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New Approaches to Child Support Services: Custodial Parent Perspectives

2022–2024 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 14

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the second of three deliverables associated with Task 14 of the 2022–2024 Child Support Policy Research Agreement (CSPRA): “Researching New Approaches to Child Support Services.” This task supports the goal of exploring the development of new strategies to address noncompliance with child support orders, including programmatic offerings for obligors having difficulty with work and paying the support they owe. As the child support program considers new approaches to serving obligors, the views of custodial parents owed child support—and particularly those who do not receive all the support due to them—provide important considerations for supporting the needs of all family members involved with child support.

To that end, the research team sought input from custodial parents in Wisconsin to better understand their views on how such programs might work to best meet family needs; appeals of, and concerns about, alternate approaches to child support services for obligors; and how child support agencies (CSAs) can support custodial parents and children when obligors fall behind. This report provides an overview of the team’s data collection efforts, summarizes key findings, and discusses potential implications for policy and practice. In addition to informing approaches for serving child support-involved families generally, the study’s findings are also relevant for the evaluation of Wisconsin’s Empowering Lives through Education, Vocational Assessment, Training, and Employment (ELEVATE) program. ELEVATE is an innovative pilot program funded via a Section 1115 waiver from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE). ELEVATE has been operating in five Wisconsin counties—Brown, Kenosha, Marathon, Racine, and Wood—since program enrollment began in January 2020.

BACKGROUND

Nonpayment of Child Support

Over one-quarter of U.S. children live apart from a parent, and in 2018, children living apart from a parent were nearly three times more likely to live in poverty (30.1%) than children with both parents in the household (11.1%) (Grall, 2020). Child support, when paid, can be an important income source for families, particularly those with low incomes (Cancian et al., 2003; Grall, 2020; Ha et al., 2011). Despite its potential importance as an income source, nonpayment of child support remains a significant problem. In 2017, most (54.1%) custodial parents received none or only some of the child support owed to them (Grall, 2020), leaving many custodial parents and children without this important resource, while at the same time resulting in substantial arrears debt for many obligors, particularly those with low incomes (Brito, 2019; Kim et al., 2015).

Prior research has identified several factors affecting nonpayment of child support (see, for example, Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003). Some obligors may not comply because of a lack of willingness to pay formal child support. This is primarily relevant for those working outside of the formal labor market who are outside of the reach of automatic income withholding. Dissatisfaction with the child support system can decrease willingness to pay (Meyer & Kim, 2021), and can stem from prior negative experiences with child support agencies and courts (Vogel, 2020a), perceived unfairness and inflexibility in policies and practices (Lin, 2000; Vogel, 2020a), and fear of sanctions and stigmatization (Vogel, 2020a). Co-parenting relationship quality (Goldberg, 2015), and contact and quality of relationships with children (Chen & Meyer, 2017; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013), are also related to unwillingness to pay. Further, some obligors—as well as some parents owed support—prefer informal payments instead of payments made through the formal system (Vogel, 2020a; Waller et al., 2018).

However, research has found that for most nonpayers, issues related to ability to pay are key barriers to child support compliance. Ability to pay child support is often limited by unstable employment and low earnings (Berger et al., 2021; Cancian et al., 2021; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013). Low levels of educational attainment, lack of work experience and training, and criminal history—particularly a history of previous incarceration—are negatively associated with child support compliance and payment amounts (Berger et al., 2021; Cancian et al., 2021; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013; Geller et al., 2011). Transportation concerns, housing instability, physical and mental health issues, and care obligations can also negatively impact ability to pay (Berger et al., 2021). Race also plays a role as Black men are disproportionately likely to experience incarceration than other groups, and Black men experience stronger negative impacts of incarceration on employment and earnings than white men (Berger et al., 2021; Holzer et al., 2005). Prior research has also identified that many parents behind on child support experience multiple barriers to compliance (Berger et al., 2021; Cancian, Meyer, et al., 2018; Vogel, 2020b). For example, a recent analysis, drawing on a sample of noncustodial fathers behind on their child support obligations, identified that over 60% of fathers experienced three or more barriers to compliance, and child support payments and labor market outcomes declined as the number of barriers experienced by a father increased (Berger et al., 2021).

In addition to issues affecting employment and earnings, high burden orders—which comprise a larger percent of obligors' income—decrease ability to pay, as does having multiple child support orders (Eldred & Takayesu, 2013; Hodges et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2008; Vogel, 2020a) or obligations to children across multiple households (Cancian, Guarin, et al., 2018; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013; Vogel, 2020a).

Child Support Enforcement

When obligors do not pay the support that they owe, child support agencies have traditionally taken an enforcement approach. These include administrative actions—such as license suspension, liens and levies, and intercept of tax refunds—as well as court-based actions, including civil contempt and (rarely) criminal nonsupport charges (Gentry, 2017). Even as the tools available to compel compliance have grown stronger, compliance rates have remained relatively flat (Grall, 2020). Further, recent scholarship has identified that some child support agency actions have the potential to *negatively* impact formal child support payments and compliance. For example, driver’s license suspension can make it more difficult for parents to get to work, leading to job loss or challenges finding employment (Turetsky & Waller, 2020; Vogel, 2020a); and empirical work has identified a mixed and sometimes negative relationship between license suspension and child support payments (Meyer et al., 2020). Loss of a driver’s license can also worsen relationships with nonresidential co-parents and children (Turetsky & Waller, 2020) and lead to legal financial obligations and justice system involvement (Vogel, 2020a). Incarceration as a sanction directly impedes parents’ ability to work and pay during incarceration (Vogel, 2020a) and after release (Berger et al., 2021; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013; Geller et al., 2011). Further, as obligors fall behind, accrual of substantial arrears, exacerbated by high interest rates, is associated with decreased participation in the formal labor market (Cancian et al., 2013; Turetsky & Waller, 2020), decreased motivation to pay (Vogel, 2020a), and decreased parental involvement and contact with nonresident children (Turner & Waller, 2017).

Given the limitations of this traditional approach, many within the child support community have called for more services-based and family-needs oriented approaches to child support. Recommendations for obligors include ensuring child support orders are “right-sized” to obligor income, based on actual earnings rather than imputed income, and reflect obligor ability

to pay (Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Hahn et al., 2018; Turetsky & Waller, 2020), as well as reducing interest charged on arrears (Turetsky & Waller, 2020) and providing employment services and training to improve obligors' ability to pay (Hahn et al., 2018; Vogel, 2020b, 2021). Some proposals are aimed at the family more broadly. These include calls for a guaranteed minimum amount of child support to be distributed to custodial parents, regardless of obligor payments (Cancian & Meyer, 2018), as well as suggestions for the child support program to provide parents with more input on their child support arrangements, to recognize informal support contributions (Hahn et al., 2018), and to offer services intended to help improve co-parenting skills and facilitate co-parenting agreements (Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Edin et al., 2019).

The Wisconsin Policy Context

In Wisconsin, as in other states and nationally, the culture of child support has started to shift from a punitive enforcement approach in response to nonpayment towards a more supportive model (Vogel, 2021; Vogel, Ros Pilarz, et al., 2022; Vogel & Hossain, 2022). Wisconsin is also a leader in offering innovative programs to provide support to obligors who are behind on payments in lieu of an enforcement-only approach. From 2005 to 2007, Wisconsin piloted the Families Forward demonstration, a unique arrears reduction program that provided gradual forgiveness of state- and CP-owed debt conditional on obligor payments towards current support or arrears, and eliminated interest charged on arrears during program participation; the program's evaluation found that program participation resulted in obligors paying more towards current support and arrears, more frequently, and reductions in both their state- and family-owed arrears debt, and provided important insights from interviews with obligors and CPs for implementing future programs (Heinrich et al., 2011). In the realm of

employment service programs, Wisconsin provides the Children First program for unemployed and underemployed obligors behind on child support payments. Children First is a court-ordered program in 16 Wisconsin counties, where contracted agencies provide employment and case management services (*2021–2022 Children First Program Guide*, n.d.). Two Wisconsin counties also participated in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) was a federally funded, child support-led demonstration implemented in 18 counties across eight states. CSPED’s evaluation tested the impact of providing a package of services—employment, parenting, and case management services, as well as enhanced child support procedures that included temporary relief from enforcement actions, order review and potential modification, and potential reduction of state-owed child support debt—for obligors having difficulty paying their child support and finding and keeping work. While CSPED did not improve compliance or payments, it did improve participants’ satisfaction with child support services, sense of responsibility for children, and slightly and temporarily improved earnings (Cancian et al., 2019). CSPED was a voluntary program which, in Wisconsin, was locally referred to as Supporting Parents Supporting Kids (SPSK).

