WISCONSIN'S ELEVATE PROGRAM: FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

ELEVATE FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In 2019, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) provided funding, via a waiver from the federal Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) to five Wisconsin counties, to test an innovative approach to serving families involved in the child support system. This program, called ELEVATE (Empowering Lives through Education, Vocational Assessment, Training, and Employment), originated from a previous OCSS-funded national demonstration project, the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED), in which Wisconsin piloted projects in Brown and Kenosha counties under the title Supporting Parents Supporting Kids (SPSK). Like SPSK, ELEVATE provided a package of services to noncustodial parents (NCPs) behind on their child support obligations, in lieu of more traditional, enforcement-oriented approaches. This report summarizes findings from the ELEVATE evaluation, including a quasi-experimental impact analysis, which analyzes the program's impacts on employment and child support payment outcomes using state administrative data, as well as information about how the programs operated via an implementation analysis, analysis of services data, and interviews with ELEVATE participants.

Wisconsin's ELEVATE Program

The OCSS waiver supplemented by additional state budget funds allowed Wisconsin to continue to operate programs in Brown and Kenosha counties and to extend programming to three additional counties. Three counties—Marathon, Racine, and Wood—applied for the opportunity, and DCF selected all three to take part in the pilot. As DCF articulated in the program's Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), the main goal of ELEVATE was to increase NCP compliance with child support obligations by increasing NCP participation in the workforce, and to increase NCPs' engagement with their children. DCF also explicated an operational goal of shifting agency culture from a more traditional, enforcement-oriented approach towards a more supportive array of services.

DCF tasked child support agencies with ensuring that the core components of the ELEVATE program— enhanced child support services, case management services, employment services, and parenting services—be delivered to participants directly through child support agency staff, through a contract with third-party service providers, or through a combined approach. DCF specified that all participants were to receive certain services, while others could be provided as staff found appropriate. All counties began enrolling study participants and providing services in January 2020. Study enrollment continued through December 2022 with a four-month interruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 18 through July 7, 2020).

Implementation Analysis

The implementation analysis drew from program documentation and 26 interviews with leaders and staff from ELEVATE child support agencies and partners from all five ELEVATE counties between February and March of 2023. Thus, findings are indicative of the program at full implementation. The analysis builds on earlier learnings from the initial implementation report (Vogel et al., 2021) and highlights adaptations programs made between initial and full implementation, as well as factors contributing to change; implementation successes, challenges, and strategies programs used to address hurdles; and program staff perspectives on key lessons learned.

Key findings regarding changes in program leadership, partnerships, and staffing included:

- **ELEVATE programs generally used partnership models consistent with their approach at initial implementation, with a few adaptations.** At full implementation, most partnerships in place at initial implementation remained in place, though parenting partners were the exception to this trend. Staff noted that on one hand, a "most services in-house" model can be helpful for facilitating goal alignment and ensuring that child support outcomes are a top priority. On the other hand, a "most services through partners" leverages the expertise of—and broadens connections to—non-ELEVATE service providers in a county.

- **ELEVATE programs continued to develop relationships with local service providers beyond ELEVATE partners.** At full implementation, ELEVATE programs had built upon and expanded their earlier efforts to leverage and build relationships with a broad array of local service providers to address these needs. These included community providers who offered services directly related to employment (e.g., local job centers, state-run employment programs, and job training programs), and providers who offered other services that support well-being (e.g., financial education, substance use and mental health, and low-cost legal services).

- **Staff turnover presented both challenges and opportunities.** Between initial and full implementation, three programs experienced additional turnover in the coordinator role. Interview participants described challenges that accompanied turnover, including temporary additional burden on other staff, loss of institutional knowledge and information gaps, the "learning curve" required for bringing new staff up to speed, and interrupted services and relationships with participants. Positive consequences of turnover included new skills, expertise, and talents within the team; new connections to community partners; and opportunities to bring on staff with attributes that supported current needs.

- **As the COVID-19 pandemic receded, ELEVATE programs appreciated the benefits of co-location.** In all counties, programs' child support staff and ELEVATE coordinators were in the same building, and most agencies were housed in the same physical space as other community agencies. At full implementation, all ELEVATE program agencies that had been closed during the pandemic had re-opened to the staff and the public, and staff described many benefits to the return of working together and in the same physical space, especially opportunities for informal communication.

- **ELEVATE programs continued to refine tools for information-sharing; yet, tracking across multiple systems remained an ongoing challenge.** While all counties used KIDS (Kids Information Data System) to track child support information, counties used various other tools to store case information. At full implementation, as at initial implementation, an ongoing frustration for staff was the necessity of tracking data across multiple systems that "don't talk to each other" and the amount of time required to do so, which came at the expense of service delivery.

Though criteria for ELEVATE eligibility remained largely consistent, an important change in December 2021 specified that parents actively under contempt proceedings or purge conditions could be eligible to participate in ELEVATE on a voluntary basis. Counties took different approaches to incorporating the contempt policy clarification into their processes. Ultimately, ELEVATE counties achieved 92% of study enrollment targets.

At full implementation, the ELEVATE service model continued to include four primary service domains: (1) case management, (2) enhanced child support services, (3) employment services, and (4) parenting services. DCF expected counties to provide services in each of those domains but provided counties the flexibility for local customization as well as to tailor service offerings to the needs of a given participant. At initial implementation, staff sometimes described their program's offerings as a "menu" of options, rather than a "package" of services all participants were expected to receive (See figure ES.1).

Figure ES.1: ELEVATE Service Model

Case Management Services	Enhanced Child Support Services
All expected to receive: Domestic violence screening; service referrals; progress monitoring; overview of expectations and responsibilities	All expected to receive: Desk review; suspension of administrative and judicial enforcement (if applicable); assessment for expedited review and adjust Could also include: Order modification; stipulation on arrears payment; lifting license suspension; license reinstatement fees; state debt reduction
Employment Services	**Parenting Services**
All expected to receive: One-on-one employment needs assessment Could also include: Resume writing assistance; job search assistance; job readiness training; job placement services; job retention services; rapid re-employment services; education; work supports; other	All expected to receive: One-on-one parenting needs assessment Could also include: Parenting education and services related to: personal development; responsible parenting and co-parenting; parenting skills; relationship skills; domestic/family violence; other

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started just months after ELEVATE's launch, forced ELEVATE programs to quickly pivot to new ways of working. Though in-person offerings were routine by the time of full implementation, some pandemic-era changes persisted. For example, despite broad agreement about the benefits of in-person offerings, across ELEVATE programs, virtual provision of services—through phone, text, or email—continued. Staff discussed benefits and drawbacks to these new virtual options. Additionally, while most services were offered in a one-on-one format, counties described resuming group-based aspects of their programs, particularly parenting classes. Brief highlights of findings regarding each service are presented below:

- **Case Management Services.** At full implementation, case management services remained a cornerstone of ELEVATE. Staff emphasized that local service contexts varied across counties, which had implications for how programs approached their work with parents. Across all counties, however, connecting ELEVATE participants to other community providers also

remained an important component of case management. Maintaining engagement in program services remained a key challenge.

- **Enhanced Child Support Services.** At full implementation, as at initial implementation, counties took different approaches to implementing enhanced child support services. Staff described performing desk reviews swiftly and regularly, though often found that orders were not eligible for adjustment. Counties also differed in their approaches to providing feedback to participants about the outcome of the desk review process. Staff continued to view state-owed debt reduction as a beneficial incentive, though found many participants did not have eligible debt to forgive. Likewise, staff reported suspending enforcement tools, when possible, though some participants did not qualify and other barriers limited uptake.

- **Employment Services.** Across counties, employment services began with assessments. Counties varied in assessment approaches and subsequent steps. ELEVATE staff provided some employment services directly and referred participants to other programs for additional needs. Generally, programs referred participants to local providers for more intensive or specialized employment services, such as HSED programs, short-term job skills training, job development, and job coaching. However, staff described several challenges for connecting participants to specific job training opportunities and challenges for participants in terms of their ability to take part. Crucially, staff emphasized that many participants were unable to forego wages that they might have at another job due to urgent financial needs. The ability to provide work supports continued to be a helpful and unique aspect of ELEVATE. While the flexibility afforded to counties provided advantages for addressing participant needs, it also sometimes made it difficult for staff to know where to draw the line on a given expense or across expenses for a given participant. Other staff expressed concerns about participants engaging minimally with the program in order to maintain access to such supports.

- **Parenting Services.** ELEVATE staff observed substantial value in parenting services, though found that parenting classes were not always the type of parenting support participants needed. As described in the initial implementation report, plans for parenting classes were substantially disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and underwent change since initial implementation. Furthermore, uptake in parenting classes remained a key challenge for ELEVATE programs.

Looking forward, ELEVATE leaders and staff offered reflections on lessons learned:

- **Partnering across agencies to provide program services required time, intentionality, and strong communication.** ELEVATE leaders and staff valued the partnerships they established and nurtured through ELEVATE. They required care and attention to facilitate alignment in missions and goals, to develop a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities, and to cultivate effective channels of communication. Leaders and staff also emphasized the important role that community agencies and organizations outside of ELEVATE played in implementation—both for recruitment and for being able to help participants address needs beyond the scope of the program.

- **Serving participants effectively required time, trust, flexibility, and creativity.** ELEVATE leaders and staff underscored the importance of effective case management for helping participants reach goals and address needs. Serving participants effectively required not only time and trust, but also the flexibility to shift plans and approaches as needs change and creative thinking about

addressing barriers beyond those directly related to employment or child support. Staff noted that intervening early provided opportunities to help before situations became overwhelming, and frequent and proactive outreach, as well as offering services of value, were crucial for continued engagement.

- **Strong leadership, effective and supported staff, and commitment to teamwork supported implementation.** Program leaders described the benefits of having case managers who could relate to participants, were known to and respected by participants, were strong communicators, and took a holistic and participant-centered approach. Staff expressed appreciation for leaders who they felt set clear priorities, supported and empowered them, and helped them grow their skills. Both leaders and staff underscored the importance of teamwork. Building buy-in with child support staff required strong communication and demonstrating the value of the program—before and throughout implementation.

Ultimately, ELEVATE leaders and staff hoped that ELEVATE would continue. Interview participants also hoped that the next version of the program would include more intensive resources and more opportunities to learn from each other. For example, one frequent suggestion was for financial resources that could be used to help participants access fundamental and lacking supports such as housing. Interview participants also suggested that a future iteration of ELEVATE should include more financial resources available directly through the ELEVATE program for education and training for specific occupations, stipends for parents participating in training, and potential policy changes that would address issues such as arrears accumulation.

ELEVATE Service Receipt

As noted previously, the ELEVATE program included four core service types: case management, employment, parenting, and child support. For case management, employment, and parenting services, individual county staff recorded services provided for each category within a template spreadsheet and submitted completed spreadsheets to IRP each month. Major revisions to the spreadsheet resulted in consistent reporting for a subsample of parents enrolled in the ELEVATE evaluation between August 2021 and December 2022 (N=655). Child support services were tracked via administrative data.

The overwhelming majority of participants in the service data subsample (96%) received at least one case management service, including 42% who received at least one referral. Over three-fourths of participants (78%) received at least one employment service, including 56% who received work support services. Nearly half of the group (49%) received at least one parenting service. Approximately 83% received at least one service on a date after ELEVATE staff recorded their initial service(s) on the spreadsheet. Most ELEVATE participants (81%) received services in at least two core categories. The most frequent combination of core services (42%) was receipt of at least one service in all three categories. Participants who received services in just one category were most likely to have received case management (15%).

In terms of **case management**, most participants (82%) received ongoing case monitoring, and 69% were recorded as receiving an intake assessment. Notably, about 16% of respondents received direct transportation, often described by ELEVATE workers as transporting a participant to an appointment or agency. Participants received a wide variety of referrals with no specific category of referrals emerging as dominant; the most common category of referral was "other" (22%). Few participants were referred to external employment services such as short-term job-skills training (6%), subsidized employment

opportunities (3%), GED/HSED programs (2%), vocational training (2%), or post-secondary education (0.5%).

The most common **employment services** provided were related to job searching. For example, 39% of the services data sample received job-search services; 28% had an employment plan, and 13% received help with their resume. In terms of work supports, transportation services (e.g., gas cards, bus passes, ride share, OWI assessments, driver license fees) were most common. Nearly half (43%) of the 655 participants received at least one gas card; this was by far the most frequent subtype of work support provided in ELEVATE. Fewer ELEVATE participants received job follow-up/retention services (28%) or training (14%).

Fewer ELEVATE participants received **parenting services**. A quarter (25%) of the subsample received a parenting needs assessment, and 24% were reported as participating in a parenting class or support group. Other parenting services included assistance with mediation, access, and visitation, as well as individual parent counseling.

While the spreadsheet data provide a helpful window into our understanding of what services ELEVATE participants received during their time in the program, several limitations exist. An incomplete sample of parents for which information is available, and inconsistency in service reporting across counties, make it difficult to use these data to provide contextual insights regarding treatment dosage or to precisely inform staffing efforts for future programming.

Receipt of enhanced child support services was measured using administrative data from the Kids Information Data System (KIDS); thus, data are available for all 992 parents enrolled in the ELEVATE evaluation. Data analysis included measures of enforcement actions, changes in child support orders, and arrears reduction. Although desk reviews were expected for all participants, we were not able to verify whether these occurred using the administrative data available.

Regarding enforcement actions, only a small number of parents experienced license suspension (5.1%), but nearly one-quarter (23.6%) of parents were required to attend a contempt hearing within a year of enrollment. On average, contempt hearings, for those who experienced them, were held 6 months after enrollment, indicating that parents may have experienced a cessation of this enforcement action in the months immediately following enrollment, but that did not continue for a full 12 months. Approximately 18.7% of all evaluation participants had a license suspension removed in the 12 months following enrollment. Just over three-fourths of ELEVATE participants (77.4%) had an automatic income-withholding order established in the 12 months following enrollment.

