to employment services: 92%
- Refer NCPs to other supportive services: 79%
- Provide employment services directly: 28%

“We’re not going to be specialists in all areas. But we certainly can link people to specialists. As long as we can continue exposure, we can at least give our clients an option.” - Director
Growing collaborative relationships is key agency priority

Building or strengthening relationships is a “very” or “extremely” high priority:

- With employment service providers: 58%
- With other supportive service providers: 58%

“It’s really sad that... people in our community do not know that [the employment provider] is even there. Given all the resources they have, it’s a shame that they’re not being used by people who need those resources so badly.” – Caseworker
Findings

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Evolving expectations for connections to employment services

• Upon learning an NCP loses their job:
  – Caseworker decides what steps to take (56%)
  – CSA expects caseworkers to take specific steps (41%)

• When expectations, some differences:
  – Share info with NCP for NCP follow-up (85%)
  – Share info with employment provider; provider follows up (62%)
  – Include employment services in a court order (76%)
Overall positive view of employment partner relationship quality, service quality *

* With some expressions of uncertainty due to limited NCP feedback, challenges getting progress and outcome updates
But some uncertainty around employment partner service offerings

Primary referral partner offers the following services:

- Help with finding or applying for work: 95% available, 5% not available, 0% not sure
- Basic job skills training: 75% available, 4% not available, 21% not sure
- Work supports (e.g., gas cards): 68% available, 11% not available, 21% not sure
- Skills training for a specific job: 67% available, 9% not available, 25% not sure
- Education-related services: 63% available, 5% not available, 32% not sure
- Job retention services: 39% available, 12% not available, 49% not sure
Less connections, weaker relationships with other supportive services

- If another supportive service needs is identified:
  - CSA expects caseworkers to make a referral (25%)
  - Caseworker is “very” or “extremely” likely to refer (26%)

Perceptions of agency relationship strength with supportive service providers:

- Food assistance: 48%
- Childcare assistance: 47%
- Low cost health care providers: 23%
- Disability services: 21%
- Parenting services: 19%
- Housing assistance: 18%
- Substance use disorder services: 17%
- Legal services: 16%
- Mental health counseling: 16%
- Financial education or services: 15%
- Assistance with driving penalties: 12%
- Services for adults with criminal records: 12%
- Anger management services: 11%
Service gaps in domains beyond employment, despite needs

Ease of NCP access to supportive services in agency’s area:

- Financial education or services: 22% Not Easily Accessible, 60% Unavailable
- Legal services: 14% Not Easily Accessible, 58% Unavailable
- Services for adults with criminal records: 15% Not Easily Accessible, 53% Unavailable
- Assistance with driving related penalties: 17% Not Easily Accessible, 54% Unavailable
- Parenting services: 9% Not Easily Accessible, 58% Unavailable
- Anger management services: 7% Not Easily Accessible, 48% Unavailable
- Substance use disorder services: 46% Not Easily Accessible
- Mental health counseling: 49% Not Easily Accessible
- Housing assistance: 2% Not Easily Accessible, 47% Unavailable
- Disability services: 41% Not Easily Accessible
- Low cost health care providers: 2% Not Easily Accessible, 28% Unavailable
- Childcare assistance: 31% Not Easily Accessible
- Food assistance: 17% Not Easily Accessible
Findings

• Perceptions of NCP barriers
• The child support agency’s role
• Service connections and gaps
• **Collaboration challenges**
• Supporting local efforts
Lack of time, resources, information creates challenges

Factors that have challenged collaborative efforts with other service providers “a lot” or “a very great deal”:

- Insufficient time for getting to know providers: 47%
- Lack of or overly restrictive financial resources: 46%
- Lack of information about providers in the area: 30%
- Physical distance between agency and providers: 20%
- Different priorities between agency and providers: 18%
- Lack of buy-in from CSA staff: 12%
- Challenges communicating with providers: 11%
- Little support or interest among potential partners: 7%
Location matters for collaboration and accessibility

In relation to agency, primary referral partner is:

- Outside of the agency’s county: 32%
- More than a mile, but within the same city: 21%
- In the same building or space as agency: 19%
- Outside of the city, but within the same county: 12%
- Within a mile of the agency: 9%
- Within a few blocks of the agency: 7%
Findings

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• Service connections and gaps
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• Supporting local efforts
Agencies identified strategies for supporting local efforts

• Training and resources for staff
  – Adequate staff capacity to facilitate intensive approaches
  – Centralized, searchable resources
  – Training and TA on collaboration, new service approaches

• Tools for dynamic information exchange with partners
  – Secure, user-friendly database(s) for all stakeholders
  – Streamlined referral processes

• Expanded employment and supportive services for NCPs, including expanded infrastructure
Summary

- Agencies value a “connector” role, representing a key opportunity

- This study provides insight into current practices and potential opportunities

- Study also highlights challenges for collaborating with supportive service providers
  - Operational constraints (high caseloads, funding restrictions)
  - Disconnect between NCP needs and available assistance
  - Difficulties navigating the landscape of providers
Limitations

• Survey limited to director perspectives
  – Not frontline staff
  – Not service providers
  – Not NCPs

• Possible systematic bias of non-respondents

• Small sample size limited subgroup analysis

• Findings are descriptive
Potential Implications

• Resources for additional staffing could expand capacity
• Agencies could benefit from help learning about local options (e.g., resource mapping, searchable databases)
• Training and technical assistance could help prepare staff; facilitate consistency
• Opportunities for knowledge-sharing could help make CSAs comfortable working in new ways
• Expanded service offerings could help provide options
  – Rural and small counties face unique challenges that require investments in services, infrastructure
Questions?

Thank you!

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CSAs perceive NCP willingness to engage as a significant challenge

“There’s a bit of pride because it is hard for people to ask for help. We stress that we’ll be as accommodating as possible... It can still be difficult. Part of that might be busyness, but also a sense of pride.”

“Some people are angry with us because we’re making them do something they don’t want to... They want o have their freedom, and we are pretty much infringing on it.”

“The ones that don’t follow through on [services] have a negative viewpoint. It’s not necessarily their fault. Maybe they’ve had bad luck in the past...they have that attitude already, like, ‘Why bother’ or ‘I’ve applied at every job in town, and nobody wants me, so, just throw me in jail.’”

“I hear quite often, ‘I have a background. The only jobs I can get pay a little, and you guys take up to 60% of that.’ They feel it’s not worth their time if they’re not going to have money to even live off. And sometimes that job might bump them from getting certain benefits.”

“[Staff] hear from NCPs, ‘You probably think I’m a bad person...’ I think a lot of people think, ‘I’m not calling my case-worker because they’re taking me to court, and they think I’m a bad parent.’”

“They see these services as an extension of the CSA, not as a separate body. I think they see anything in their contempt paperwork as all child support... ‘They’re coming after me.’”
Employment services options vary across counties

- Transitional Jobs: 42%
- Children First: 18%
- ELEVATE: 11%
- FSET: 16%
- Wisconsin Job Center: 9%
- Wisconsin Works (W-2): 4%
- Other: 2%