Since 2020, Wisconsin has also operated the ELEVATE program. ELEVATE builds on Wisconsin’s earlier SPSK program and is offered in five Wisconsin counties—two counties that previously participated in SPSK (Brown and Kenosha) and three newly-participating counties (Racine, Wood, and Marathon). The program targets obligors with orders in these counties who are behind or at risk of becoming behind on their child support payments and are unemployed or underemployed. Similar to SPSK, the goals of ELEVATE are to increase compliance with child support orders by increasing employment and earnings, and to improve parenting skills and participant relationships with their children (Vogel et al., 2021). ELEVATE programs vary in

their specific offerings, but provide case management services, enhanced child support services, and offer a range of employment and parenting services to program participants, as an alternative to traditional enforcement approaches (Vogel et al., 2021).

Centering Custodial Parent Perspectives

As the child support program takes steps toward becoming a more family-centered institution, it is important to consider the needs and perspectives of both obligors and custodial parents involved in a child support case as well as the needs of their children.

Prior research focused on the perspectives of custodial parents has identified several concerns about child support program policies and practices. Chief concerns among custodial parents are how much child support obligors are expected to pay, and the steps agencies take to enforce orders when obligors do not comply. When the amount of child support paid is low or inconsistent, many custodial parents struggle to plan for expenses and make ends meet (Harris, 2015; Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022). On one hand, some custodial parents feel that the child support program does not do enough to hold obligors accountable, particularly when they are able to pay but choose not to, or when they believe the obligor to be hiding resources or falsifying income (Harris, 2015; Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022). Alternately, other custodial parents have raised concerns that the child support program takes an excessively punitive approach that does not consider—or exacerbates problems related to—obligors’ ability to pay, and instead call for supportive services that could improve obligors’ capacity to pay child support when ability to pay is the underlying barrier (Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022). Additionally, some custodial parents feel the child support program unduly places the burden of expense tracking and obligor income monitoring on them, costing them time and placing strain on co-parenting relationships (Harris, 2015).

Custodial parents have also raised concerns about the CSA's communication and parents' abilities to access staff for information and help. Some custodial parents have difficulty reaching staff at child support agencies for information and support, and experience frustration about the lack of proactive outreach from child support staff to parents (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022). Custodial parents also perceive child support agency and court processes as complex, opaque, and time-consuming. These concerns have led to calls from custodial parents for simplified, publicly available information, resources, and paperwork; lower caseloads to facilitate staff availability for more personalized case management; and more avenues for direct communication between parents and staff (Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022).

Another key area of concern identified by custodial parents is the role that the child support agency plays in the lives of families. Some custodial parents—particularly those who enter the system involuntarily through a referral from a public benefits program—experience the child support program as invasive and find requirements to have an order regardless of the custodial parent's wishes as unfair (Harris, 2015; Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022). Prior research has identified that some would like to see a more targeted child support program—aimed at parents who seek out child support orders—that provides a broader array of services and connections to community resources (Vogel, Dennis, et al., 2022). Custodial parents have also raised concerns about the potential for the child support program to create or exacerbate conflict between parents and have expressed a desire for more programmatic support in the areas of mediation, affordable legal services, and supports for survivors of domestic violence.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The overarching goal of this project was to hear the views of parents owed child support on how the child support program can help families when obligors get behind on payments. The

research team was interested in learning about custodial parents' perspectives on different approaches child support programs can take for encouraging obligors to pay their ordered support, including service-based approaches and punishment-oriented approaches, including their views on the potential benefit of programs like ELEVATE to families. The team also aimed to gain insight into how custodial parents perceive that child support currently helps—or could in the future help—custodial parents when they do not receive all of the support that they are owed.

Methods

Given that several Wisconsin child support programs, including ELEVATE, are aimed specifically at *obligors* behind on their child support payments, this study aimed to reach a sample of *custodial parents* affected by nonpayment of child support. The research team used administrative data from the Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC) to identify parents who, in 2022, had an order for current support (i.e., not an order for arrears only) in any of the five ELEVATE counties, and received less than full payments in at least one month in 2022. From this pool, the research team pulled a random sample of cases for recruitment. A total of 600 recruitment letters were mailed in two batches; the first 200 letters were mailed on March 13th, 2023, and the remaining 400 letters were mailed on March 29th, 2023. The number and frequency of letters mailed was based on the number of responses received.

The letters provided two ways to express interest to the study team: (1) a telephone number, which connected the potential sample member to an IRP study team member and (2) a link or QR code to a short Qualtrics-based screener tool. All interested parents completed this short screening questionnaire online or by phone to verify eligibility, indicate availability, and provide contact information. The research team received 35 eligible responses. Each eligible individual was contacted up to three times by phone (or by email if the phone number provided

was not valid) to explain the study and determine their interest in moving forward. A study team member administered a pre-completion background questionnaire with each interested parent, over the phone, to collect the enrollee's demographic information, family characteristics, and child support circumstances. This over-the-phone questionnaire also allowed a final opportunity to verify eligibility and determine participation modality.

Originally, the research team intended only to conduct focus groups; however, early in recruitment, the team identified technological and scheduling concerns among some potential participants and decided to add an individual interview option to improve accessibility. Therefore, interested and eligible parents had the option to participate in the study in one of two ways: (1) via a focus group with other parents who were owed child support (conducted via Zoom), or (2) via an individual interview with a study team member (by telephone or Zoom). A study team member walked through options with each potential participant to determine which option would work best for the participant, based on scheduling (i.e., their availability and the focus group's scheduled time); technology limitations (all focus group participants needed to be able to participate in the group via Zoom with video); participant concerns about privacy (those with privacy concerns were routed toward the individual interview option), and personal preference. With the addition of this option, the team was able to offer every interested and eligible parent a viable option for participation.

Semi-structured interviews and the focus group were administered using a protocol with similar questions tailored across modes. The protocol was developed in accordance with best practices to build rapport, facilitate open conversation, minimize privacy concerns, and address research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2001). Individual interviews were conducted by one or more study team members and lasted 35 minutes on average. The focus group was facilitated by

three study team members—a moderator, an assistant moderator, and a logistics coordinator—using best-practice strategies for virtual administration of focus groups. (Forrestal et al., 2015; Krueger & Casey, 2001). The session lasted one hour. After taking part, all study participants received a \$50 electronic gift card, via email, to a store of their choosing (Target, Amazon, or Walmart). All data collection was approved and overseen by the UW–Madison Institutional Review Board.

All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed; transcribed quotes presented below have sometimes been lightly edited for clarity or brevity. The transcripts were inductively and deductively coded using NVIVO. From these codes, the research team collaboratively identified patterns both within and across participant responses and constructed themes related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We also present descriptive statistics on participant demographic characteristics and child support circumstances, drawing on responses to the background questionnaire administered prior to data collection.

Sample

Of the 35 initial screener responses, 16 parents participated in an interview or the focus group. The focus group had five attendees. The group size allowed each participant sufficient space to share their perspectives and enabled group discussion and interaction between participants, while still respecting participants' time. The remaining 11 parents participated via individual interviews.