Approximately 18% of ELEVATE parents experienced an order modification in the first 6 months following enrollment into ELEVATE. Modifications were split equally between upward modifications and downward modifications during this period. A larger number of ELEVATE parents (29.6%) experienced an order modification in the full 12-month follow-up period. A slightly larger proportion of these were downward modifications (17.3%) compared to upward modifications (12.3%). The median change in order amount over the 12-month post-enrollment period was a decrease of $88 per month.

We find that arrears reduction was not a common experience for most ELEVATE parents. Approximately 11% of parents had a reduction in state-owed arrears in the follow-up period; most of these parents (9.8%) received a reduction in state-owed arrears that were incurred from birthing costs. The median amount of this decrease was $426.

In sum, although some NCPs were spared punitive enforcement actions, received order modifications, and/or had their state-owed arrears decreased, these experiences were more the exception than the norm. As noted in the implementation analysis, this may have been because of broader changes in child support practices in ELEVATE counties.

ELEVATE Participant Experiences

Twenty-three parents (four to five per county) enrolled in ELEVATE participated in interviews asking them about their experiences in the program. Although findings participants cannot be generalized across all program participants, they provide helpful insights for future programs seeking to enroll, retain, and provide services aligned with parent needs.

In discussions about **how and why participants signed up for the program**, key findings included:

- Participants learned about ELEVATE through community resources, outreach from ELEVATE or child support staff, and referrals from other people or programs.

- Participants were motivated to participate in ELEVATE to get help with employment, child support issues, co-parenting issues, or relationships with children.

- While some participants viewed ELEVATE as a voluntary program, others perceived participation as less than a true "choice."

Participants described significant variation in their **perceptions of the services available** through the ELEVATE program as well as their **experiences with service receipt**. For example:

- Most ELEVATE participants described being offered resume assistance, job search activities, and work supports aimed at transportation barriers.

- Some participants thought the employment services offered to them aligned with their needs, while others wanted more job placement and occupational training options.

- Participants who received help with child support issues valued this assistance, though some had limited access to or information about child support services available through the program.

- Few participants reported taking part in parenting activities. Those who did found peer-based support groups and one-on-one conversations with staff particularly helpful.

- ELEVATE participants appreciated and valued referrals to community resources beyond those available through ELEVATE, particularly when tailored to their individual needs.

- Parents interviewed often described ELEVATE staff as supportive, empathetic, and caring—even when they were dissatisfied with the services available through ELEVATE.

- Participants described receiving services in a broad array of formats that often matched their preferences, though some wished for more face-to-face options.

- Some ELEVATE participants engaged in program services long-term. Others reported that they chose to stop participating, or that communication from the program dwindled over time.

- Participants held a wide range of opinions on the ELEVATE program's helpfulness. Their views were often shaped by the alignment between their situations and the services they received.

- Some participants we spoke with experienced barriers to work and that also limited their abilities to participate in program services.

Many participants valued the program and hoped it would continue, though some called for more intensive services such as job placement, occupational training, peer-support based parenting groups, low-cost legal services, expanded mediation resources and co-parenting activities, suspension of child support orders during program participation, and child care and housing assistance to be made broadly and consistently available.

Impacts on Child Support and Employment Outcomes

The ELEVATE impact evaluation was designed to measure whether participation in ELEVATE was associated with improved outcomes in the domains of child support payment, employment and earnings, parenting behaviors, and attitudes toward the child support program. In response to a request from DCF to expedite the sharing of findings regarding child support and employment outcomes to inform current programming, this report focuses on impacts in these domains, providing results for confirmatory measures drawn from administrative data.

For the administrative data outcomes included in this report, the impact analysis uses a difference-in-differences design. This design compares changes in the levels of pre-determined outcomes before and after enrollment in ELEVATE with changes in the levels of the same outcomes, over the same period, for a comparison group designed to be similar to ELEVATE participants. The comparison group was constructed using propensity score matching by first using administrative data to create a sample universe of obligors from non-ELEVATE counties who met the ELEVATE eligibility criteria and then selecting those who were most similar to ELEVATE participants on a variety of relevant characteristics. IRP's Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC) serves as the primary data source for the analyses; outcome measures are derived from KIDS and Unemployment Insurance (UI) quarterly wage records.

The 992 participants who enrolled in the ELEVATE evaluation comprise a diverse group of obligors. ELEVATE participants were on average just over 35 years old at the time of enrollment. Most were male. Obligors came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. On average, ELEVATE participants had 1.7 current support cases, and most had only nonmarital cases (74.7%). Participants owed, on average, just under $400 each month across all open support cases. Most participants received FoodShare benefits in the year prior to enrollment, and participants were employed, on average, just over half of the four quarters preceding enrollment (2.27 quarters). Data analyses suggest that ELEVATE participants may be distinctively different than the overall population that was eligible for ELEVATE; thus, verifying the need for a matching strategy to make the treatment and comparison groups more similar.

Key findings from the impact analysis suggest that the ELEVATE program did not have significant impacts on child support or employment outcomes. Specifically, when measuring differences in outcomes between the treatment and comparison group, we found:

- **ELEVATE had no impact on NCPs' average monthly child support order amount.** In theory, ELEVATE may have resulted in *lower* child support order amounts by "right-sizing" of orders, as was the case with CSPED (Cancian et al., 2019). If, however, ELEVATE produced increased

employment and wages, we might expect *higher* order amounts; although, we might anticipate any increase in orders to occur later in the follow-up period. The mean monthly order amounts for ELEVATE participants and the comparison group in the 12 months prior to ELEVATE were statistically equal at $417 and $423, respectively. Neither group experienced a statistically significant change in the post-period (unadjusted amounts = $429 and $418, respectively). This also holds true in our difference-in-differences analysis.

- **ELEVATE had no impact on NCPs' average monthly child support payments.** On average, without any regression adjustments, ELEVATE participants paid approximately $315 each month in current support in the 12 months prior to ELEVATE enrollment, and the comparison group paid a statistically similar amount ($356). Neither group increased their payments by a statistically significant amount in the 12 months after ELEVATE enrollment. Again, these results hold true in our difference-in-differences analysis.

- **ELEVATE had no impact on NCPs' child support compliance.** ELEVATE had no impact on either orders or payments, the two measures that make up the confirmatory child support compliance measure; thus, ELEVATE also did not have an impact on overall child support compliance, in terms of monthly average and the ratio of the sum of all payments to all orders across the full 12 months of pre- and post-enrollment periods.

- **ELEVATE had no impact on employment for participants**. While both ELEVATE participants and obligors in the comparison group experienced an increase in the proportion of the four quarters in which they were employed following enrollment (or synthetic enrollment for the comparison group) compared to the four quarters preceding enrollment, this increase was not statistically significant for either group of obligors, nor was it different between the groups. We also estimated the impact on the non-confirmatory outcome of whether the participant had *any* employment in the four quarters following enrollment. Similarly, we found no impact.

- **ELEVATE participants increased their quarterly earnings at a statistically significantly lower rate than participants in the comparison group.** Considering the unadjusted means, ELEVATE participants increased quarterly wages from approximately $2,900 to $3,600, and participants in the comparison group increased quarterly wages from approximately $3,300 to $4,600. The unadjusted means indicated a larger increase in wages for the comparison group, and this difference holds and is statistically significant in our difference-in-differences analysis.

Conclusions

This report shares findings from the ELEVATE evaluation implementation analysis, service data analysis, and participant interviews, and uses administrative data and a quasi-experimental design to measure program impacts on employment and child support outcomes. Taken together, the findings suggest that child support agencies built strong partnerships across organizations, and engaged in creative, thoughtful case management work and relationship building with program participants. However, the findings also suggest that like SPSK, ELEVATE did not improve earnings, employment, child support payments, or child support compliance. Thus, two questions remain: Why don't we observe impacts on these outcomes? and What can we learn from the current evaluation as the state considers innovations in programming to support families with NCPs behind in their child support payments?

One possibility is that ELEVATE, like SPSK, might not have provided the intensity of services—or the right set of services—to lead to changes in outcomes on average across program participants. Moving the needle on child support and employment outcomes may also require longer engagement with the program. In particular, study data point to the potential need for employment services that provide direct pathways to full-time, adequately paying employment. Although most ELEVATE parents had worked in the prior year, and most were working 12-months post-enrollment, the fact that earnings and child support payments did not appear to increase as a result of the program suggest that job quality could be an issue.

The most reliable service data available—those measuring enhanced child support services—also suggest a small potential for program impact. It is unclear how many ELEVATE participants upon enrollment were eligible for such services (e.g., whether they already had minimum order, did not have driver's license suspensions, did not have arrears). Also, importantly, ELEVATE appears to have been happening in the context of broader shifts toward more service-based (and less punitive) approaches in the child support system. This means that the "difference" in what ELEVATE parents received compared to the full population of parents in the changed counterfactual was smaller and, thus, the unique impact of the program may be weaker.

At a broader level, both staff and parents indicated the need to address systemic issues impacting NCPs' well-being and parenting, in addition to their abilities to find and maintain quality employment and pay child support (e.g., housing, AODA, mental health, legal service needs). Certainly, the fact that ELEVATE was implemented during the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic may also have impacted program participation and parent outcomes.

Ultimately, the study points to some helpful implications for future programming aimed at supporting families with NCPs behind in their child support payments:

- Parents appreciated the individualized and trusting relationships built with ELEVATE staff, and staff's dedication to their work and parents' success in the program. Both parents and staff acknowledged the importance of, but challenges with, maintaining engagement in the program.

- Many NCPs are experiencing multiple, complex barriers to employment and child support payment that may be beyond the scope of services a child support agency can provide. While agencies were successful in building many partnerships with community service providers and employers to implement ELEVATE, additional partnerships—particularly regarding legal services, housing, mental health, and AODA services—may be helpful. In addition, challenges remain in terms of ensuring that the benefits of referrals to outside services can be realized by NCPs.

- Both staff and parents shared that although parenting classes may have been helpful for some participants, different kinds of parenting supports—in particular, resources that could assist with custody, placement, and supervised visitation—might also be helpful. Broader leveraging of federal Access and Visitation funds to help parents access mediation services and supervised visitation, and enhanced focus on ensuring such services are systematically available for parents who are interested in and appropriate for such services, may also be avenues to providing these supports highly valued by some parents.

- Attention to job quality (vs. any employment) may be needed to truly impact earnings and child support outcomes. This may point to the need for direct partnerships with high road employers

as well as employment follow-up and scaffolding services. Additional funding, supports, policy changes, and expertise may be required for parents to benefit from occupational training and education programs.

- Changing attitudes about child support service provision and other contextual factors may impact the "counterfactual" experienced by NCPs throughout the state; thus, it is important to consider whether the target audience for interventions like ELEVATE might also change. For example, might the interventions be targeted to families receiving the least child support? To parents with the most complex sets of barriers to employment? To those uniquely eligible for enhanced child support services?

- In addition to providing services focused on supporting individual parents, it may be important to consider more systemic interventions. These might include policy changes; addressing bias/racism within social systems; addressing upstream issues impacting well-being, parenting, and financial stability; or providing direct financial support to families.

- Future evaluations may benefit from additional investment in consistent and reliable service data collection to help clarify the impacts of particular service configurations, dosage, model fidelity, and what happens with service referrals outside the child support agency. In addition, more information about the flow of program dollars may be helpful in understanding the "true cost" of implementing an effective program, levels of funding needed to support effective organizational partnerships, and the impact of funding provided directly to parents.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The child support system is intended to help ensure that parents who live apart from children contribute financially to their upbringing and well-being by establishing, enforcing, and collecting child support orders. Many noncustodial parents (NCPs), and especially parents of low-income children, have difficulty meeting their child support obligations (see, for example, Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003). As a result, most custodial parents (CPs) do not receive all the child support owed to them (Grall, 2020), while many NCPs struggle to meet their own basic needs and carry substantial child support debt (Sorensen, Sousa, & Schaner, 2007). In recognition that the current approach to child support does not work for all families, some policy leaders, practitioners, and researchers have called for the child support system to take new approaches to serving families, particularly those that the system has struggled to engage and serve in the past. This has led to innovations nationally and locally, with some programs shifting emphasis toward serving the whole family, building relationships with customers, and helping NCPs address barriers to meeting their obligations (Cancian et al., 2019; Lippold & Sorensen, 2011; Miller & Knox, 2001; Pratt & Hahn, 2021).

Consistent with this shift, in 2019, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) provided funding via a waiver from the federal Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) to five Wisconsin counties to test a new approach for serving families involved in the child support system. This program, called ELEVATE (Empowering Lives through Education, Vocational Assessment, Training, and Employment), provides a menu of services to NCPs behind on their child support obligations in lieu of more traditional, enforcement-oriented approaches.

The ELEVATE evaluation documents this approach and provides a test of the program's effectiveness. ELEVATE's evaluation includes a quasi-experimental impact analysis using administrative data to measure employment and child support payment outcomes, as well as information about how the program operated. This report summarizes final evaluation findings.[1] Chapter 1 describes the ELEVATE program and evaluation. Chapter 2 describes ELEVATE program operations at full implementation, including program staffing and partnerships; eligibility, recruitment, and enrollment; and service delivery strategies. Chapter 3 describes the services ELEVATE participants received. Chapter 4 describes participant experiences with the program. Chapter 5 summarizes the ELEVATE program's impacts on participant outcomes using administrative data. Chapter 6 provides summarized findings and potential implications for future programs.

Wisconsin's ELEVATE Program

The ELEVATE program originated from a previous OCSS-funded national demonstration project, the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED). Wisconsin was one of eight states to take part in CSPED, a project aiming to identify effective strategies for improving reliable payment of child support by unemployed or underemployed NCPs. The intervention was a child support-led program that included case management, as well as enhanced child support, employment, and

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[1]Other available ELEVATE evaluation products include an interim implementation report [@embed link]; a report describing custodial parent perspectives on new approaches to child support services; and a report that summarizes a profile of ELEVATE participants at the time of enrollment into the program. A subsequent memo, to be released in 2025, will describe ELEVATE participant outcomes drawing on survey-based measures (the current report presents outcomes using administrative data).

parenting services. Wisconsin piloted projects in Brown and Kenosha counties under the title Supporting Parents Supporting Kids (SPSK).