Each of the five counties where ELEVATE is operating were represented in the sample (Brown, Kenosha, Marathon, Racine, and Wood Counties), with between one and five participants per county (Table 1). Most (94%) participants were custodial mothers, and participants included custodial parents of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nearly two-

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

	Count/Mean (Min-Max)	Percent
Total	16	
Gender		
Male	1	6%
Female	15	94%
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	3	19%
White	11	69%
Black or African American	1	6%
Two or More Selected	1	6%
Personal Income		
Less than \$20,000	2	13%
\$20,000–\$29,999	5	31%
\$30,000–\$39,999	3	19%
\$40,000–\$49,999	1	6%
\$50,000–\$59,999	1	6%
\$60,000–\$69,999	2	13%
\$70,000 or above	2	13%
Total Number of Kids (under age 18)	2.7 (1–6)	
Number of Kids on a Child Support Order (under age 18)	1.7 (1–4)	
Number of Child Support Orders	1.3 (1–2)	
1	12	75%
2	4	25%
Estimated Total Child Support Ordered to Receive (monthly)	\$510 (\$50–1,340)	
Proportion Received in Last 12 Months*		
None	1	6%
Less than half	8	50%
About half	2	13%
More than half	5	31%
Relationship with Co-parent(s)		
Poor	3	19%
Fair	5	31%
Good	0	0%
Very Good	2	13%
Excellent	1	6%
(VOLUNTEERED) Don't think of selves as a co-parenting team or no involvement with other parent(s)	2	13%
(VOLUNTEERED) Too difficult to answer across parents	3	19%

thirds reported having personal incomes under \$40,000 in the prior year. Participants reported being owed an average of \$510 in child support per month for 1.7 children; most (56%) reported receiving less than half of the support owed to them in the prior year. Participants described relatively low relationship quality with obligors, with only 19% reporting an “excellent,” “very good,” or “good” co-parenting relationship.

FINDINGS

Perspectives on Programmatic Approaches

At the outset of discussions, we asked custodial parents to share their perspectives on two general approaches child support agencies might take when parents get behind on ordered support: enforcement-oriented approaches without the offer of services, or approaches that offer services with a goal of helping parents to start paying. Custodial parents shared their views on when each approach might be appropriate, potential benefits, and potential concerns related to each approach. Ultimately, most custodial parents described seeing a role for both services and enforcement in child support agency responses to nonpayment, and called for a situationally-informed approach that takes into account case circumstances.

Perspectives on Enforcement-Oriented Approaches

Many—but not all—custodial parents felt enforcement had a beneficial role to play in the child support program. Some perceived that without the potential for enforcement, some obligors would not make payments. One custodial parent stated:

I'm personally about, if you do an action there's consequences, and if you have an obligation and you don't fulfill that obligation, there has to be some form of consequence to make that person more motivated. So, I do believe you know losing their license or potentially going to jail if it's in a right situation would be effective, because it kind of gives them some motivation of 'Hey, I don't want those things to happen, so I'm going to do my part.'

A few parents shared that in their situation, the threat of enforcement was an effective “reality check,” and they only received child support when CSAs took those enforcement actions. Others felt punishment would be effective for yielding payments on their child support case and felt the CSA should be doing more to enforce.

Custodial parents highlighted examples of when enforcement felt particularly appropriate for a given case. Several custodial parents believed punishment was appropriate when an obligor was hiding income to avoid paying child support, or if they were using a services program as an excuse to not work or temporarily avoid making payments. One custodial parent described:

So, in my situation, I went into court for child support. I had all of my paperwork and the other person said, ‘Oh, yeah I don’t have a job,’ but didn’t provide any proof that he didn’t have a job. As the custodial parent, I ended up having to pay him child support and come to find out he was working the whole time. He just said, ‘Oh, yah I wasn’t working’ and didn’t provide paperwork for it. So, there should be repercussions for hiding funds and not paying, you know, the amount that you’re supposed to pay.

On the other hand, custodial parents also raised concerns about enforcement-oriented approaches. Some felt enforcement was generally not beneficial for children and families, while others felt enforcement should be used only as a last resort when all other options were exhausted. Many custodial parents raised concerns about using enforcement alone when obligors truly lacked the ability to pay. From their perspectives, using punitive tools in these situations was unlikely to be effective and could make an obligor’s situation more difficult.

Custodial parents expressed concern that sanctions such as license suspension and incarceration due to contempt can create additional barriers to employment. Several shared that they had expressed these concerns to the court or CSA when enforcement was being considered, but felt their perspectives were unheard. Custodial parents were particularly concerned about the impacts of incarceration when obligors lacked ability to pay. From their perspectives, use of

incarceration when an obligor cannot pay puts them further behind and increases debt. One custodial parent described her child's father's cyclical experience with nonpayment and incarceration:

He had gotten thrown into jail many times because of child support and being behind. And I feel like it never really helped him pay like continuously every time. It seemed like it just pulled him back because now he has—like he would start a job, be behind on child support and then have a warrant and then go to jail.

Another custodial parent raised the concern that in addition to removing obligors from the labor force, incarceration also poses barriers to good-paying jobs after release. She explained:

Now you don't have the ability to look for work and you don't have the ability to even attempt to try to make money because you're in jail. I feel like in a lot of instances, them being released from jail, I feel like that kind of makes the finding of jobs being harder than it was prior to that because you were just recently incarcerated.

Custodial parents were also concerned about the impacts that jail or other enforcement can have on the other parent's relationship with their children and the co-parenting relationship. As one parent put it, "If you're in jail you can't parent my child. You can't help." Parents also explained that a parent might stay away from their children in an attempt to avoid incarceration or other CSA enforcement actions resulting in negative consequences for the parent-child relationship. Similarly, custodial parents described that punitive measures can further stigmatize parents who are behind on their support, which might lead them to avoid their family out of shame.

Perspectives on a Service-Based Approach

Many custodial parents felt that offering services to obligors also had a role to play in the child support program and could be beneficial to some obligors in some circumstances. Some

parents saw enforcement and service-based approaches as complementary, where punishment could be used to incentivize participation or effort in a program.

Custodial parents highlighted a host of potential benefits of providing supports and services, as an initial response to nonpayment or due to the underlying factors affecting nonpayment. Custodial parents discussed that a service-based approach could help address underlying barriers to employment, such as mental health or substance use issues. One custodial parent explained:

I know, like, a lot of parents who don't pay child support, or some of them, have issues with mental health or drug use. So possibly some type of, you know, support in that sense could be [possible].

Several also noted that for obligors with limited labor market experience and younger parents, providing services could help build essential work and life skills. Custodial parents explained that, ideally, by helping the obligor get a job and being able to pay their child support, the benefits of service-based approaches could extend beyond the obligor to custodial parents and children. Custodial parents also noted the potential benefits that gaining meaningful employment and paying the support they owe could play in increasing obligors' sense of confidence, responsibility, and productivity, and helping to improve their self-worth overall—not only for the well-being of obligors, but with potential benefits to parenting and co-parenting relationships. A custodial parent, who shared her experience of helping her co-parent look for employment and address barriers:

When I started to help him, and he saw for the first time that someone was interested in him, I almost saw this, like, this smile and this relief in his face that I haven't seen in a long time. And I just think he wanted it deep down inside. I just don't think he was able to obtain it without some sort of help. So it was really gratifying to see him. And now I check in with him. I have the kids call him. Like, check in with your dad. See how his day was at work. And he really feels like he's contributing, and you can kind of see just energetically how he's already starting

to shift. His work, his self-worth, just his overall confidence has started to steadily to kind of improve.

For several, giving a person a second chance or the benefit of the doubt was a value in and of itself. As one parent explained:

It gives them a chance if they're struggling. You know, we've all been in a position where we've struggled. And it gives them a chance to, you know, kind of regroup, you know, and kind of like better themselves.

Most custodial parents shared a view that offering services to nonpayers would not be appropriate or effective for obligors who were not paying because they did not want to pay even though they could, were not motivated to work, or chose not to work in order to avoid having income subject to child support collections. Custodial parents had concerns that in these situations, offering services in lieu of enforcement would not be effective for obligors who might lack the motivation to meaningfully engage with the program; they were concerned that some obligors might use the program as a way to avoid punishment for nonpayment or to avoid working, and could use such services to undermine the child support process. One custodial parent stated:

So, I think that the idea behind it—it's a really cool idea. It's a nice idea. But that's the idea under the assumption that people aren't paying because they can't, not because they don't want to. And I think in however many cases, it is because they don't want to. So, this wouldn't be helpful in those cases.

In general, parents thought child support programs should start with offering services and help to obligors who were behind on payments, but if the obligor was not putting in sufficient effort or genuinely engaging with the program, then enforcement actions should be used as a next step or last resort. One custodial parent described:

In my opinion, I think it's better to start with, I guess you would call it kind of the rehabilitative, you know, the helpful approach. You know, if it doesn't work obviously then, you know, additional steps I feel should be taken such as the

punitive approach. But I think it's worth trying to help first if—especially if there's underlying issues.

Calls for a Situationally-Informed Approach

Custodial parents often felt that the approach taken by the agency should be driven by the underlying reasons for non-compliance—whether the obligor is willing but unable to pay, or able but unwilling to pay. They emphasized that programs should invest case management time in working with obligors and custodial parents to unpack the issues contributing to an obligor's nonpayment, including a close examination of the obligor's financial situation and ability to pay (particularly for self-employed obligors or obligors working off the books whose income might be more challenging to readily ascertain) and potential short- and long-term barriers to payment. Custodial parents called for in-depth assessment of these circumstances by case managers both at the outset of an obligor's involvement with the program and through frequent, regular assessment throughout the duration of participation. They emphasized the importance of ongoing assessment, monitoring, and tracking as a means of ensuring that obligors were actively engaged in services and making an effort to improve their circumstances, rather than as a means to avoid sanctions for noncompliance.

When thinking about which approach might be appropriate, parents considered a variety of situations in addition to their own. For example, one custodial parent, who believed that her former partner was not paying because he lacked motivation to work, said:

I really think it's on an individual basis. My ex-husband doesn't want to work. [...] So he wouldn't benefit from [services] because he has no desire or motivation to work in the first place. But I think for the right individual that could be fantastic, and I actually agree with the concept of offering assistance as a Plan A, and then if that doesn't help then go to Plan B and some harsher punishments.

On the other hand, another custodial mother perceived mental health issues to be the underlying reason for her former partner's noncompliance, and so thought services were needed.

But despite having a different experience, she reached a similar conclusion, that some cases warranted help and others, punishment.

I think everyone's situation is very unique and shouldn't be treated the same. In my situation, I really saw that my ex-husband struggled with mental health and struggled with being able to find ambition and motivation to obtain employment. [...] But I feel like sometimes the fathers are very belligerent and like, 'I don't feel that I should have to pay that. I already provide that'. They're very like, 'I buy this, this, and this; I pay for half of their cell phone', and they keep tabs. Where they may be obtaining income from other resources and that being [...] where we want a, in my opinion, probably a more forceful approach is going to work for that type of person. So, I think it really depends on the situation and the type of person you're dealing with.

Recommendations for Future Obligor Programs

We asked custodial parents to share their perspectives on how a child support program might operate if aimed at helping obligors behind on their support get jobs and pay the support they owe. Custodial parents reflected carefully on many aspects of this question, and spent time thinking through the complexities of logistics, services, and the role of enforcement.

Program participation. Custodial parents raised considerations related to program logistics: who would be eligible, how they would come to and exit the program, and accountability measures. A key issue custodial parents grappled with when considering program participation was whether obligors should be required to participate in such programs or whether program participation should be voluntary. Some custodial parents were concerned that mandatory participation would result in low motivation, resentment, inauthentic engagement, or ineffectiveness. Some felt that forcing program participation could increase resistance to engaging in services, and could potentially harm the parent's relationship with the child or reduce involvement with the child. Others raised concerns that some nonpayers would not participate in a voluntary program. Several custodial parents felt that programs should be voluntary but should also put effort into emphasizing how participating could benefit the obligor

themselves, as well as help their child. One highlighted the potential value of a peer-based component involving successful program graduates. She suggested: "...showing newer people interviews [of program graduates] and why it was successful for them and what a difference it made for them and their child. Possibly what they learned, what they gained from it."

Another key aspect of program functioning custodial parents raised was ensuring that obligors participate meaningfully and consistently. Some custodial parents suggested having requirements for different services provided, such as having to apply to a certain number of jobs or providing a copy of their work schedule for employment services. Many custodial parents emphasized a strong need for caseworkers who provided intensive case management and support, both at the start of the program to help identify barriers and match barriers with services, as well as later in the obligor's involvement with the program, to monitor activities and confirm adequate progress. Several parents raised concerns that without follow-through on the part of case managers, program services would be ineffective—not only failing to help the obligor but resulting in a lack of material support for children. One custodial parent described:

I would assume or hope that having a program and having some participation, like, it would need the follow up. Because I wouldn't want to see that someone was, say, trading that program versus getting a warrant or versus getting a lien, and then they don't follow through in the end. You know what I mean?... A lot of times, I feel like liens and intercepts or whatever are beneficial deterrents for people that owe support. So, I'm just saying I hope that a social services program wouldn't be just a Band-Aid. It actually would have to be something that would fix and resolve the problem.

In addition to monitoring participation of obligors, several custodial parents stressed the importance of monitoring the success and performance of service-based programs. These parents felt the effectiveness of programs for obligors should be assessed and monitored to determine if benefits outweigh the costs—and considered whether these program resources should be reallocated to directly benefit children or aid custodial parents and children. Parents often spoke

in terms of how such programs would be paid for and the importance of monitoring such programs to ensure the impacts of them are beneficial long-term. A custodial parent noted:

I know a lot of families struggle with, you know, not being paid child support. And it's something that I haven't been able to wrap my mind around. How can the system be this way where parents can just not pay for years and years and years, and most parents will never ever see the money that they were owed. So, there is a part of me that wants to say, 'Well, [the CSA] should help them as long as the child is a child.' And then there's a part of me that is confused, you know, for how long the limits should be. I mean, deep down, I think there should be help, you know, for the amount of time that the child support isn't being fully paid, because the children otherwise suffer without that help. And then the other part of me wonders how sustainable a program like that would be. So, I guess it's hard not knowing where the funding would come from, you know, in terms of answering that, but I guess my honest answer is, as long as the payments aren't being made in full, I think the parents should be helped. I don't know.

Incentivizing obligor participation. Custodial parents also expressed the need to not just track progress but also incentivize and reward it, noting that programs should be goal-oriented and celebrate participant milestones. Custodial parents' suggestions included graduation ceremonies that might include other family members or parent-child activities. Others suggested that taking classes or participating in the program could count as a certain amount or percent of child support payments, which the CSA would then cover. As one parent explained:

Like for them to be like, 'OK, well, if you can't, you know, pay this, like if you do this program it'll count for like maybe like \$10 worth of child support,' or something. You know what I mean? Like that way, if people who aren't paying can do programs, community service or if they have to go to like these AA meetings or if they have to go to certain things to help them get better, you know, and they can't work right now. If they can attend classes, it can count for like money or something. So that they're making payments versus like falling farther behind, if that makes sense.

Several parents also suggested reducing child support arrears as an incentive to participate in the program or to make more regular payments. Another parent explained she would support a reduction in the amount of arrears owed to her as an incentive for the obligor— if that meant there would be fewer missed payments in the future. As this parent explained:

Like, I could probably say, 'OK, you're this far behind.' You could offer some kind of incentive, like 'If you make X amount of payments on time, we'll take part of the money off.' I would be OK with that. But I can tell that the majority of people would probably not be OK with that. Like that would not be—I would say most people that I know, that would not be something they would even consider. But in my situation, I kind of feel like that that's going to help motivate you to continue working and continue paying and stay on top your payment. I would be willing to lose some of what's owed if I know that I'm not going to continue to have money owed.

Service offerings. With regards to the types of services service-based programs might offer to obligors, custodial parents strongly emphasized providing services that aligned with, and were able to address, each obligor's underlying barriers and needs. Broadly, types of services custodial parents suggested included employment services, parenting services, as well as more holistic services around mental health, financial literacy, meeting basic needs, community involvement, motivational skills, and domestic abuse education.

Nearly all custodial parents envisioned a future program that would include employment services, including fundamental job application skills, such as help creating a resume and cover letter, and interviewing skills. Many custodial parents also envisioned that such programs could work with local colleges or trade schools or provide training to help obligors build their skillset so they could earn higher wages. Custodial parents also suggested that programs collaborate with or replicate job programs offered by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) or the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR); connect obligors to community service programs to gain work experience and strengthen connections to the community; and work directly with local employers and temp agencies, including those willing to hire people with minimal experience or with criminal records, to help obligors obtain employment. One parent felt it would be beneficial for a future program to advocate for employers to improve obligor rates of pay.