CSPED's impact evaluation found that the program led to modest declines in child support orders (consistent with services provided to "right-size" orders), smaller reductions in payments, and no significant changes in child support compliance. While the impact evaluation found some evidence of increases in earnings, the program had no impact on employment outcomes. However, CSPED resulted in significant improvements in NCPs' attitudes toward the child support program and increases in NCPs' sense of responsibility for their children (Cancian et al., 2019). Results from CSPED suggested that child support agencies can lead programs that provide a more comprehensive set of services than traditionally offered within the realm of child support, with the potential to support meaningful change in the lives of NCPs and families. Findings also suggested that further innovation was needed to identify a service array that improves employment, earnings, and child support compliance.

Given Wisconsin's experience with SPSK, DCF pursued and received a waiver from OCSS—as well as additional state budget funds—to continue operating programs in Brown and Kenosha counties and to extend programming to three additional counties under the new name ELEVATE. Three counties—Marathon, Racine, and Wood—applied, and DCF selected all three to take part. The five ELEVATE counties, shown in Figure 1, varied across a broad array of characteristics, including previous experience running service-based programs for NCPs (Vogel et al., 2021), county IV-D caseload size, local labor market conditions and characteristics of the populations in each participating county (see Appendix A for additional detail).

The main goal of ELEVATE, as articulated by DCF in the program's Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), was to increase NCP compliance with child support obligations by increasing NCP participation in the workforce. DCF also explicated an operational goal of shifting agency culture from a "traditionally enforcement focused [approach] to a more supportive and engaging approach to NCPs," as well as a goal of increasing NCP engagement in the lives of their children. DCF specifically sought county child support agencies "prepared to shift or who wish to further advance their agency's relationship with NCPs to one that is more supportive and engaging through internal cultural change and strong partnerships with other community organizations and agencies" (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2019, p.1). Counties were also required, as a condition of receipt of funding, to take part in ELEVATE's evaluation (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2019).[2]

Figure 1: Wisconsin's ELEVATE Counties

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[2]The impact findings in this report directly assess the effectiveness of ELEVATE in achieving the primary goals of improving NCP employment and child support outcomes. We discuss some aspects of organizational culture change in the implementation analysis and participant experience sections of the report. Potential changes in participant attitudes toward the child support system and engagement with children will be measured using survey data and reported in a future memo.

As described in the ELEVATE Policy and Procedures Manual, child support agencies were tasked with ensuring that the core components of the ELEVATE program be delivered to participants, either directly through child support agency staff, through a contract with third-party service providers, or through a combined approach. Like SPSK, core services included enhanced child support services, case management services, employment services, and parenting education (Figure 2). DCF specified that all participants were expected to receive some services, and others could be provided as staff found appropriate (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2020). Compared to SPSK, ELEVATE appeared to be designed to give county child support agencies more discretion in developing and providing specific services for participants, opening the door to more variation in implementation across counties.

Figure 2. ELEVATE Services and Providers

Leadership, Oversight, and Coordination		
Child support agency		
Employment services	**Child Support Services**	**Parenting Services**
Employment services assessment Other employment services as needed	Enhanced child support services Parenting needs assessment	Parenting services Other services as needed
Child support agency or employment partner	Child support agency	Child support agency or parenting partner

Case Management Services
Case management, including needs assessment, domestic violence screening, referrals, progress monitoring, overview of expectations and responsibilities
Child support agency or partner

As described in the interim implementation report, the communities in which ELEVATE programs operated had some employment and parenting resources that NCPs could access on their own, independently of the ELEVATE program (e.g., the Children First program). Availability of such programs and resources differed across counties. All ELEVATE counties operated under the same state policies for setting and modifying child support orders, though counties have some flexibility to interpret policy locally (Gentry, 2017), and county practices outside of ELEVATE related to enforcement (such as driver's license suspension and use of civil contempt) may also vary (Vogel et al., 2021).

All counties began enrolling participants into ELEVATE and providing services in January 2020. Study enrollment continued through December 2022, with a pause from March 17, 2020, until July 7, 2020, due to the University of Wisconsin–Madison's requirement that research with in-person components cease on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as counties' inability to provide a full array of ELEVATE services during that time.

Evaluating Wisconsin's ELEVATE Program

Evaluation Overview

Terms and conditions of the waiver from OCSS required a rigorous evaluation of the program; Wisconsin DCF contracted with IRP to serve as the program's evaluator. The evaluation aims to understand whether ELEVATE program services improved NCP child support payments and compliance, employment

and earnings, parenting, and attitudes toward the child support program, and to generate information on how the programs operated. The information gathered could help inform decisions related to future investments in child support-led, employment-focused programs for NCPs who have difficulty meeting their child support obligations.

The ELEVATE evaluation has two main components: an **impact analysis** and an **implementation analysis**. Findings from the impact analysis on child support and employment outcomes using administrative data are summarized in Chapter 5 of this report; subsequent products will describe findings related to participant attitudes toward the child support program and parenting practices. The implementation of ELEVATE programs is described in two products: the current report, which describes ELEVATE programs at "full" implementation (i.e., shortly after enrollment concluded in December 2022), and a previous report summarizing ELEVATE program operations early in the demonstration's lifecycle (i.e., Spring of 2021) (Vogel et al., 2021). The initial implementation report details the services provided, structures in place to facilitate service delivery, as well as recruitment, eligibility, and enrollment strategies. It also summarizes early successes celebrated by staff—finding new ways to provide services in an ever-changing landscape; building teams, partnerships, and resources; shifting agency culture; and refining service models—as well as important challenges encountered.

Evaluation Research Questions and Overall Approach

The ELEVATE evaluation addresses the following research questions:

1. Do NCPs who are enrolled in ELEVATE demonstrate significantly better change in child support outcomes than demographically comparable NCPs in counties without an ELEVATE program? *(Impact analysis)*

2. Do NCPs who are enrolled in ELEVATE demonstrate significantly better change in employment and earning outcomes than demographically comparable NCPs in counties without an ELEVATE program? *(Impact analysis)*

3. Do NCPs who are enrolled in ELEVATE report changes in parenting and co-parenting behaviors and attitudes? *(Impact analysis)*

4. Do NCPs who are enrolled in ELEVATE report changes in attitudes toward the child support program? *(Impact analysis)*

5. What were the program's key design features? How were programs implemented and how did they change over time? What challenges did programs encounter, and what strategies did they use to address challenges? *(Implementation analysis)*

The impact analysis uses quasi-experimental methods to address research questions 1 through 4 above. The first and second research questions are addressed in Chapter 2 of the current report, and the third and fourth will be explored in a subsequent product focused on survey-based ELEVATE outcomes (expected to be released publicly in 2025).

The fifth set of (implementation) research questions is explored through the interim implementation report and in Chapters 3 and 4 of the current report. Chapter 3 summarizes information from ELEVATE staff about ELEVATE program operations at full implementation, and Chapter 4 provides data on ELEVATE services received by program participants.

ELEVATE-Related Research Products

In addition to this report and the interim implementation report, the ELEVATE evaluation team also previously released two ELEVATE-related reports: a report describing ELEVATE program participant characteristics at the time of their enrollment into the ELEVATE program and evaluation (Costanzo et al., 2024), and a report exploring custodial parent perspectives on programs and services for parents who owe and are due child support (Vogel et al., 2023). All ELEVATE related products are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. ELEVATE Evaluation Products and Related Reports

Product	Content	Status
Interim implementation report	ELEVATE program operations at initial implementation	Complete
Custodial parent perspectives report	Views of custodial parents residing in ELEVATE counties who do not receive full payments on programs and services for families served by child support	Complete
ELEVATE participant profile report	Characteristics and circumstances of the participants enrolled in the ELEVATE	Complete
Final evaluation report	Impacts of ELEVATE on child support and employment outcomes ELEVATE programs operations at full implementation; ELEVATE participant experiences	Complete
Survey-based ELEVATE outcomes report	Impacts of ELEVATE on parenting, attitudinal outcomes, and service receipt	Expected in 2025

CHAPTER 2. ELEVATE PROGRAMS AT FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of a programmatic innovation occurs in stages rather than all at once (Fixsen et al., 2005). Programs try out new approaches, figure out "what works," and adapt accordingly. As such, programs typically adjust and change from the stage of initial implementation—the early phase of launching new processes and procedures—to the period of full implementation, where processes and procedures generally become more established.

Changes to program operations are common even in typical social circumstances, and ELEVATE programs launched at a highly atypical time—just two months before the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. As detailed in the initial implementation report, ELEVATE programs needed to rapidly adapt to allow programs to continue functioning amidst the constraints and challenges of the pandemic. By the time of full-implementation interviews—early 2023—the COVID-19 pandemic had peaked and started to recede. Not surprisingly, therefore, and as reflected in this chapter, ELEVATE programs had adapted yet again in response to the changing public health landscape by this time.

Drawing on interviews with ELEVATE program staff, this chapter builds on earlier learnings from the initial implementation report (Vogel et al., 2021) to describe ELEVATE programs at full implementation. It highlights key adaptations programs made between initial and full implementation and factors contributing to change; implementation successes, challenges, and strategies programs used to address hurdles; and program staff perspectives on key lessons learned.

Data and Methods

The analyses presented in this chapter draw on two types of data:

- **Staff interviews.** The evaluation team conducted video interviews with 26 leaders and staff from ELEVATE child support agencies and partners from all five ELEVATE counties between February and March of 2023. Interview participants included child support agency leads; managers with day-to-day oversight of program operations; ELEVATE case coordinators; and other staff who provided enhanced child support services, parenting services, and employment services.[3] Staff interviews were coded using the qualitative software package NVivo and analyzed thematically (Braun & Clark, 2006). Quotes presented in this report have been lightly edited for clarity or brevity.

- **Program documentation**. To understand DCF's design specifications and programmatic guidance, the evaluation team reviewed the ELEVATE funding opportunity announcement, the ELEVATE policies and procedures manual, and notes from DCF's monthly technical assistance calls with counties. The team also reviewed evaluation enrollment data as provided by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center.

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[3]As noted in the initial implementation report, ELEVATE staff who worked directly with program participants often performed multiple roles and functions.

Findings

Changes to Program Leadership, Partnerships, and Staffing

Program Leadership

- **Child support agencies continued to play important roles in program leadership.**

By design, child support agency leadership is a key feature of ELEVATE. At full implementation, as at initial implementation, across all five ELEVATE counties, an individual from the child support agency was designated as the ELEVATE program lead. Leads worked closely with other child support agency staff, as well as leaders and staff at partner agencies, to implement ELEVATE. Child support supervisors or other agency staff helped project leads with program oversight in some counties.

> "It's just a really nice team, and it makes it easy for [Child Support Supervisor] and I to be able to step away from the day-to-day intensive case management. [Earlier on], we felt like we had our boots on the ground, and we had to in many ways. We can step away from that now because there are more boots, and they're doing a great job." – **Project Lead**

Several leads described that by the time of full implementation, ELEVATE processes became more routinized, and ELEVATE staff gained experience in their roles, allowing them to delegate activities such as recruitment oversight, communication, or monitoring budgets. Leads noted several benefits resulting from these transitions, including workload management; the ability to shift attention to higher-level, longer-term issues instead of immediate case needs; and staff growth opportunities.

Child support agency staff and partners expressed appreciation for the leadership provided by their child support agency leads within their counties. They highlighted the stability and knowledge their project leads brought to ELEVATE and expressed gratitude for attributes such as their project lead's openness to new ideas, support for staff growth, commitment to collaboration, and respect for ELEVATE partners.

> "[Project Lead] is always open to new ideas or new ways of doing things. If this didn't work—obviously within limits—[Project Lead] asks, 'Can we try this instead?' 'Can we ask this other person?' 'What community resource can we connect this person with, in order to make this a better opportunity?'" – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Partnerships

DCF required child support agencies to ensure the program's core services—employment, case management, enhanced child support, and parenting services—were provided to ELEVATE participants.

- **At full implementation, ELEVATE programs generally used partnership models consistent with their approach at initial implementation, with a few adaptations.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, child support agencies took one of two approaches to providing ELEVATE services: providing most services in-house or providing most services through one or two partners. In two counties, child support agency staff provided child support, employment, and case management services, and a partner provided parenting services. In three counties, child support agency staff provided child support services, and one or two partners provided case management, employment, and parenting services. Interview participants generally reported having a clear sense of each partner's roles and responsibilities within their respective programs.

> "I think we both know our roles. I never step on [Project Lead's] toes and [they] never step on mine. If something is a new idea, usually, we'll start with each other. Like, 'Hey, what do you think about this?' And then, 'Do you want to talk to your staff about it, or can I go talk to that person?'" – **Partner Agency Leader**

At full implementation, most partnerships in place at initial implementation remained in place, though parenting partners were the exception to this trend. Both of the "most services in-house" counties changed parenting providers between initial and full implementation, with one county partnering with a new provider and the other bringing parenting services in-house. In the "most services through partners" counties, one county had temporarily paused parenting service referrals at full implementation; another experienced a temporary disruption but ultimately resumed services, with the parenting facilitator transitioning from one ELEVATE partner agency to another and providing services in this new capacity. One county's provider was unchanged. Parenting partner changes occurred for different reasons: the closure of a partner agency, a partner agency ending the parenting class to which participants had been referred at initial implementation, contractual issues between the county and parenting provider, and a strategic change on the part of a child support agency. In this latter instance, the initial partner switched to virtual offering due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the agency pursued a partner change to allow for in-person offerings with a goal of increasing participant engagement in parenting services.

Interview participants described benefits and challenges of these partnership changes. Parenting service delivery was disrupted; in several counties, these changes led to prolonged periods in which no parenting service provider was available, and participants could not be referred. However, in counties where parenting services were pulled in-house, interview participants described that the change yielded benefits, including streamlined communication, improved alignment in goals and messaging between parenting and other ELEVATE services, and increased staffing to help with other ELEVATE activities.