Regarding parenting services, some custodial parents expressed a desire for services aimed not only at the obligor, but for services that work with both parents to provide co-parenting classes, mediation, or counseling. One parent suggested that programs have “a center where kids could hang out and the parents could get co-parenting classes or some formal training on how to work together.” Custodial parents also called for parenting services that emphasized building awareness around and addressing domestic abuse in all its forms and educating perpetrators about the impacts of abuse on children.

Custodial parents also suggested an array of services beyond those directly related to employment and parenting. Custodial parents highlighted a need for basic services aimed at improving obligor stability, such as transportation, stable housing, and health insurance. A key priority raised by custodial parents was mental health services; custodial parents suggested some form of counseling or rehabilitation for drug abuse for those that might need it. Custodial parents also brainstormed ways the program could help improve general life skills, that would in turn improve payment of child support. For example, they suggested that financial and budgeting skills trainings could directly improve child support payments and help the parent save up for other financial goals. Others suggested ways to improve nonpayers’ motivation to get a job and improve their life; for example, by bringing in life coaches or motivational speakers or providing guidance on developing career and life goals. One custodial parent suggested:

“Showing, I don’t know, simple breakdowns of possibly like, studies, or how being in poverty can be a stressor...let’s say that stressor impacts the primary caretaker. And then how that trickles down to the child and the stress affects the child. I guess showing—connecting someone to, like, showing like their actions or inactions have impact one way or another. And then just bringing it back to like, again, showing like, what that can look like differently when someone is being consistent and taking care of their child.”

Underpinning all these services, parents wanted there to be in increased emphasis on the well-being of children whose parents are involved with the child support program. Several custodial parents expressed feeling that obligors, custodial parents, and the current child support program are all overly focused on securing payments owed, leading to resentment and suspicion between parents. These parents suggested that programs should focus on educating obligors about how their actions, behaviors, and supports affect their children. This emphasis could improve obligor's motivation to participate in the program and take genuine steps to better themselves. One custodial parent stated:

It is for the child and when you don't pay those amounts, it's hurting the child. They may not be able to play baseball, because the other parent isn't able to afford it because you're behind your child support. They might not be able to have school clothes or other food that day, you know, it just depends on the situation of the mother, but ultimately, you know, it really affects, and it hurts the household that the child is in. And I think really stressing that fact, because a lot of men or women that are paying child support, think that it's oh I'm just giving this person money all the time and it does go to the proper areas. So, you know, I think stressing the fact that you're doing this for the child not for the other child's parent.

The role of order review and adjustment. We also asked custodial parents to consider whether, from their perspectives, child support programs should review orders and potentially adjust them to better align with what obligors earn, when obligors fall behind on their ordered support. In this domain as well, custodial parents voiced a range of perspectives, considering complex challenges. A key tension custodial parents highlighted was the obligor's ability to meet their own basic needs, and the needs of and obligor's responsibility for children. On one hand, some custodial parents felt that order amounts should be based on obligors' actual earnings. From the perspective of these parents, it felt unfair to set orders at an amount outsized to obligor earnings; they voiced these concerns for obligors with low incomes who do not have enough to meet their own basic needs, especially with current inflationary pressures.

On the other hand, some custodial parents felt that reducing order amounts when obligor earnings decrease is unfair to custodial parents and could negatively impact children. From the perspective of these parents, the expenses of raising children do not decrease simply because an obligor's income has decreased, and reductions in child support can leave children with unmet needs and custodial parents scrambling to make up the difference. These custodial parents raised concerns specifically about the inadequacy of minimum orders and low order amounts for covering the costs of raising a child.

In addition to concerns about fairness related to order adjustments in response to nonpayment, custodial parents also expressed more general concerns related to how order amounts are calculated and resultant order amounts. Several custodial parents expressed that the calculation of child support orders should factor in the costs and needs of the child, rather than parent earnings. As one custodial parent stated:

As a mother, I have a lot of different payments that child support does not cover. So, on my end, I pay you know 90% of the things and child support covers only x amount, you know, so I don't believe that it should be based off of what the other parent makes. It should be based off of an average of what the children need for said year.

Custodial parents also raised concerns about order amounts being set at or adjusted to artificially low levels, particularly in situations when obligors conceal income working for cash or being self-employed. Custodial parents expressed frustration with the perceived inaction of the child support agency and courts systems in these situations. Several described that in their own situations, their child's other parent worked under the table or hid income or assets. They expressed frustration that the child support agency and courts did not do more to ascertain actual earnings in these situations.

Further, custodial parents expressed feeling that the child support program and courts frequently relied on custodial parents to report potentially falsified income, creating undue burden for custodial parents and introducing the opportunity for conflict between co-parents. Custodial parents called for increased transparency around parents' financial situations, more investigation on the part of child support agencies when obligors claim very low or no income (particularly when self-employed), and shift in the burden of proof from custodial parents to obligors. Finally, several parents also raised concerns about how orders are calculated and distributed when obligors have multiple child support orders, citing potential unfairness to children on orders established subsequent to prior orders.

Program communication. Finally, when considering how programs for obligors might operate, we asked custodial parents for their perspectives on whether they would want to know if the obligor on their case was enrolled in a service-based program. Nearly all parents said that they would want the child support agency to share this information with them; further, some desired information about obligor progress and completion, beyond simply being informed that the obligor was enrolled in such a program. Custodial parents explained that knowing the other parent was enrolled in a service-based program would help them understand the circumstances around the obligor's nonpayment and the child support agency's lack of enforcement. They expressed that this communication could potentially reduce custodial parent frustration and increase custodial parent empathy for the obligor's position, as well as improve co-parenting relationships by letting the custodial parent know when the obligor is making an effort to change their circumstances. One custodial parent explained:

I think it would be helpful to know, because I think then it also takes that, you know, anger, frustration off the other parent when they're not receiving the support. They can, I guess, understand there's some sort of leeway or headway being made. I think it goes back to being transparent about what's happening.

Some custodial parents highlighted that knowing about the obligor’s successes and progress in the program could potentially help inform their decision-making around the obligor’s involvement with children. Another key consideration for custodial parents was what program participation for obligors would mean for their receipt of child support. They wanted information from the child support agency that could help them understand what to expect and how to plan, if orders, payments, and enforcement practices change during program participation. Finally, and importantly, several custodial parents expressed a desire for the child support agency to share information about how program participation might impact their children—such as if the program would take steps to increase contact between obligors and children—or their own contact with obligors. This issue was of particular concern for custodial parents with safety concerns due to prior family or domestic violence.

It is also noteworthy that the custodial parents we spoke with were often surprised and disappointed that they had not heard of the ELEVATE program from their local child support agency; many custodial parents expressed interest in the idea of the obligor on their case participating in a program like ELEVATE, and some wanted to know the options available to obligors within their communities, yet only one parent had heard of ELEVATE prior to taking part in this study. From their perspectives, this lack of information from the CSA about a resource available in their community that had the potential to help their family felt indicative of a broader lack of consideration for custodial parent needs and perspectives.

Perspectives on Current CSA Supports for Custodial Parents

When child support obligors do not pay the support that they owe, custodial parents and children are left without that source of income flowing into the household until the obligor resumes payments. This absence of income can make it difficult for custodial parent families to

plan for household expenses and make ends meet. As the child support program moves toward a more holistic approach focused on the family, understanding custodial parent perspectives on what CSAs could do to support them in their role as parents provides important insights for future policy and programming considerations.