Staff shared perspectives on the benefits and challenges of a partnership model for ELEVATE, which echoed views shared at initial implementation. On one hand, a "most services in-house" model can be helpful for facilitating goal alignment and ensuring that child support outcomes are a top priority. On the other hand, a "most services through partners" leverages the expertise of—and broadens connections to non-ELEVATE service providers in a county—by drawing on the networks of both partners. Interview participants noted that new partnerships take time to build and keep strong

> "I feel like our team is just really good. We are good at communicating. We're good at planning. We're good at troubleshooting issues. The case managers with [Partner Agency], they're part of our child support team...We're just one big team, and I think we operate really cohesively." – **Project Lead**

and emphasized the benefits of long-term collaborations for building trust, streamlining processes, and developing successful communication processes.

- **At full implementation, ELEVATE programs continued to develop relationships with local service providers beyond ELEVATE partners.**

ELEVATE participants sometimes came to the program with goals and needs that required the help of service providers outside of the ELEVATE program. At full implementation, ELEVATE programs had built upon and expanded their earlier efforts to leverage and build relationships with a broad array of local service providers to address these needs. These included community providers who offered services directly related to employment, and providers who offered other services that support well-being. As relationships strengthened over time, programs found that they led to reciprocal referrals; in addition to providing services to ELEVATE participants, other providers started referring individuals served by their agency who could potentially benefit from ELEVATE services to ELEVATE staff.

At full implementation, staff highlighted new or strengthened relationships with providers who offered services directly related to employment—both foundational services related to job readiness and job search, as well as more intensive services, such as job development, job coaching, or providing connections to job training opportunities. Such partners included local job centers; the FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET) program; the Transitional Jobs program; the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Worker Connection program, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) program; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) partners; and other private and non-profit employment services providers. ELEVATE programs also forged several partnerships with job training programs, such as computer numerical control (CNC) and welding training, some of which included stipends for participation. They built or strengthened partnerships with their local W-2 child support liaisons to connect with participants ELEVATE programs had difficulty recruiting into the program and engaging in services after enrollment.

> "I meet weekly with a business services team at the Job Center. That brings in all the people that do job-related community resources. We all meet and bounce ideas off of each other. Never with names, obviously, but, 'I have a participant that this might be a fit for.' 'Do you have a resource that you think might be fitting for them or do you think something else would work best?' Getting other people's ideas into the mix has been helpful for me. I'm still learning and there's so many resources out there that I think people aren't even aware of." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

In addition to partnerships for employment-related services, ELEVATE program staff also pursued relationships with providers who could help address other participant needs. These included providers who offered services related to financial education; vehicle repairs; substance use and mental health; low-cost legal services, particularly for help with custody and placement issues; aging and disability resource centers (ADRCs); and assistance with addressing fines and fees that impeded regaining driver's licenses. They also made referrals to parenting classes offered outside of ELEVATE, to support specific parent needs or child ages and stages.

ELEVATE programs also took steps to strengthen relationships and information flow with local providers—to learn about services available in the community, as well as to ensure that other providers in the community were aware of ELEVATE and what the program had to offer. They engaged in activities such as establishing a regular in-person presence at a local job center, participating in regular meetings with community partners, and taking part in community outreach activities through schools and community events. Several engaged in efforts to build relationships directly with local employers, through job fairs, outreach to local businesses, or temporary employment agencies.

Several counties noted that as COVID-19 pandemic distancing restrictions receded, identifying and building these partnerships became easier. Furthermore, as local job centers and other providers re-opened, they were once again able to send participants to those physical locations for hands-on help. Staff in two counties also described that the COVID-19 pandemic helped facilitate several new partnerships with employment services providers in the area. The pandemic led to new meetings with community partners, focused on helping people with urgent needs during the pandemic, and these partnerships persisted in their counties even as the pandemic waned.

> "Now that we're doing referrals with employers, we created a partnership. The benefit to the employer is that they have a direct pipeline to work if they need it. And they know they are supported. A lot of employers might have struggles with turnover because of gas or getting to work and transportation. We can support all of those things. So, the employer has to worry a little less about those things. And then the employer also has that communication with us if something goes off the rails or they need to get into contact with them, or they need a mediator…And for the participant, right off the bat, it's just feeling like they are valued and feeling like we have that support and service for them. 'Hey, we have these partners that we can get you an interview with if you're interested'." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Staffing Models

ELEVATE programs had the flexibility to determine staffing structures within their counties. A key role in ELEVATE staffing across all counties was the lead ELEVATE case manager, called the ELEVATE coordinator. ELEVATE coordinators were responsible for—among other duties that varied across programs—performing intake into the study and program, overall case management, and monitoring participant progress. In two counties, ELEVATE coordinators were employed by the child support agency; in three, they were employed by partner agencies and supervised by partner agency leadership. These structures remained in place at the time of full implementation, and these staff continued to pay crucial roles in the delivery of services to ELEVATE participants. At full implementation, several counties also expanded or shifted their ELEVATE staffing to provide ELEVATE coordinators with additional support with recruitment, engagement, or case management.

> "It was getting really overwhelming for one person, especially when we were doing [evaluation enrollments]. It was getting to where we weren't able to be as intensive with case management…You get so busy. Then you get the really engaged customers that are calling you all the time. And there's the ones who are falling off. Because you're so busy with the other ones, they're not on your radar… [Having help for the ELEVATE Coordinator] frees up them from having to worry about that while they're doing follow-up calls on those loose-end customers we haven't been able to get a hold of in a while." – **Partner Agency Lead**

- **Turnover presented both challenges and opportunities.**

At the time of initial implementation interviews, three programs had already experienced turnover in the role of ELEVATE coordinator. Between initial and full implementation, three programs experienced additional turnover at least once in the coordinator role. Interview participants described challenges that accompanied turnover, including temporary additional burden on other staff, loss of institutional knowledge and information gaps, the "learning curve" required for bringing new staff up to speed, and interrupted services and relationships with participants. Staff noted that participants often become comfortable with their ELEVATE coordinator, and sometimes could be reluctant to start a relationship anew with a different person. To address this challenge, one county-initiated case management transition meetings with the participant, exiting case manager, and new case manager as a means to build trust and share information ahead of the transition. Leaders and staff also described that training coordinator back-ups, present in several counties, helped to provide continuity during times of turnover.

> "There are some folks who disengage just because it's someone new or different. And it does not matter how incredible your case managers are. Some folks will say, 'Well, you're not this person. And because you're not this person, I don't want to engage or I don't trust you...[the exiting and incoming ELEVATE Coordinators] did co-appointments as much as possible to really try to say, 'Hey, here's a face you know. You're meeting [incoming Coordinator] and here's [exiting Coordinator] to advocate and say 'Here's the stuff we were working on. Why don't you tell [incoming Coordinator] more about that? I think that really helped to mitigate things to the best of our ability."
> – Partner Agency Lead

Leaders and staff also noted positive consequences of turnover. With staff changes came new skills, expertise, and talents within the team; new connections to community partners via the new hire's experience; and opportunities to bring on staff with attributes that supported current needs. For example, leaders cited communication and organization skills as particularly important attributes that they sought, and ELEVATE coordinators brought, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when recruitment and engagement were especially challenging.

Working Together

By the time of full implementation, most staff had returned to the office following COVID-19 pandemic restrictions at least part of the time. Staff strategies for collaborating and information-sharing continued to evolve; yet, the five strategies described by staff as key to effective communication at initial implementation—regular communication through formal channels, co-location, informal communication, documentation, and using tools to sharing information about participant needs and progress—remained crucial from the perspective of staff at full implementation.

- **At full implementation, ELEVATE team meetings remained a key tool for sharing information, problem-solving, and building relationships and trust.**

Across counties, many staff described the benefits of regular, consistent meetings with other ELEVATE staff as key to working together successfully. How and when meetings worked varied across counties. Some counties—particularly where parenting services were provided in-house—convened all ELEVATE partners between weekly and quarterly; others brought together leadership from child support and/or partners and ELEVATE case managers. At full implementation, several counties held meetings in person, while others met virtually or via a hybrid approach. Topics included case staffing; program operations and priorities; and participant needs, progress, and challenges.

> "A big thing for us is that we try to at least weekly have what we call a client walkthrough. We touch on each of the clients and delegate tasks that way…I've found it very helpful for making sure we aren't missing anybody." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

In addition to ELEVATE team meetings, most counties' programs also convened regular meetings between ELEVATE staff and child support enforcement workers. In counties where these meetings occurred, staff discussed the benefits of these meetings for sharing information about participant progress and addressing concerns from enforcement workers about participation; building buy-in among enforcement workers by sharing information about ELEVATE program offerings and accomplishments; and conveying the importance and potential benefits from referrals to the program. All counties used informal communication, through individual conversations or email, to share information with enforcement staff.

> "With child support, we go to the unit meetings. We talk to people who are in the office, asking questions. We email…I think we have a lot better relationship with the team since we're in the same building. We're part of the team. I think that really helps facilitate a good relationship there." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

- **As the COVID-19 pandemic receded, ELEVATE programs appreciated the benefits of co-location—though some challenges persisted.**

ELEVATE programs valued co-location and took steps, prior to the pandemic, to co-locate ELEVATE service providers with a goal of reducing the number of places participants had to visit to receive services and facilitating collaboration. In all counties, programs' child support staff and ELEVATE coordinators were in the same building, and most agencies were housed in the same physical space as other community agencies. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, many ELEVATE program agencies closed to the public and staff, or limited public access, as did many community partners.

At full implementation, all ELEVATE program agencies had re-opened to the staff and the public, and staff described many benefits to the return of working together and in the same physical space. These included opportunities to connect and build relationships in-person with participants; participants' abilities to access other staff and services within the space; and opportunities for collaboration among ELEVATE staff, between ELEVATE staff and child enforcement staff, and between ELEVATE staff and other community partners.

As described by interview participants, being in the same physical space helped ELEVATE staff to work together. It afforded the opportunity to collaboratively staff cases, check in informally, and build rapport. Leadership and staff particularly emphasized the crucial role of informal communication for successful collaboration, with one project leader referring to informal opportunities as "the most important tool for successful collaboration." Being in the same space also helped ELEVATE and child support staff work together—to build goodwill about ELEVATE, provide updates on participant progress, streamline handoffs and referrals, and establish trust. Several counties moved ELEVATE case managers to be closer to the child support enforcement team's workspace when they returned to the office, both to keep ELEVATE at the top of mind among enforcement staff and to be available for staff questions.

> "[Co-location is] a great way to just connect with someone human-to-human. 'How was your weekend?' Just little questions like that can really help people say, 'Hey, I feel really connected to you,' and form a bit of a professional relationship where we can then have those information pieces to bounce back and forth or to send over a referral. I think it fosters a spark, to say, 'Oh, yeah, this person is in my office.' They have to walk past [ELEVATE Coordinator] to get to the break room. That can be a really great time for you to grab someone and say, 'Hey - really cool story for you.' That might not be something I'd share otherwise, right? I'm not going to type up a big, long email. But because I'm in the office, I'll stop by and say, 'Hey, someone just called me today.' That could be a huge success, right? So, those little things we can share along the way, I think, make a really big difference." – **Partner Agency Leader**

Further, being in the same space as other community providers helped ELEVATE staff learn about community resources and build relationships with those providers. For example, in one county, the ELEVATE coordinator's co-location with the W-2 Child Support Liaison and the Children First case manager provided the opportunity to share information about the differences and areas of overlap in their respective work, and ultimately resulted in the creation of a three-day, in-person employment and parenting-focused, jointly administered workshop for participants of both programs.

- **ELEVATE programs continued to refine tools for information-sharing; yet, tracking across multiple systems remained an ongoing challenge.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, ELEVATE programs used electronic tools to track and share information about customers and program operations. While all counties used KIDS (Kids Information Data System) to track child support information, the tools used to store other case information varied and included OneNote, Teams, SharePoint, Word and Excel, and county-specific software. Counties also tracked service data in the IRP-created spreadsheet for evaluation purposes. Across counties, staff also used WWP (Wisconsin Work Programs) to varying degrees.

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, an ongoing frustration for staff was the necessity of tracking data across multiple systems that "don't talk to each other" and the amount of time required to do so, which came at the expense of service delivery. As one project lead explained, "You can spend all day just recording what you're doing, and then you're not doing anything." Staff shared a wide array of challenges with WWP. These included the length of forms within WWP and the breadth of information required for entry relative to their more streamlined internal systems; insufficient customization for ELEVATE program needs, which led staff to need to use multiple systems for case management, yet also duplication with other systems; and the amount of time required to populate all data fields. As one case manager stated, "It's just impossible to keep daily track of what the person is doing [on WWP]."

> "The WWP employment plan is pretty unwieldy. I know a lot of money went into that system and getting it rolling. It is, in my opinion, more work than it is useful. There are benefits to it, but I would love to see modifications...I've worked in some other computer systems. Normally, you can see your whole case load within that system. You can't within WWP. So that's why we've had to do some of these [external tracking] things. It's a little bit challenging having to navigate the system and still all of the [separate] paper tracking because it doesn't all exist in the system." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Changes to Eligibility, Recruitment, and Enrollment

Meeting study enrollment targets can be a key challenge in any evaluation. At full implementation, as at initial implementation, the ELEVATE enrollment process began with CSA staff or partners referring potentially eligible participants to designated ELEVATE staff. If ELEVATE staff determined the potential participant was eligible and interested, that staff member reached out to explain the study and facilitated the consent and baseline survey process with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center (UWSC). Upon baseline survey completion, ELEVATE staff provided the participant with a $25 incentive and commenced program intake, then or later (Vogel et al., 2021, p.19). The initial implementation report describes the criteria specified by DCF in the ELEVATE Policies and Procedures manual defining eligibility for the ELEVATE program (Vogel, et al., 2021, p.21). The Policies and Procedures manual also provided guidance to counties about enrolling participants not eligible for the ELEVATE evaluation into the program outside of the context of the evaluation (called "Services Only Exceptions").