Perceived lack of support for custodial parents currently. In order to learn more about custodial parent views on how CSAs could provide supports and resources differently for custodial parents and children in the *future*, we first asked them to share their thoughts on ways in which the CSA makes life easier for custodial parents *currently*. Some parents discussed the CSA's role in transferring resources from obligors to custodial parents as a way that the CSA helps them currently. Broadly, however—and perhaps not surprising given that the study's sample included custodial parents who do not receive child support payments regularly—many custodial parents perceived current supports for custodial parents to be lacking. As one custodial parent stated, “If there is [any way that they help], I'm just not participating in it or I'm not aware of it.” Another custodial parent said, “Other than like the direct deposit of the support payments? No. I honestly haven't talked to somebody at the child support agency until this past year for probably 10 years.” Another custodial parent viewed CSA help and services unfairly targeted for obligors at the expense of custodial parents. As a result, from her perspective, custodial parents are left to bear the costs of nonpayment and must do so to ensure children's needs are met. She explained:

There really isn't anything. I've had a child support order for 13 years now; there really hasn't been anything for me on my end. This other person that's supposed to be paying has been in arrears for years. So, getting \$10 extra a month, that's not going to really help out the child. Ten dollars is literally nothing in the scheme of raising a child. So, I think it favors the payor and not the one that receives the payment. I feel like it's very lenient and helpful on that end, but for the custodial parent that has to pick-up the slack or have, you know, have credit cards and pay interest on things to pay for the child because the other person is

not paying, or have their credit affected as things go into collections; there's no one there to help the custodial parent. We're always meant to just figure it out. And I think that that's very unfair.

Some custodial parents also shared that they earned just over financial thresholds that would allow them to qualify for public benefits, such as childcare and nutritional assistance, but nonetheless experienced significant economic hardship—particularly when their child support went unpaid. This left them feeling that the child support program, and broader social service landscape, was not helpful for parents in their situations. One custodial parent described:

I feel like the child support agency—I don't know. I feel like they don't really do much for people who like have decent jobs. I feel like the only time you really get a lot of help is if you are like basically kind of working at McDonald's. Because I—when I had my kids, I was—I was a young parent. I did everything like I was supposed to do, but I would never qualify for help because I always made, like, petty amounts like \$50 over the limit and I didn't qualify for food stamps. I didn't qualify for, you know, W2. I didn't qualify for any of that. So, I kind of just had to figure it out.

Communication gaps. Beyond a lack of services, a key issue affecting custodial parent experiences was lack of communication with agency personnel. Most custodial parents described a relationship with their CSA in which caseworkers contacted them only when seeking information about the obligor. Communication challenges included two elements: a lack of proactive outreach from the CSA to custodial parents, and difficulties custodial parents experienced contacting someone at the CSA for help when they had questions and concerns. One custodial parent stated, regarding a lack of proactive outreach: “My relationship with child support has been very, very non-existent... maybe if I would have reached out more, there might have been more help. But not that I know of, no.” Another custodial parent elaborated on the topic of difficulties reaching someone at the CSA for help and described a lack of information-sharing when caseworkers changed, exacerbating communication challenges. She stated:

It's really hard to get a hold of them. Just like, if you get a response or when you do have issues, it's going to be a couple of days before you get a call back. Sometimes you have to call multiple times before you do actually get a call back. I believe I had actually, at one point, started emailing because I felt like that was a faster way to get a response. That was a little bit closer to COVID so there was a lot of like different stuff going on, like the case workers were changing. And so, like at that point like I would've appreciated like a letter telling me that my case worker was changing because I had no idea. And when I called them and I talked—you know, tried to get a hold of my case worker, it was like oh, she—you know, she's no longer your case worker ...Let me check and see who it is now.

Agency expectations of custodial parents. Another key issue was CSA requests of custodial parents for information-gathering. Some custodial parents we spoke with, because of this lack of support, perceived the child support program as more extractive of custodial parents than beneficial for them. Particularly for custodial parents who received little to no child support, being expected to track down information about the obligor and report back to the CSA, or take time off to attend court hearings, felt costly and unfair. As one custodial parent described, “We’re putting in legwork on our own to figure out, did they switch employers? Did they do this?” Another custodial parent expressed frustration at being asked to prove that the obligor on her case had a higher level of income than he reported in court and feeling as though the costs of engaging with child support exceeded the amount she expected to receive in child support, contributing to her disengagement from the program. She stated:

I kind of feel like at times that I'm doing more work than the caseworker has. I've contacted them as far as he's doing all these different jobs. They asked me for the proof. I feel like, what are they here for? What are you here to help me do if I'm the one that have to do all of this?... I'm like, he's doing this, the DoorDash and Instacart. And they're not counting that. And he's making a lot of money doing that. And they're just like... I have no help with them getting his information. 'Well, we can't find it,' or 'He's not working.' That's why I feel like I'm doing more than they are doing that time. You give up. You get to that point where you're like, just forget it. It's not worth it. I'm wasting more money going around doing all that than what I'm going to be getting from him anyway. So, it's like, what's the point?

Another custodial parent concurred, stating,

I feel like it just kind of gets dumped in our lap and like, 'Oh, he changed his job? You got to tell us.' ... You're like, all right. Well, this is just how it is. It's either nothing, or I'm the one who hunted it down and is doing all the work.' Then it's like, what you even get out of it is not even worth the hours you put into it.

Perspectives on Potential Future Supports for Custodial Parents and Children

We also asked custodial parents for their perspectives on things the CSA could start to do in the future that would make their lives easier as parents. Custodial parent suggestions fell into three broad categories of desired supports and resources—more transparency and communication; more empathy, understanding, and tangible service offerings for custodial parents and children; and less reliance on custodial parents for tracking down and reporting information on obligors. They also offered concrete suggestions for practical process and technology-based changes. We provide more detail about each of these topics below.

More transparency and communication. Custodial parents sought more proactive outreach and communication, and easier-to-access communication channels for reaching CSA caseworkers with questions. In particular, many custodial parents sought more communication from CSAs when obligors do not make expected payments; rather than the payment simply not arriving, they desired an outreach from the CSA letting them know the payment had not been made to help them plan accordingly to make ends meet. As one custodial parent described, “You know, if I was a parent who didn’t monitor my bank to see when, you know, those payments come, you know, like I may not have even known [that he missed a payment].” Another custodial parent described how crucial this information is for her family:

If you think about raising children, it's all about a budget. And so if you, as the custodial parent, are expecting even \$400 in a month, what do you do if that child support suddenly doesn't appear? What do you do when you can't pay your rent? So communication, I feel like, [would be] a huge benefit because there is no communication for me right now. It's just sit and wait and wonder when it's going to show up. And there's been many occasions where, you know, you're put in a

pickle where you've got to borrow money from somebody or donate plasma or whatever you have to do to provide.

A third custodial parent emphasized the importance of this outreach from the CSA in situations when co-parents lack strong or regular communication between them. She described:

I have a very good [co-parent] relationship, but I know some relationships that co-parenting is just not there. So, they have no idea what's even going on. You know, so just give them a heads up on, "Oh. It's going to be less this month because they lost their job." Or whatever. Or it's going to be more this month.

Custodial parents particularly highlighted a desire for more information about the co-parent's situation and child support case. For example, any enforcement actions taken, obligor job and income changes that might result in changes to order or payment amounts, and information about how to request order reviews. As one custodial parent envisioned, more communication might involve regular, periodic outreach from the CSA to the custodial parent, to facilitate check-ins on the status of their case. She described:

It'd be nice, maybe, like every six months or maybe even, like, yearly, I don't want to say checkups, but maybe check-in. I don't know. Again, just to be like, okay, so this is what we found. Again, it'd be nice if they would do some legwork and be like, okay, so he or she changed their job. I don't know. Again, just more communication and just on top of the case, because I feel like some cases just kind of get brushed under the rug again, and they have a lot going on. Again, more communication would be awesome.

Other custodial parents highlighted the importance of communication for helping custodial parents understand "their rights and how the process works," and "more transparency about what child support agency does and their process." One custodial parent sought more web-based resources and information about child support. She described how due to this perceived lack of resources, child support processes felt less than transparent, and custodial parents lacked information about resources and processes available to them. She stated:

I would say the parents don't know their rights of, you know, okay, what steps can I take? Or, you know, as far as like child support reviews. A lot of times with

services for different things—not child support, but other things—like, you know, you can go on a website and you can look at, okay, ‘These are the things I can do’ and ‘This is what’s available.’ You know, like there’s nothing like that. It’s almost like child support is a big like hidden secret, you know, and the processes and it’s not widely known. And I’ve heard that from, you know, multiple parents. Not just myself, but just like across the board like not knowing what you can and can’t do and, you know, that sort of thing.