Though criteria for ELEVATE eligibility remained largely consistent, an important change related to interpretation of eligibility criteria occurred between initial and full implementation, in December 2021, when DCF added language to clarify eligibility criteria related to contempt. This change specified: "*The fact that an NCP is actively under contempt proceedings or purge conditions does not in itself disqualify him or her from being considered for participation in ELEVATE. However, if such an NCP elects to participate in ELEVATE, it must always be on a voluntary basis. There must never be an implication that participation in ELEVATE will in any way impact the outcome of contempt proceedings* (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2022)."

- **The clarification regarding eligibility for contempt-involved individuals yielded opportunities as well as challenges.**

Counties took different approaches to incorporating the contempt policy clarification into their processes. For three counties, process changes were minimal; these counties continued to use Children First as their primary resource for contempt-involved parents, continued to engage contempt-involve parents as they previously had been, or noted that ELEVATE had typically been offered to contempt-involved parents many times prior to initiation of contempt, making non-ELEVATE service offerings a generally better fit after contempt. Two counties began offering ELEVATE to contempt-involved parents not enrolled in Children First, with one county focusing narrowly on parents who had already been found in contempt and paid their purge. This county selected this group because these parents could be monitored for a year, but did not have a future court date, and the county wanted to avoid participants perceiving that ELEVATE was related to contempt-based court activities.

> "It gave us more cases that we could refer. So, I think marginally, not a huge difference, but it was nice to have that flexibility. With ELEVATE, there's the whole voluntariness of it. And I get that, and I think it's good to have a program that's court ordered and a program for us outside of a court order. But given that everyone who is participating is under a court order to pay child support, where we're still enforcing the case, to call anything voluntary in that context is playing with words a little bit." – **Project Lead**

Counties described opportunities and challenges resulting from this change. Benefits included expansion of the recruitment pool; opening communication pathways between parents and child support prior to potential sanctions resulting from contempt; and, if participants were able to obtain work and start paying, potentially helping to avoid sanctions entirely. However, opening enrollment to contempt-involved parents also meant that program staff needed to take care to ensure that parents and all entities that came into contact with parents understood that ELEVATE remained a voluntary program that could not be court-ordered, and that ELEVATE could not intervene with courts or change the outcome of contempt processes. As one leader stated, "You're constantly evaluating that line… [which] takes more time." And while staff described going to lengths to explain the voluntary nature of ELEVATE, a few shared concerns that ELEVATE might not feel entirely voluntary to participants when they were under judicial enforcement "because there's that aspect of potential incarceration," as one project lead described. As another lead described, however, most parents had orders to pay support that they did not seek out themselves, enforceable via an array of sanctions; therefore, participation in child support is generally not voluntary even absent contempt. Across counties, a number of staff expressed that knowing that this option was available to counties earlier in the process would have been helpful for decision-making about eligibility and enrollment.

> "It's difficult - a very purposeful line. These are a lot of the people we meet with [Project Lead] about, because we want to keep them as separate as possible. So our court liaison will give out brochures to be like, 'This is an employment program. It could potentially help you.' But we always, on the front end, say they're not correlated. Just because you're an ELEVATE doesn't mean you're not going to have to appear on your contempt case. It doesn't mean that you're not going to go to jail. It doesn't mean that you don't have to do your job searches. The standard contempt process is separate. We'll offer any support that we can in your goals…They're being told that it's an option." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

- **Enforcement staff remained a key source of ELEVATE referrals; staff also cultivated new referral relationships and leveraged in-person opportunities.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, child support agency staff—including enforcement staff, front desk staff, and call center staff - served as the key source of referrals to the ELEVATE program, and their efforts remained crucial for recruitment into the program. At full implementation, ELEVATE staff continued efforts to keep ELEVATE top-of-mind for child support enforcement staff. Across counties, ELEVATE staff emphasized the importance of sharing information about participant progress and program successes regularly and in a variety of formats, as well as being available when child support agency staff had questions or needed information. They held meetings with enforcement workers, shared information by email and, in one county, developed talking points for enforcement staff to use to "sell" the benefits of ELEVATE to potential participants. They also emphasized the importance of making it easy for child support staff to connect potential participants "live" with ELEVATE staff, through in-person and phone-based handoffs, to "get [participants] while they're hot."

> "It isn't really just the ELEVATE team. That's a disservice to the rest of the agency. They're all the ELEVATE team. Yes, [ELEVATE Coordinator] is the coordinator who leads NCPs to eventually make it all the way to that point. But everybody recruits for ELEVATE. Everybody talks about ELEVATE. Everybody encourages participation. Everybody is all in, from the receptionist to the legal assistant to the attorneys to the court commissioners. It's part of what child support is." – **Project Lead**

At full implementation, staff also described cultivating new relationships for referrals to ELEVATE with local jails, probation and parole, re-entry programs, and the W-2 child support liaison program. They also identified new strategies for putting information about ELEVATE directly into the hands of participants, through means such as increased use of texting and including information about ELEVATE in mailings. Several counties also brought on new ELEVATE coordinators between initial and full implementation, and leaders emphasized that with these staff came new recruitment opportunities through new staff members' experience working with, and successes building relationships with, the target population and enforcement workers.

> "I think about what [another county's Project Lead] says—'Top of mind, tip of tongue.' Just to always promote it with your partner agencies…If you're in the Job Center, make sure those other departments and agencies are aware that you're available to collaborate. Make sure they know how to make referrals to the ELEVATE program. Just make a referral to us and then we'll get them vetted on the back end. Just think about the other community agencies that work with clients. Many clients who are out seeking services in the community may be tied to child support. So just cycle the information." – **Project Lead**

As the COVID-19 pandemic waned, ELEVATE programs also shifted back toward in-person recruitment methods, which staff lamented had been diminished during the pandemic due to reduced or no foot traffic in offices and closures of other community spaces. While counties generally found that foot traffic remained lower than prior to the pandemic, they seized opportunities to leverage face-to-face contact with parents who visited the child support office and to make "warm" hand-offs from enforcement staff to program staff. They also continued to engage in strategies to reach participants through virtual means, such as through texting, mailing, and telephone.

- **ELEVATE counties ultimately achieved 92% of study enrollment targets.**

Due to the enrollment interruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, DCF and IRP reduced study enrollment targets—from 1100 study participants to 1080 study participants—and extended the recruitment period by 9 months (from March to December of 2022). Despite the many challenges counties encountered related to enrollment, as detailed in the initial implementation report, ELEVATE counties ultimately enrolled 992 ELEVATE study participants (92% of the overall enrollment target). As shown in Figure 3, two counties exceeded their local targets.

The ELEVATE evaluation released a report summarizing the baseline characteristics of all 992 participants who enrolled in the ELEVATE study (Costanzo et al., 2024). Consistent with earlier demographic profiles of participants constructed by the ELEVATE evaluation team, as well as learnings from the initial implementation report, this product described that many ELEVATE participants experienced multiple and complex barriers to work and paying child support. The baseline characteristics report identified that ELEVATE participants faced a number of challenges for meeting child support obligations, including relatively low levels of education overall, limited work histories, prevalent experiences with economic hardship, high levels of previous justice system involvement, and physical and mental health challenges. Despite these barriers, most ELEVATE participants reported supporting their children financially and having strong relationships with their children. The report also highlighted limited engagement among participants in services to address employment barriers and other supports, and mixed feelings among participants about the child support program, prior to ELEVATE enrollment.

Figure 3. ELEVATE Study Enrollments by County Compared to Total Enrollment Targets
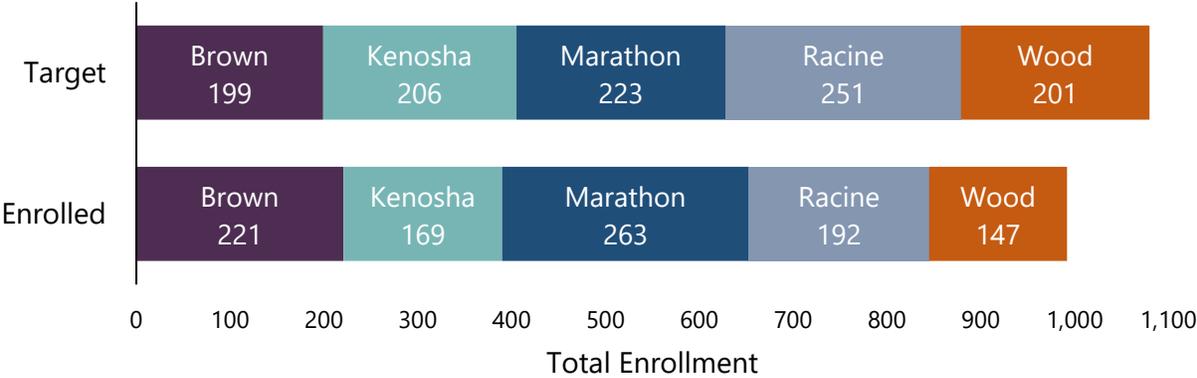
Program Models at Full Implementation

Services Overview

The ELEVATE service model included four primary service domains: (1) case management, (2) enhanced child support services, (3) employment services, and (4) parenting services. DCF expected counties to provide services in each of those domains but provided counties the flexibility for local customization as well as to tailor service offerings to the needs of a given participant. At initial implementation, staff sometimes described their program's offerings as a "menu" of options, rather than a "package" of services all participants were expected to receive.

Staff emphasized at full implementation as at initial implementation that local service contexts varied across counties. The service partners available locally, as well as the needs of participants due to localized constraints such as geography or local labor market conditions, differed. These differences had implications for how programs approached their work. For example, when programs were located in communities with few parenting service providers, programs needed to pull parenting services in-house. Similarly, some communities had resources like legal services and financial education where they could refer participants, and others lacked these resources.

> "I always look at ELEVATE as a program to help individuals meet their basic needs, in a sense, where—at the end of the day, helping people become self-sufficient is important. They got to pay child support, but they also have to pay rent. They also have to get their driver's license. They also have to have pride. A lot of times, people are so down, they feel defeated, that everything is against them. But once you get that job, and you're working to get those paychecks coming in, and 'Hey, now I got my driver's license back. Now I'm saving up to get a car.' I think it's giving people hope…We want to stabilize people. Someone that's not stable is not going to be a good parent, are not going to be there for their kids. So, it's just trying to help individuals improve their own lives, so they can be better parents in the lives of their children." – **Partner Agency Lead**

Transitions in Approach Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started just months after ELEVATE's launch, forced ELEVATE programs to quickly pivot to new ways of working. Counties had planned for most services to be available in person, and when in-person options were curtailed amidst the pandemic, counties shifted fully to virtual offerings or a combination of virtual and in-person services. These virtual offerings were essential to service continuity and celebrated as an important success of ELEVATE's early implementation. the full implementation, counties were no longer under pandemic-era restrictions, though found that some aspects of their new ways of working persevered.

- **Though in-person offerings were routine by the time of full implementation, some pandemic-era changes persisted.**

By full implementation, most ELEVATE staff returned to the office for some or all of their work. Staff broadly welcomed and celebrated the ability to offer services in-person, describing that in-person options generated stronger connections with participants. As a Project Lead stated, "It really is a program that is meant to be delivered face-to-face." In interviews, staff highlighted many benefits of in-person service offerings, including improved ability to build rapport and trust; more open and deep conversation and communication through nonverbal cues; and the ability to provide participants with

hands-on help with a task or facilitate warm hand-offs to other staff in the building for additional supports.

Despite broad agreement about the benefits of in-person offerings, across ELEVATE programs, virtual provision of services—through phone, text, or email—persisted. From the perspective of staff, virtual offerings also came with benefits. Staff described that many participants found virtual offerings convenient and helped them to "meet participants where they are" in terms of service engagement. For example, virtual offerings saved participants the difficulty of finding childcare or transportation, or from potentially having to pay for parking or take time off during the workday to check in with a case manager. Virtual communication tools also allowed case managers to share broadly useful information, such as reminders and announcements, to many participants at once via email or text.

Additionally, while most services were offered in a one-on-one format, counties described resuming group-based aspects of their programs, particularly parenting classes. One county developed and launched an in-person employment and parenting workshop for new ELEVATE participants. Staff whose programs resumed group-based in-person activities found that the format helped participants to bond and cultivate relationships, share advice, and share experiences with sensitive topics such as navigating difficult co-parenting relationships and domestic violence. Staff noted, however, that some participants preferred and felt more comfortable in a one-on-one setting. For this reason, counties also kept individual sessions available for participants.

> "The opportunity to connect humanly, if you will—you just don't get that over the phone. You just don't. You lose the ability to look somebody in the eye or shake their hand. My experience has always been that there's so much more that you can accomplish positively with nonverbal communication. Sometimes just sitting in silence and letting somebody grieve or regroup. That goes a long way to building trust and respect and empathy. I think we just lose people over the phone. They don't have those in-depth conversations. They just naturally don't progress in the same way as when you're meeting with somebody personally." – **Project Lead**

> "I definitely see advantages to both. The take-up rate has always been better with one-on-one. But I think it really depends on the individual. Some people feed off of others, and they really get more out of it when there's more than just their own voice in the conversation. But there are others that clam up in those situations where it's a group. They don't feel comfortable sharing why they're not employed, or what struggles they've had, or how many jobs they've interviewed for that they aren't getting…It depends on the person." – **Child Support Supervisor**

Services at Full Implementation

DCF provided parameters about services all ELEVATE participants were expected to receive within each of the four main service categories and the flexibility to augment these services with optional offerings (Figure 4).

Figure 4. ELEVATE Service Model

Case Management Services

All expected to receive:
Domestic violence screening; service referrals; progress monitoring; overview of expectations and responsibilities

Enhanced Child Support Services

All expected to receive:
Desk review; suspension of administrative and judicial enforcement (if applicable); assessment for expedited review and adjust

Could also include:
Order modification; stipulation on arrears payment; lifting license suspension; license reinstatement fees; state debt reduction

Employment Services

All expected to receive:
One-on-one employment needs assessment

Could also include:
Resume writing assistance; job search assistance; job readiness training; job placement services; job retention services; rapid re-employment services; education; work supports; other

Parenting Services

All expected to receive:
One-on-one parenting needs assessment

Could also include:
Parenting education and services related to: personal development; responsible parenting and co-parenting; parenting skills; relationship skills; domestic/family violence; other

Case Management Services

As specified by DCF, all ELEVATE participants were expected to receive the following case management services "at a minimum": needs assessment, an overview of expectations and responsibilities, progress monitoring, service referrals, and domestic/family violence screening (FCDP/ELEVATE Policy and Procedures Manual, 2022, p.15). ELEVATE coordinators were also responsible for enrolling participants and performing initial intake assessments, determining service needs, performing outreach to CPs, and monitoring their progress throughout their time in the program. At full implementation, as at initial implementation, ELEVATE coordinators were employed by the child support agency in two counties and a partner organization in three counties. As caseloads expanded and the amount of time required for follow-up grew in tandem, by the time of full implementation, several counties brought on additional staff to help ELEVATE coordinators—as case managers, back-ups, or to help with outreach and maintaining engagement.

- **At full implementation, case management services remained a cornerstone of ELEVATE.**

ELEVATE coordinators played a crucial role in identifying participants' needs, providing and connecting them to services and supports, and keeping participants engaged in the program. At full implementation, as at initial implementation, case management services typically began on the day of intake. ELEVATE coordinators performed formal or informal initial assessments and developed a written plan—shared with participants in most counties—summarizing participant goals and actions expected of the participant and staff. Staff described that these plans guided the client toward achieving self-sufficiency and compliance by establishing priorities and plans for addressing barriers and allowed staff to demonstrate concrete intent and plans for providing help.

At full implementation, case managers also had a new tool in their case management toolkit. In February and March 2023, staff from all ELEVATE counties participated in seven three-hour sessions on Transition to Success (TTS). As described on the TTS website, TTS provides training on working with clients on strategies to address the question "What is your dream?" In interviews, staff reactions toward TTS were mixed though leaned positive. Across counties, staff discussed the importance of developing action plans that are client-driven, and several counties discussed planning to incorporate principles of TTS—particularly identifying

> "My philosophy was just making the customer feel like they were valued and that they brought value. Listening to them and like making sure they felt human and felt like a parent and felt like they could do this thing. That was my philosophy - making people feel that they are worthy of that opportunity. I think when you connect with people on that level and then listen to them - provide a listening ear, when a lot of times especially in child support, they don't get the opportunity or at least feel like they don't get the opportunity to be heard - just giving people that space to feel human, feel like they are worthy and deserve what they're looking for. That builds a lot of rapport." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

> "We have an action plan that we fill out, and then they sign at the end, that lists what we accomplished during the meeting, what their goals are, what our goals are, and then what we'll each be doing before the next appointment. So, at least for me, it helps me even if we're talking about small things, like getting them forms to file or requesting gas cards. Those small to-do list checklist pieces. And it's something that they can take away as, 'These are the points we hit. These are the points I'm supposed to follow before our next meeting…I think that that is helpful to hold them accountable." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

and working toward goals rather than simply finding and taking any paying job—into their action planning process.

- **At full implementation, connecting ELEVATE participants to other community providers remained an important component of case management.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, interview participants emphasized the importance of identifying and connecting participants to resources beyond the scope of ELEVATE as a core component of case management. At full implementation, these connections remained an important feature of ELEVATE case management. Across counties, staff emphasized the importance of investing time in learning about other community resources and programs available and building relationships with these programs.

> "We don't have to be the experts in everything because there's a lot of really great experts out there that we can connect you with. Those relationships go a really long way." – **Project Lead**

ELEVATE staff described that they made referrals for services directly related to employment, for education (such as High School Equivalency Diploma, or HSED, classes), job development services, vocational training, and short-term job skills training. Staff described that co-enrolling participants in other employment programs could offer many benefits, including additional funding beyond what ELEVATE could offer to pay for supportive services and skills, and in some cases, connections to subsidized employment opportunities. However, co-enrollment also presented challenges. For some participants, answering to multiple programs with differing requirements could be confusing and overwhelming and, for program staff, coordinating effectively with other service providers could be time-consuming and difficult.

Beyond employment-specific services, they also described making referrals for services such as financial literacy; substance use, physical health and mental health; housing and rent assistance; clothing and food; substance use-related driver's assessments and driver's education; help with fines and fees impeding driver's license reinstatement; and disability resource centers and Social Security offices. One county developed a relationship with a local low-cost legal services provider—a key area of unmet need that most counties sought but encountered roadblocks to implement.

- **Maintaining engagement in program services remained a key challenge.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, staff described maintaining engagement in program services as a significant and ongoing challenge, with several staff citing "getting the buy-in from customers" as the greatest challenge for implementing ELEVATE. ELEVATE staff described an array of reasons why a participant might not engage in services, such as lack of interest or motivation, lack of trust or skepticism in the program, and transportation and child care barriers. Staff noted that COVID-related factors identified at initial implementation had generally waned. Some staff also shared that as the economy rebounded and jobs were easier to obtain without assistance, participant no-shows increased and engagement became more difficult.

> "My suggestion would probably be to be out in the community…That's, I think, the most important thing. I feel like if they see you and talk to you in person, you would get a lot more response to that versus just phone calls or text messages. I think it's more personal. And if you tend to look at people when you're explaining a program, they see your reaction to it. They genuinely feel connected to the person." – **Enforcement Worker**

Staff described challenges at the outset of program participation such as getting participants to return after the initial enrollment appointment, as well as challenges maintaining engagement over time. Both early on and throughout the life of the program, leaders and staff shared that a key component of maintaining engagement was offering services that were, as one project lead described, "meaningful, authentic, client-focused, and client-centered." At full implementation, as at initial implementation, staff emphasized the importance of rapid follow-up post-enrollment, frequent contact, offering services through multiple modalities, and providing reminders about appointments to encourage attendance. They also adapted communication materials for non-engaged participants to emphasize the benefits of and services available through the program, with several counties using strategies suggested in a behavioral economics training provided by OCSS staff to ELEVATE staff.

> "We knew after the first year, when we really started picking up, that there was no way [ELEVATE Coordinator] could oversee all of the higher-level pieces in addition to the level that we wanted to see with case management. We literally do have some clients that need that daily connection, actually, as they're navigating some of the struggles being very new in the program, for instance. So that's how we ended up with the three [case managers] coming together. The three of them really, really work well in triaging. They help each other out with the different strengths that they bring." – **Project Lead**

Counties also described additional outreach strategies that they had cultivated between initial and full implementation. Several counties described community-based engagement efforts—in schools, detention centers, and community events—in order to help break down negative perceptions of child support and present as a resource to the community. Staff noted that these efforts were not always immediately successful. Success required persistence in building relationships with community partners and investments of time in community outreach.

Additionally, several counties brought on additional staff for outreach and/or case management to help ELEVATE coordinators manage caseloads. These counties noted additional benefits of involving multiple staff in case management, including: (1) lack of interruptions in service continuity when a staff member was sick or out of the office; (2) the opportunity to leverage the combined wisdom and strengths people of different backgrounds bring; and (3) more opportunities for connection with participants.

Enhanced Child Support Services

ELEVATE enhanced child support services commenced shortly after enrollment. As specified by DCF, all participants were expected to receive "at a minimum... a desk review of the participant's support order, assess and suspend (as appropriate) administrative and judicial enforcement procedures while the NCP participant is active in FCDP, and assess the NCP participant's child support orders for expedited review and adjust." DCF specified that other enhanced child support services "as warranted... may include modifying orders if appropriate, stipulating for payments on arrears, lifting driver's license suspension upon enrollment and assisting with reinstatement fees, monitoring and offering incentivized eligibility for state debt reduction tracking based on participation, etc." (FCDP/ELEVATE Policy and Procedure Manual, 2022, pp. 15-16).

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, counties took different approaches to implementing enhanced child support services. In some counties, participants' child support cases moved onto the caseload of ELEVATE coordinators or another designated ELEVATE child support worker. In others, participants remained on the caseload of their regular enforcement worker and ELEVATE coordinators

worked with them to coordinate necessary steps. While ELEVATE cases needed to meet the same criteria as other cases to be eligible for modification, interview participants noted benefits for ELEVATE participants: eligibility for a review outside of the 33-month review cycle; faster processing than in the business-as-usual environment due to staff dedicated to this function for program participants; direct access to child support staff; and sometimes, expedited processing on the court docket.

- **Staff described performing desk reviews swiftly and regularly, though often found that orders were not eligible for adjustment.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, staff described that desk reviews of new ELEVATE enrollees occurred promptly and consistently after enrollment. Staff in one county noted that at full implementation, because some participants stopped engaging immediately after the review occurred, they implemented a process of scheduling a follow-up appointment a week after intake and initiating the review then to promote continued engagement.

Counties differed in their approaches to providing feedback to participants about the outcome of the desk review process. Some shared information back to the participant if the case appeared eligible for a modification, while others provided information about the review regardless. Staff in one county emphasized the importance of letting participants know that a review had occurred, even if the outcome was not favorable. Walking through the calculations used during the review provided the opportunity to educate participants about how order amounts were determined, to identify additional potentially relevant factors and address questions, to allow participants to express and work through potential frustration, and to demonstrate taking effort in this domain.

> "When [ELEVATE Coordinator] is doing a review, the desk review happens early in the enrollment process so if something looks like it needs to change, then [they] are already on top of getting that paperwork out. [The Coordinator] obviously doesn't have the volume of cases that [the agency review and adjust worker] has, so the case can get into court, or get sifted out, a lot faster…That is a huge benefit to people. The alternative is you could file a motion on your own, but that's a lot of legwork for them. They're getting the best of both worlds with ELEVATE because they're having somebody knowledgeable with eyes on their case, conducting the review, and then are able to move that forward much quicker than if they were in the regular review process." – **Child Support Supervisor**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, ELEVATE staff described finding that most cases were not eligible for modification because they did not meet criteria for adjustment or were already set at the lowest guidelines-specified amount. Several counties also shared additional circumstances in which they were unlikely to put forth a case for potential modification, including recently modified orders, newly established orders, and cases in which the initial review suggested the order would increase rather than decrease if modified per the state guidelines.

Staff in several counties noted additional challenges for implementing modifications for potentially eligible participants. For example, staff in one county noted that as local prevailing wages increased, local court commissioners began to expect that individuals would be able to earn at least $15 an hour and often imputed orders based on this assumption, leading to a "raising of the bar" of circumstances in which modifications were likely to occur. In another, program staff learned from court staff that participants added to court dockets for modification hearings sometimes did not appear, due in part to confusion or misperceptions about attendance requirements. To address this challenge, the county

adjusted their communications about modification hearings to clarify the process and emphasize the importance of attending hearings.

- **Staff continued to view state-owed debt reduction as a beneficial incentive, though found many participants did not have eligible debt to forgive.**

ELEVATE participants were also eligible for compromise of state-owed debt in response to achieving program milestones, including making consistent payments. At full implementation, staff expressed appreciation for debt reduction as an incentive for program participation. Several noted that more participants became eligible for debt reduction as the program progressed, particularly after taking actions such as attending parenting classes.

However, staff described state debt reduction as relatively infrequent at full implementation, due to lack of state-owed debt to forgive, forgiveness already having occurred, or insufficient participant progress toward eligibility benchmarks. To address these challenges, several counties

> "State debts, at this point, consist of birth costs or foster care, so it's a really limited number of cases…obviously we don't have AFDTC *(sic)* arrears anymore. W-2 arrears don't really count as state debt because if the other parent goes off W-2, those are rolled over anyway. So, it's just foster care and birth costs, and that's certainly not as much as it used to be, especially after 2020 when the participants got the stimulus payment. That took care of a lot of the birth costs." – **Project Lead**

adjusted the criteria linking debt forgiveness to parenting class participation, from completion of the entire series to a lower threshold, such as attending one class. Despite these limitations, a staff member noted that even when participants were not eligible for state-owed debt reduction, having the incentive as an option "opened the door" to conversations about their order, circumstances, and other debts.

Several counties noted challenges with tracking eligibility for state-owed debt reduction. These included cumbersome processes for reviewing data in KIDS to determine eligibility and delayed implementation of a state-generated report identifying eligible participants. Staff also noted that following a participant's disenrollment[4] from the program, regular focus on their progress toward milestones relative to currently enrolled participants went down, leading to concerns in most counties about "if we are getting everybody" eligible for debt reduction. Revisiting efforts to systematically review cases for debt forgiveness was a topic most counties flagged as a priority for the near-term future.

- **Staff reported suspending enforcement tools when possible, though some participants did not qualify and other barriers limited uptake.**

During or shortly after the enrollment process, ELEVATE staff assessed (or coordinated with enforcement staff to assess) whether a participant had administrative enforcement activities imposed that were eligible for suspension. In several counties, this process happened right away for new

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[4]As described in the interim implementation report, DCF directed counties to "disenroll" participants from ELEVATE via the WWP system. The ELEVATE Policies and Procedures manual specifies that participants should be disenrolled from ELEVATE within the WWP system "when the NCP participant has been determined to have "'inactive,' 'complete,' or 'alumni' status" (Department of Children and Families, 2020, p.13). The manual provided six reasons for which a participant could be disenrolled: (1) Successful participation: Employed and making regular payments; (2) Successful participation: Other; (3) Determined to be ineligible: Inability to work; (4) Determined to be ineligible: Other; (5) Unsuccessful participation: Inactive; and (6) Unsuccessful participation: Other. DCF gave counties latitude to determine the criteria under which disenrollment should occur, and given this flexibility, counties varied in their use of approach toward disenrollment, and approaches towards re-enrolling disenrolled participants. Disenrollment from program services has no effect on a participant's enrollment in the ELEVATE evaluation (i.e., once a participant enrolls in the evaluation, they remain in the impact analysis sample with the initial enrollment date).

enrollees; others waited until participants engaged in follow-up meetings with a caseworker before lifting the hold. If participants stopped engaging in services, child support staff resumed enforcement.