More empathy and understanding. Custodial parents called for CSA staff to provide services in a manner more understanding and empathetic of custodial parents’ situations and experiences. They wanted caseworkers to listen to custodial parents, hear their concerns, treat them respectfully, and help them understand options. One custodial parent described:

I think just more of like the understanding of people’s difficulties. Because, I don’t know. I feel like everybody goes through stuff and they are kind of just like, ‘Oh well, like, you’re going to have to just do this.’

A male custodial parent shared his experience of often being mistaken for the obligor on his case, placing him in the uncomfortable position of needing to explain his situation repeatedly. He called for fewer assumptions about gender roles and more individualized attention to case circumstances, stating:

There’s a lot of times where I’m just going into a courthouse or I’m calling the agency, and the assumptions are already being made that I’m the one that’s not supporting the child, my child or children, others’ examples. And so sometimes it’s hard. And even when I do decide to contact the agency, like, there’s times I’m explaining—it’s taking five, 10 minutes to explain, ‘No, I’m the one owed.’ Right? So it almost—like, it becomes tiresome. And it’s just hard sometimes because like—they just never believe you. Like, ‘No, really, I’m owed, like, a significant amount of money.’ And it’s not something that I think a lot of people really see, that sometimes there’s males in that situation as well.

More tangible service offerings. Custodial parents expressed a desire for a host of tangible service offerings aimed at custodial parents and children. From the perspective of some custodial parents, instead of programs for obligors, child support programs should re-direct funds towards helping to meet the needs of custodial parents and children when obligors do not pay the

support that they owe. Some perceived that the child support program focused a disproportionate share of resources and attention on obligors. These custodial parents expressed that as primary caretakers for their children, supports and services that could help them improve their own employment situations or financial circumstances would be most beneficial to the financial well-being of their children. A custodial parent described:

It's been rough to raise a child on your own. It's by far the roughest thing. You know, but I, again, I've never been offered anything more... first, if they would ask, is something more that we could do to help benefit you and your child since, you know, the father's incarcerated and has been incarcerated since [the child was] nine months old. You know, all those years, I wished I would've gotten, you know, offered something more to help or, again, an incentive. You know, I'm raising my child on my own.

Several parents suggested that the CSA could provide information about available community resources or programs that can help support custodial parent and child needs, such as employment programs, childcare, medical questions, and other supports. One parent suggested that the CSA compile a regular newsletter for custodial parents with this information:

Maybe a list—getting a list together of things to do in your county or your city. You know, you still have to have a life, and you still have to have some kind of fun. So like, 'The library has XYZ programs,' or there's like a monthly calendar that could be sent out of free things or local food pantries that are in the area. Just maybe a quarterly publication that would have resources.

Several custodial parents wanted financial supports or access to resources when obligors do not pay the support that they owe, particularly for custodial parents who experience significant financial hardship as the result of not receiving child support. Some custodial parents suggested access to funds to help make ends meet; one custodial parent suggested that a portion of each child support payment should be held in escrow for distribution when obligors missed a month.

You could even have a \$25 cushion that gets set aside—that's ordered from the child support, you know, like how you have to pay back state services. Why

couldn't they do that with the ELEVATE program and have \$25 every month set aside from the child support in that case that person does default? That would be a really big benefit to the recipient as some sort of backup.

Others called for CSAs to directly offer free or low-cost activities for parents and children together, and programs specifically for children. One custodial parent stated:

If there's other programs that would exist for children who have not had consistent child support payments with scholarships, or like, access to counseling services. Like in case, like, the parent's insurance wouldn't cover it or something like that. Creating some programs for them. Like maybe sports or something that maybe the parent might not be able to pay for because they're not getting the payments.

Other custodial parents wanted childcare, to allow custodial parents a periodic “night out,” co-parenting classes and activities, and therapeutic supports. Access to free or reduced-cost therapeutic services were raised as both a generalized help to all custodial parents as well as specifically beneficial for custodial parents in high-conflict co-parent relationships and survivors of domestic violence. As one custodial parent said, “I wish they would give us therapy because God knows being a single parent should require that therapist. It's been really hard.” One custodial parent also expressed a desire for emergency funds to help cover emergency medical costs for children, explaining:

I don't really know if this falls into child support, but the orders for like medical that's not covered, no one helps obtain that—those funds. I'm you know, personally, I'm in a situation where my son needed braces and it was like \$4000 out-of-pocket, and their dad just didn't pay the amount and I ended up having to pay his half because the doctor wouldn't remove my son's braces until the amount was paid off. And to go and collect and there's no one to help for that. I called attorneys. I called this or that; no one's there assist with those, so I think having a program that helps pay—but you know, helps having a fund for those types of expenses would be extremely helpful for the primary parent.

Another key support custodial parents desired was connection to free or low-cost legal resources to help custodial parents navigate child support and child custody issues. As a custodial parent suggested:

Maybe they could have family law attorneys available to help families. Because otherwise, you're just kind of running around trying to, you know, find this attorney and that attorney and maybe it would be just helpful to have attorneys familiar with all these situations available to families, and available to the child support agency to help these families as much as possible live a more streamlined process.

Another parent explained that she avoids court due to the costs associated with representation:

When I have to go to court and like, kind of, fight for it, not having to worry about the legal fees would be nice. Because I tend to avoid it because it just doesn't seem cost effective, or I can't afford an attorney.

Less reliance on custodial parents for “detective work.” Many custodial parents called for CSAs to do more to track down information about obligors' employment and income without relying on updates from custodial parents. One custodial parent suggested the CSA should be pursuing regular information updates from obligors directly:

So technically, the parent who owes or is supposed to pay is supposed to let the system know when they change a job. They're not doing it. So then we're having to do it. But if it was, like, six months or yearly even, that they reached out [to obligors] and said, 'Okay, where's your place of employment at this time? What's your salary?' Why should that fall back onto us if the other parent is not doing it in the first place? Because they're not going to. If they're making more money now, why would they?

Another custodial parent described that a more service-oriented approach to child support would involve taking custodial parents out of the “enforcer” or “middleman” role:

So we aren't sitting here either trying to be the enforcers or trying to be the middleman. We're putting in the legwork. We got to get the court dates. We got to get all this. And I mean, that's money. That's time. That's effort. It's exhausting. If we want to move towards a more social services-oriented approach, how can they help provide that benefit?

From the perspective of a third custodial parent, the child support program and courts should do more to verify obligor income regularly. This parent suggested that obligors could be

expected to share income information at the end of the year based on tax return information, and that the CSA could set up mechanisms for facilitating regular transmission of this information.

She said:

So a thought I just had was, like, when we do our taxes, right? We have all these forms we got to fill out. So end of year, if another parent could get a form from their agency of 'Here's how much I made,' 'Here's how much of this'—we already file state taxes. I mean, I understand not everybody. But, like, there's got to be some level of reporting and responsibility on the other parent that 'you're required to fill this out within 90 days of receipt.' Something along those lines just so that agencies can help keep tabs on people.

Suggestions for Process-Based Improvements and Innovations

Custodial parents offered a host of practical suggestions for process-based improvements that they felt could help provide them with information and support. These included:

Notifications when actions occur on a case or when a case's status changes, through automated mechanisms, such as emails, push notifications on an application, or pop-up notifications upon logging into the child support website. One custodial parent described:

"Even something in the account that just kind of like—you know, how like different accounts will show like notifications and messages when you log in. Like something even as simple as a message specifically for that case that says, 'Hey, FYI, we sent out a notice to the IRS to put a lien on taxes for back-owed child support.' Like just something as simple as that ... something as simple as like a pop-up in the account would've been sufficient for me."

Notifications when a caseworker changes, and information about how to reach assigned caseworkers. Custodial parents wanted to know who the worker assigned to their case is, and how they could be reached directly when custodial parents need help or information.

They suggested that this information could be made available directly in the child support portal.

Using modern communication technology to eliminate the need for in-person visits and long phone calls. Custodial parents were often frustrated with needing to go down to the CSA or wait on hold on the phone to try and reach their caseworker. One custodial parent explained how

online messaging could address these issues and ensure all parties receive information synchronously:

So, really, the big one for me is it needs to be modernized, right? And what I mean by that is why are we still driving 10, 20, 30, 50 minutes, an hour into a building downtown somewhere to speak with someone, or we're waiting four days for a return phone call, when you can have more of a—like a messaging service. Like an OurFamilyWizard type of thing with your caseworker ... where communication can not only be a little more instantaneous, but also, everybody is seeing it at the same time. So now you're not worrying whether or not the other parent even received the letter or if they're living in the house of the last known address and that type of thing. So I think just getting a program into the 21st century where, like, internet capabilities can help maintain some of this would be beneficial.

Improvements to the process for reporting obligor income changes. Several custodial parents thought there could be easier ways to report changes to obligor jobs and income, or to report obligors concealing income or assets. Suggestions included creating a “whistleblower report” that could be filed with the help of CSA staff or using the current online system.

Expedited processing time for the collection and distribution of lump-sum payments collected through tax intercepts. As one parent explained:

I've been in my situation, there's taxes and tax interceptions, but those funds are not available for 6 to 9 months after a tax season. That's a really long range from the time that you are supposed to receive those funds to when you actually get payment. So, maybe shortening that up would be helpful, and then having someone to talk to.

Web-based resources to help track expense sharing, including variable expenses covered by formal child support orders, and potentially mechanisms for automatically enforcing the splitting of these expenses. Explained a custodial parent:

I know in some cases people have to pay for like, childcare or extra like educational expenses. Maybe have a separate web portal where somebody could attach the receipts and then it adds to the bucket for that as well. Because that's all part of child support, right? You're supporting the child. And you know, school registrations or anything like that. So, if it's a court order, there should be some form or platform where you can upload and then it adds to their child support amount.

CONCLUSIONS

The child support program is in the midst of a crucial transition, from enforcement-only approaches toward approaches that couple enforcement with services. These changes are evident nationally—with the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement’s June 2023 renaming as the Office of Child Support Services a clear signal of the program’s intended future—as well as in Wisconsin, as the state pursues and tests new programmatic approaches to child support services. As programs make decisions about the kinds of services to make available to parents, the role and shape of enforcement, and in which domains to target programmatic efforts, parents served by the child support program offer key insights for consideration. Obligor behind on payments—generally the target population of child support-led programs intended to improve their employment and child support outcomes—offer important insights into their own challenges, needs, and experiences. The needs and experiences of custodial parents and children, however, are also important to consider when making decisions about programming and supports for families. This report added to the evidence base about custodial parent perspectives on the child support program’s role in holistically supporting family well-being. Custodial parents called for an approach to serving obligors that is driven by obligors’ underlying barriers to compliance; connects obligors to services aligned to their specific needs; and includes a role for enforcement. They also sought more services and supports for custodial parents when obligors fall behind, and more communication and outreach about their child support case, processes, and available resources, including obligor program enrollment and progress in a program.

This study has several limitations. Our study gathered information from a small and non-random sample. The parents willing to participate in this research might have different experiences and perspectives from those who did not express interest in participating, or for whom technology barriers precluded taking part in a Zoom-based or telephone interview. Also,

our sample included only custodial parents with at least one current support order who were not receiving all the support owed to them. Custodial parents without orders, and parents receiving child support in full, may have different views. Additionally, data collection was limited to only five Wisconsin counties, all of which currently provide state-funded programmatic offerings to obligors behind on their child support. While the custodial parents in our sample were generally unaware of ELEVATE programs in their counties, counties engaged in these types of service offerings may take a different approach to serving families than counties that do not, with the potential to shape parent experiences differently. Finally, our study gathered information about the perspectives of custodial parents generally on approaches child support agencies might take to serving families, rather than perspectives of custodial parents whose co-parent participates in the ELEVATE program, and custodial parents with this specific experience may have differing views from the custodial parents in our sample. As a result, the perspectives of parents we spoke with are not generalizable to a broader population of parents, within or outside of these counties; family and individual experiences with child support are unique, and perspectives on those experiences vary. Despite these limitations, we believe this analysis provides potentially useful considerations for policy and practice, as well as information to inform future research.

Potential Implications

This study suggests several important policy implications for future programs and support services that consider the needs of custodial parents as well as obligors.

Communication and outreach to custodial parents from programs. Findings from this study suggest that communication and outreach from the child support program are key concerns for custodial parents, generally throughout the life of a child support case as well as specifically when obligors take part in programs aimed at improving compliance. The child support program

could explore opportunities to create direct, streamlined avenues of communication between child support programs and custodial parents generally (beyond the context of any obligor-specific programs), such as enhanced web resources and sharing direct telephone numbers and email addresses for caseworkers with custodial parents. Additionally, child support programs could explore opportunities to share regular updates with custodial parents about the status of their case, particularly when obligors are not paying in full. Child support programs could also consider sharing information with custodial parents about programs and resources available in the community aimed at obligors behind on their support. Such information-sharing would be consistent with custodial parent wishes for transparency about programmatic options, and also cultivates additional potential pathways for information about services and support to get to obligors, should custodial parents wish to share such information with obligors themselves. Further, when obligors take part in programs to address compliance, child support programs could explore opportunities to share information and updates about their participation both at the time of enrollment and throughout an obligor's participation.

Continued investment in services for obligors behind on support. The custodial parents we interviewed emphasized the potential value of services for helping obligors address barriers to compliance and improve their abilities to provide financially for children. Findings from this study highlight the importance of programs providing or connecting obligors to an array of services that not only directly support entry into an adequately paying job—by building fundamental employment skills and matching obligors with employers—but also in addressing underlying barriers that impede the ability of some obligors to participate in work reliably, such as mental health, motivation, substance use, and lack of transportation or housing. Future programs could consider continuing to foster connections to community resources focused on

these barriers, in addition to services related directly to obtaining and keeping a job and improving obligors' earning potential.

Careful consideration about when and how to take enforcement actions. Most custodial parents believed use of enforcement actions—such as fines, incarceration, and license suspensions—in situations where the underlying barrier to compliance was an inability to pay would do more harm than good. But, they recognized in some situations enforcement could be effective. Clear guidelines (e.g., process flows to help guide decision-making), could potentially help caseworkers in determining when enforcement is appropriate. Specifically, such guidance could help caseworkers making enforcement decisions in the context of a service-based program, as well as more generally during routine case management.

Developing programs and services aimed specifically at custodial parents. Findings from this study add to the evidence that when obligors do not pay the support that they owe, this disruption in resources can have tangible and consequential implications for the ability of custodial parents and children to make ends meet. While engaging in efforts to improve the financial situations of obligors is a key component to improving family well-being, providing or connecting custodial parents to resources that can help them to meet their children's needs—particularly when obligors do not pay—is worth consideration. Such solutions could potentially include policy approaches that help meet basic expenses or bridge the gap between income and needs when obligors do not pay, as well as child support agencies playing an active role in connecting custodial parents to economic support services and other community resources.

Expanded offerings for co-parenting services. Learnings from this study highlight that cultivating positive co-parenting relationships is a priority for many custodial parents, as well as an ongoing challenge. Child support programs could explore opportunities to include co-

parenting activities into program service offering when safe and appropriate. Additionally, programs could consider efforts to connect obligors and custodial parents to mediation services early in the child support process as well as when household circumstances change, to provide parents with an opportunity to reach arrangements that work for their family's circumstances.

Expanded bandwidth for case managers to engage in intensive case management. An ongoing constraint, raised by custodial parents for this study as well as other research, is the limited bandwidth many caseworkers in child support have for providing holistic services to families. The child support program could continue to explore avenues for supplemental funding to facilitate reductions in caseloads. This expanded capacity could help identify underlying barriers for obligors, monitor obligor engagement and progress in services offered, ensure order amounts are appropriate, address communication concerns, reduce burden on custodial parents, and allow for opportunities to build trusting relationships with family members.

Exploring opportunities for ongoing custodial parent engagement. Finally, findings highlight the substantial value of custodial parent insights for developing policy and programs that support the well-being of the whole family. Policymakers could consider opportunities to engage custodial parents in providing feedback about program experiences and recommendations, policy changes under consideration, and specific programmatic offerings under development.

Next Steps

The IRP evaluation team will continue activities into early 2025. These efforts include data collection with obligors participating in ELEVATE programs, as well as program staff. As these efforts unfold, putting these perspectives into dialogue will offer helpful insights into

ELEVATE program operations and how future programs might be implemented to support family needs.

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