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, staff described lifting the child support hold on a driver's license as the most frequent action their program was able to take to relieve enforcement, as well as occasional release of liens. Three counties, however, noted that prior to ELEVATE implementation, their agencies rarely or never suspended licenses so were not able to make use of this tool. Further, staff noted that for many participants, fines, fees, or other restrictions (such as restrictions due to an Operating While Intoxicated [OWI] conviction) meant that lifting the child

> "One thing that I think is really unique that we've been able to do is the AODA assessments. To pay for someone's assessment, that's $300. And it's a way to draw people in to say, 'Well, if you enroll, we can talk about getting your license back and paying that $300 fee.' We can't do that in Children First." – **Project Lead**

support hold on a license did not necessarily lead to the participant regaining their license. At full implementation, several counties assisted with certain types of reinstatement fees, developed relationships with community partners who could provide help with fees and fines, and paid for Intoxicated Driver Program (IDP) assessment.

- **Suspension of enforcement actions required close coordination between ELEVATE and enforcement staff, and sometimes were a source of friction.**

While ELEVATE participants were taking part in program activities, they received a moratorium on enforcement actions in response to non-payment. ELEVATE and enforcement staff described that ensuring these actions were suspended as planned required careful coordination across teams. The enforcement team needed to be made aware of a participant's involvement, and conversely, when they could resume enforcement after participation ended. Staff described that this balance between participation and enforcement, as well as communication about the participant's status in the program, at times presented challenges. When enforcement staff, who were tasked with taking actions to facilitate payments, perceived that a participant was not engaged in services or they did not receive information about a participant's progress, this contributed to a perception that ELEVATE sometimes "lets people off the hook" or left enforcement workers in a state of limbo as to actions they could take. Enforcement workers also expressed frustration about feeling that they sometimes were not informed about disenrollment efforts

> "I think it's good to have a program where we're offering people other things and engaging people, but at the end of the day, the performance measures still haven't changed. They still want us to collect the money. That's where the effort emphasis still is…We're still expecting our workers to enforce cases and get money in. So, the challenge is, although we've helped some people, it's still an excuse for a lot of participants. 'They'll get off my back for 60 days if I do this.' There's still that perception [among enforcement staff] that 'You're making me do all of these referrals. These are cases I should be enforcing but they are going to catch a break. I'm going to have the CP screaming at me.'" - **Project Lead**

or when disenrollment occurred more slowly than what they saw as appropriate.

ELEVATE staff acknowledged this tension and were often sympathetic to these challenges. Several noted that enforcement staff were on the front lines of receiving phone calls from custodial parents who were upset when payments did not come in, which placed them in a challenging position. Further, some ELEVATE staff shared the perspective that participants sometimes did seem to take advantage of this grace period and enroll with the intent of avoiding enforcement. ELEVATE staff described enacting

several strategies to help manage this challenge: increased efforts to provide updates to enforcement staff on participant progress via email and meetings, being responsive to queries from enforcement workers about participant progress, and following up when participant engagement dropped off.

Employment Services

Having a regular and adequate source of income is an important precondition for regular payment of child support (Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003; Cancian et al., 2021); thus, employment services were an important area of focus for all ELEVATE programs. DCF expected counties to provide all participants with a one-on-one employment needs assessment, "at a minimum," and described that other employment services "may include but are not limited to resume writing assistance, job search assistance, job readiness training, job placement services, job retention services, rapid re-employment services, education, and work supports" (FCDP/ELEVATE Policy and Procedure Manual, 2022, p.16). In four counties, the ELEVATE coordinator or case manager also served as the employment case manager for ELEVATE customers; in one county, overall case management and employment case management functions were split across two staff members.

> "When we don't set specific goals and just say, 'Hey, here's what we're going to do,' a lot of times we just cycle through the same thing at each appointment…When I use an employment plan- just a super simple plan—of, 'What's your short-term goal? What's your long-term goal? What are three action steps between now and the next appointment that you need to accomplish?' I see it almost as a living checklist. Then the accountability piece is to say, 'Hey, I see that you checked off this or this,' or 'Hey, you're the one who set these goals and these action steps, but I see you didn't do it. Can you tell me more about that?' So, it's not attacking or 'I told you to do this.' You can open up a dialogue. Maybe there's other barriers we need to address that I just didn't know about. You continue to unfurl that person's life story." – **Partner Agency Leader**

- **Across counties, employment services began with assessments. Counties varied in assessment approaches and subsequent steps.**

Across counties, staff described assessing a participant's employment experience, goals, needs, and potential barriers as a crucial early step. Employment services typically began with employment assessments to identify participants' needs, skills, and goals. A full implementation, as at initial implementation, counties took different assessment approaches, including use of formal tools, including WWP; informal, conversation-based approaches; or a combination of these.

Across counties, this information was used as the basis for plans to help participants obtain employment, and plans evolved as participant needs and goals changed. At full implementation, most counties used written employment plans that broke down smaller actions step-by-step to help participants work toward specific goals. One county implemented written plans between initial and full implementation. Most counties shared these plans with participants; leaders and staff in those that did emphasized the importance of written and shared plans for case planning, establishing shared understanding about goals and expectations, fostering accountability for staff and participants, and monitoring progress. Counties varied as how often they revised and shared updated plans.

- **ELEVATE staff provided some employment services directly and referred participants to other programs for additional needs.**

Across counties, staff aimed to provide services tailored to an individual's needs and goals. At as at initial implementation, ELEVATE staff typically described directly providing services such as help with resumes or cover letters, monitoring or assisting with job searches, sharing job leads, and providing work supports. Staff in several counties also described having processes in place for monitoring job retention, through contact with employers and participants over a set period. These staff emphasized the importance of follow-up after new employment to help participants address retention barriers or support participants in gaining new employment following a job loss.

At initial implementation, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff provided most services in a one-on-one format. At full implementation, though pandemic-era restrictions on group meetings had lifted, staff described that most employment services provided directly through ELEVATE continued to occur one-on-one, though one county had implemented a group-based, interagency workshop on employment and parenting. Another temporarily initiated biweekly group-based job readiness sessions, but ultimately ended these activities due to low uptake.

> "It is so important that they don't get employment and just stop receiving services while they are getting on their feet and getting used to the job. In the transition of getting that job - getting steady income and catching up on bills and rent and stuff for your kids—it's a lot all at once. If you just stop receiving those services, it can feel like an impossible task…Our job retention is connecting with them on how the job is going. If there is any conflict, or anything on their mind about the job, providing them with the skills to continue that job. And now that we're doing direct referrals with employers, we can connect with the employer if something is going on, like if they miss work." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Generally, programs referred participants to local providers for more intensive or specialized employment services, such as HSED programs, short-term job skills training, job development, and job coaching. One county at full implementation had started to build profiles of and relationships with local employers to facilitate direct referral connections to employers through ELEVATE. Staff also described referring to job placement services, subsidized employment, and occupational training where available.

At full implementation, staff described that some of the resources and services that had been disrupted or suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic had returned to regular operations, though others continued to offer more limited services or never returned. An important resource staff celebrated upon return—across counties—were local, in-person job fairs. These were often hosted by local providers, and staff described working closely with these partners to encourage ELEVATE participant attendance, and sometimes attended themselves.

> "Not having a GED or high school diploma is a barrier - just navigating the system and applying. We obviously don't have time to send somebody back to school. They not only have to worry about the child support. They have to worry about supporting the family they have with them. And then to say, 'Well, go back to school'…To me, the ideal plan is, get them into a program where they're actually gaining a skill that they can use throughout their life." – **Project Lead**

Staff celebrated building relationships with referral sources that could help connect participants with training for a specific job. They noted that some participants came to the program specifically hoping to

obtain skills or training for a higher-paying job, and referral partnerships provided the opportunity to gain a marketable skill and establish pathways to better employment prospects.

However, staff described several challenges for connecting participants to job training opportunities and challenges for participants in terms of their ability to take part. These challenges included limited or lacking offerings within the local area, particularly for subsidized employment or vocational training; cost barriers; eligibility requirements impeding participants' ability to enroll, particularly for individuals with criminal backgrounds; and other barriers to participation such as lack of childcare and transportation. Crucially, staff emphasized that many participants were unable to forego wages that they might have at another job due to urgent financial needs; even part-time work or side jobs, they explained, often provided critical income that participants counted on for getting by. This was particularly a concern because child support orders did not pause during program participation, and many training programs did not offer a wage stipend during participation. Across programs, staff cited a "pause" on orders during training program participation and offering wages during participation as two strategies they felt would make a significant difference in participant uptake in such opportunities.

> "One of my biggest pet peeves when I came to ELEVATE is that it doesn't have its own training dollars. Or, the training dollars are very small—like $100 or $200. I was like, 'What are you going to get for $200 for training? Besides maybe a forklift.' [Participants] want some real training. Training just to get your CDL is $5000. So, when you talk about training—training is very expensive. Right in 'ELEVATE', it says 'Vocational', but there aren't dollars for the vocational piece." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Several staff also noted that some participants came to ELEVATE hoping for or expecting that the program would provide subsidized employment or direct placement in jobs. When these services were not accessible, participants sometimes expressed frustration with available service offerings. Staff expressed a desire for more occupational training and subsidized employment resources available directly through ELEVATE, and often viewed these resources as directly related to participants' abilities to obtain adequately paying work that aligned with their career goals.

- **The ability to provide work supports continued to be a helpful and unique aspect of ELEVATE. Flexible parameters presented opportunities as well as challenges.**

At full implementation, consistent with initial implementation, the ability to provide supports aimed at overcoming participant barriers to employment were highlighted as a unique, attractive, and key feature of ELEVATE programs across counties. Counties varied in the specific types of work supports that they provided; most often, these included transportation supports like gas cards or bus vouchers; physical equipment, such as uniforms, work boots, tools, or professional clothing; and fees for OWI assessments. Some counties also reported covering costs such as car repairs, union dues, driver's education classes, professional license renewal, or security deposits.

> "I think the biggest thing that we utilize in supportive services, besides gas cards or bus passes, is driver's license fees. It doesn't seem like much, but $150 to get your driver's license back when you don't have $100—don't have $10—is really helpful. And Children First doesn't allow that. A lot of other programs don't. We've helped a few people buy tools here and there. But for the most part, it's these $85 things here and there that are little, but substantial." – **Partner Agency Leader**

Staff remained positive about the benefits of having work supports available through ELEVATE, including benefits for recruitment and retention as well as help

addressing barriers to work. Staff also cited challenges with administering them. First, while work supports were valuable and helpful for addressing short-term needs and barriers, broader systemic issues, such as lack of public transportation infrastructure, or the impact of taking driver's education out of public schools remained ongoing challenges for participants' abilities to find and keep work.

Additionally, while the flexibility afforded to counties provided advantages for addressing participant needs, it also sometimes made it difficult for staff to know where to draw the line on a given expense or across expenses for a given participant. From the perspective of some staff, ELEVATE had "no strong rules" about expenditures for work supports and fewer parameters than other grant programs counties were used to; this presented challenges even in counties that developed in-house parameters and caps on work support amounts and usage.

Further, some staff expressed concern that in some instances, participants appeared to be engaging minimally with the program in order to maintain access to work supports such as gas cards. Staff in most counties described that at full implementation, their county shifted in approach to approve particularly costly work supports after more thorough vetting processes or after participants demonstrated engagement by meeting goals and milestones or regular participation in services.

> "We have a car repair request form. It goes through the car information: what's wrong with it, the year, mileage…It was up to $1200 that we could do a one-time vehicle repair. Especially for those folks who were literally just their car away from getting a great job, I think it helped a lot. We changed the process a little bit. Not everyone was eligible for a car repair— just making sure we were using that properly and assuring it was a one-time thing. They had to be engaged and have completed some of their tasks and goals already on their employment plan." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

- **Connecting participants to resources beyond those directly related to employment remained important for addressing underlying barriers to work and paying, though gaps persisted.**

At full implementation, as at initial implementation, staff emphasized the importance of identifying and connecting participants to resources aimed at indirectly addressing barriers to work. Staff described that many participants came to ELEVATE with foundational barriers that impeded their abilities to find and keep a job, and therefore, connecting participants to resources that could help was important for their success in the program. Oft-cited challenges included housing instability or homelessness, substance use and mental health service needs, legal service needs and assistance with custody and placement, and transportation. At full implementation, staff described building and strengthening relationships with providers to help address these needs.

> "I think transportation and daycare are our two biggest barriers that we can't really work through. Our bus line doesn't go to the part of town where all of the factories are. We try to pay for taxi cabs to pay for work until they're able to get that first paycheck to take that over on their own. But to take a taxi to work for $100 a week is not realistic…It's also hard to find any sort of mental health services in town now. A lot of the places we've contacted just don't have any openings. Especially when you're trying to work with BadgerCare insurance, not everywhere takes it." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Despite efforts to build these connections and many successes in establishing relationships with these types of providers, staff noted persistent challenges. In all counties, staff described limited stock of local housing and high housing costs relative to wages. While some counties had strong relationships with local housing assistance providers, and one county obtained

external grant funding to help with rental assistance, limited stock remained a persistent problem. Several counties also cited a need for more mediation resources and low-cost physical and mental health services.

Lack of low-cost or free legal services remained a persistent area of unmet need. At full implementation, several counties tried to establish partnerships but encountered hurdles such as lack of interest from the legal partner, conflicts of interest between clients on the ELEVATE caseloads and other parties already served by the legal provider, and insufficient legal volunteer staffing. One county established a formal referral relationship to a low-cost legal aid provider and had started to make regular referrals for participants who needed help particularly with

> "Legal advice is the biggest missing like that I feel is still within the scope of our authority. If we had the ability to be able to give somebody legal advice or get somebody connected with someone who could give legal advice, that would be a huge thing to refer [participants] to." –
> **Project Lead**

custody and placement issues, which staff celebrated and found helpful. Even in this context, however, challenges remained due to cumbersome referral and screening processes, the scope of legal issues the provider could address, and funding constraints affecting the number of referrals that the program could make.

Parenting Services

DCF specified that all ELEVATE participants were to receive "at a minimum" an assessment of parenting needs and interests, and that participants would be referred to parenting education and services that "may include but are not limited to personal development; responsible parenting, co-parenting, and fatherhood; parenting skills; relationship skills; domestic/family violence awareness, prevention and resources" (FCDP/ELEVATE Policy and Procedure Manual, 2022, p.16).

Early in a participant's time with the ELEVATE program—and often at the first intake appointment—ELEVATE coordinators assessed the participant's need for and interest in parenting services. Some counties provided information about all ELEVATE participants to the parenting facilitator, who then included participants on emails about upcoming classes and activities, in addition to direct outreach; others only referred participants who expressed an interest in taking part in classes.

At full implementation, all counties continued to make parenting classes available to ELEVATE participants. Participation in one or more classes provided access to state-owed debt compromise to participants who held this debt and was sometimes required prior to receiving access and visitation assistance. As at initial implementation, ELEVATE programs used different service models (with some providing these services in-house and others working with local partners), different curricula with differing durations (4-20 hours spread between a day and 15 weeks), and different modalities (including online and in-person offerings).

- **ELEVATE staff observed substantial value in parenting services, though found that parenting classes were not always the type of parenting support participants needed.**

Many program leaders and staff emphasized the need for including parenting service offerings in a child support-led program like ELEVATE. They noted that motivation to pay child support is, for many parents, directly connected to their identity as a parent and ability to have contact with their child. They felt parenting services recognized the participant's identity as a parent, could "empower" them with parenting skills and resources, and could help participants feel valued for their contributions as parents that go beyond paying child support.

Staff suggested that while parenting classes were helpful resources for some participants, they felt others needed different kinds of parenting supports; in particular, resources that could assist with custody, placement, and supervised visitation. Staff and leaders described leveraging federal Access and Visitation funds to help parents access mediation services and supervised visitation, services highly valued by some parents. One county also used Access and Visitation funds to provide dedicated spaces for supervised visitation that both ELEVATE participants and other parents could utilize.

> "I think our relationship with [Parenting Provider] is really good because we'll hear from a lot of our clients, 'I don't want to pay my child support because she won't let me see the kid,' that kind of thing. And obviously, studies show that when both parents are involved or when kids have relationship with their parents, it improves outcomes. So, I think that that's a really strong partnership that we have there. And I think his story and his ability to relate to our clients and to motivate our clients is a strength that we have…It also helps kind of bridge that gap for people who have preconceived notions about child support or about their workers. The fact that he has relationships with us and can kind of be a go-between there or let them know that we're not all bad, that kind of thing, is also helpful." – **Child Support Supervisor**

- **Uptake in parenting classes remained a key challenge for ELEVATE programs.**

Staff members generally reported that only a handful of participants or fewer completed their county's parenting classes and noted several key challenges affecting participation. First, for many participants juggling competing needs, parenting classes were a relatively low priority compared to finding employment or caring for children. Further, once participants found work, fitting parenting classes into their schedules often became even more difficult. Additionally, staff described that many parents were experienced parents or had children at home and did not see the benefit of participating in parenting classes. Further, as noted earlier, turnover in the parenting partner or facilitator role occurred across most counties, and these disruptions made providing parenting classes temporarily not possible or led some participants who had a positive relationship with a parenting provider to feel reluctant to start over with someone new. Finally, several staff noted that uptake was low because the classes were optional and under-incentivized, as many participants were not eligible for state-owed debt forgiveness.

- **Parenting classes underwent changes since initial implementation.**

As described in the initial implementation report, plans for parenting classes were substantially disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs planned to offer group-based, peer-oriented activities, but often ended up pivoting to online offerings due to health-related restrictions. At full implementation, counties had again adjusted their approaches to parenting classes driven by a desire to improve uptake and other local factors. These included, in some counties, changes to the duration and frequency of classes; changes to curricula and content of classes, such as shifts in emphasis to positive co-parenting and conflict resolution; and shifts from cohort to drop-in models.

Additionally, counties that had shifted to online offerings generally shifted back to in-person offerings. Staff emphasized that opportunities for interaction among parents was a substantial draw for NCPs, and online platforms limited these opportunities for informal sharing and building relationships. However, all counties also maintained offerings for modified versions of the parenting curriculum in a one-on-one format, for parents who preferred one-on-one interactions or whose schedules did not allow for group participation. Staff noted that one-on-one sessions offered the opportunity to provide personalized advice, and for participants to open up privately about sensitive issues.

> "I think the parenting bucket is important. It's a challenging bucket, though, to be honest…. For our ELEVATE population specifically, we can offer parenting classes until we're blue in the face. However, it's another thing for them to engage with, right? It's another appointment. Another thing to be at. Another thing to maybe find childcare for. Or maybe it overlaps with the time that they have visitation with their child, you know? I think parenting classes are great, but I also think there are challenges. No one likes to be told how to parent, especially noncustodial parents who have been told all these other things about how and when they can see their kids…Even with great intentions, parenting classes are just set up that way. It can be trauma inducing and triggering to have to revisit your own childhood and why you parent the way you do." – **Partner Agency Leader**

> "I think for customers, of the priorities, the things they had to do, they always viewed [parenting classes] as probably the lowest. And I mean, for us too, as a program, it probably wasn't the highest need. We were in the middle of a pandemic. What can we do to make sure you have your basic needs met? Are you safe? Do you have a job? Those were the things. That's why now, [Parenting Facilitator] has started more of a support group type thing [in addition to workshops]. They have some topics they can cover, but it's more of a drop-in way to have camaraderie. 'I know what you're going through. 'I dealt with a difficult co-parent as well.' Hopefully they can guide each other." – **Partner Agency Leader**

Leader and Staff Reflections on Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

ELEVATE offered a unique opportunity to learn from counties about the tools and strategies that helped support implementation and address challenges. At full implementation, leaders and staff reflected on the key lessons learned about successful program implementation through ELEVATE and looked to ELEVATE's future.

- **Partnering across agencies to provide program services required time, intentionality, and strong communication.**

ELEVATE leaders and staff valued the partnerships they established and nurtured through ELEVATE. Partnerships allowed each participating agency to leverage their unique expertise. They required care and attention to facilitate alignment in missions and goals, to develop a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities, and to cultivate effective channels of communication. Leaders emphasized the importance of establishing clear expectations prior to the launch of the program, addressing areas of misalignment swiftly as they arose, and communicating regularly through formal and informal channels to address problems and help keep partners on the same page.

> "[Our greatest strength] is teamwork, 100 percent. It's an entire agency effort. It's a willingness to set everything aside and do what we needed to do when we needed to do it. In order to get to that point, it needed to be a whole bunch of other things: communication, collaboration, partnering, resource identification, having the support of the courts and the legal team. And at the end of the day, all of that falls into place when we're all just willing to work together to get there." – **Project Lead**

Leaders and staff also emphasized the important role that community agencies and organizations outside of ELEVATE played in implementation—both for recruitment and for being able to help participants address needs beyond the scope of the program. They emphasized the importance of being creative, open, and persistent in building these relationships; investing time in inter-agency meetings within the local community to learn about other programs and share information back about child support; and maintaining ongoing relationships through effective communication.

- **Serving participants effectively required time, trust, flexibility, and creativity.**

ELEVATE leaders and staff underscored the importance of effective case management for helping participants reach goals and address needs. An important challenge for ELEVATE programs was helping participants reach a point where they felt comfortable opening up about their needs, their goals, and the barriers they faced for reaching those goals. Building strong and trusting relationships with participants took time and required active listening—at case outset and throughout their participation in the program. For some participants, this also required overcoming negative perceptions and prior experiences with the child support program.

Leaders and staff underscored that there is no "one way" that will work for all participants. They also stressed that goals often changed over time, and as participants grew more comfortable in the relationship, new barriers could come to light. Therefore, serving participants effectively required not only time and trust, but also the flexibility to shift plans and approaches as needs change and creative thinking about addressing barriers beyond those directly related to employment or child support.

> "We can't change the way employers view them or how the CP views them or how their kids view them. There are so many things that are out of our control that we can't change. So how can we focus? And I think that's where we've tried to spend our energy, is on 'What can we actually impact?' And trying to look at the little victories for people. Maybe this person isn't working. They're not paying their child support yet. But you know what, they showed up to a job interview, and they got a call back….that might be progress for them. So, trying to focus on everybody as an individual. And what is going to be success for that person might not be the same success for somebody else." – **Partner Agency Leader**

- **Strong leadership, effective and supported staff, and commitment to teamwork supported implementation.**

ELEVATE leaders and staff each emphasized the role that the other played in effective implementation. Leaders, for their part, described the crucial role that having the "right" person in the ELEVATE coordinator role played in effective service delivery—particularly given ELEVATE's emphasis on intensive case management. They described the benefits of having case managers who could relate to participants, were known to and respected by participants, were strong communicators, and took a holistic and participant-centered approach.

> "I have to give all the credit to [the case managers]…their greatest strength is putting the customer first" – **Partner Agency Leader**

Staff, for their part, described the important role that leaders—within child support agencies and partner agencies—played in their ELEVATE programs. They expressed appreciation for leaders who they felt set clear priorities, supported and empowered them, and helped them grow their skills. Both leaders and staff underscored the importance of teamwork. Across counties, a core element of teamwork included infrastructure for leaders and staff who interacted with ELEVATE participants to check in with each other to discuss progress, make decisions collaboratively, and ensure team accountability.

> "The fact that we operate greatly as a team. I get a lot of support from my manager and my director. They believe in it. They believe in not being so harsh and not so punitive. So, it's good that it's at the top and it's coming down to us too." – **Project Lead**

- **Building buy-in with child support staff required strong communication and demonstrating the value of the program—before and throughout implementation.**

Establishing buy-in among staff outside of ELEVATE—and child support agency staff in particular—was an important challenge for ELEVATE programs. Leaders and staff described steps that helped them build and maintain buy-in for ELEVATE over time. These included, prior to implementation, explaining the program, potential benefits, and unique characteristics relative to other programs to staff, as well as bringing outside partners and child support staff together to share information about each other's services and processes and to establish rapport.

> "I think it's good early on to really educate your team about what the program is trying to do. We had a couple of roll-outs at the beginning where we had everyone come in—the whole office—and just presented exactly what this is. This is not just another Children First. We also had [Parenting Partner] come in too. That was very powerful, and something we had never done…He had a lot of the same background and experiences [as agency clients]. To have somebody like him come in and tell his story was a good thing." –**Project Lead**

Once services were underway, leaders and staff emphasized the value of communicating regularly and often with child support staff about individual participant progress and program successes, as well as to have an "open-door" policy for questions and concern from child support staff. Keeping these lines of communication open helped to build goodwill, address problems or concerns, and keep the program at the forefront for staff broadly across the agency.

- **Intervening early provided opportunities to help before situations become overwhelming.**

Engaging parents in child support services can be a challenge for agencies, even outside the context of an evaluation. At full implementation, leaders and staff underscored the value of intervening with parents early in the child support process—both in the context of recruitment into a demonstration, but more broadly across parents served by their agencies.

Leaders and staff emphasized the importance of providing information to parents as soon as orders were set: about how their order amount was determined, how to make payments, and what to do when they lose a job or are at risk of falling behind. Several also noted the importance of recruiting under-employed participants who could benefit from services to help obtain better-paying work so they could meet their child support obligations in the long term. From their perspectives, making expectations and resources, including ELEVATE, available early were crucial for building trust through demonstrating a desire to help, as well as for helping parents avoid negative outcomes such as high arrears balances that can lead parents to feel hopeless and overwhelmed.

> "We really tried to have more conversations with our paternity establishment folks. Because the sooner you can connect people with services, before they have all of these preconceived notions about what child support is or what the culture is, the better. Or you've got people who have had a child support order for ten plus years, and they had a negative experience several years ago, and they still hate us. It's hard to overcome those things." – **Child Support Supervisor**

- **Frequent and proactive outreach, as well as offering services of value, were crucial for continued engagement.**

Maintaining participant engagement over time was a key challenge faced by ELEVATE programs. Leaders and staff shared lessons learned for fostering engagement across several key domains. Partner agency staff emphasized the importance of establishing child support as a helping agency in the community even before engaging in efforts to recruit parents into a program. Leaders and staff who had engaged in this work noted that it takes time, effort, and can at times feel daunting or frustrating. Yet, this work was important for changing child support's reputation as solely focused on enforcement, for providing education and outreach, and for beginning to establish trust within the community.

> "What's the one gift you give each customer during your appointment? Whether it's a resume, a resource, something like that—what are you giving each customer each time that they wouldn't be able to get otherwise, or would have to work really hard and do a lot of research to do? [How] do we continue to cultivate that value for customers?" – **Partner Agency Leader**

ELEVATE coordinators and other staff underscored the importance of being open, reliable, and available when working with participants; making frequent and consistent contact; and being patient. They also emphasized the importance of demonstrating a desire to help and tangible evidence of help with every client contact. As one staff member stated, case managers should "bring value to each appointment." These strategies were viewed as crucial not only for securing engagement initially, but maintaining engagement and helping participants continue to make gains over time. Staff stressed that outreach and engagement could not just end when a participant finds work.

- **ELEVATE leaders and staff hoped that ELEVATE would continue.**

Across counties, interview participants broadly expressed a desire for ELEVATE to continue and to expand more widely across Wisconsin. They noted that their programs had gained valuable experience through the implementation of ELEVATE and hoped to carry these lessons forward. Many expressed the view that ELEVATE is a cost-effective option for serving parents behind on support. Losing ELEVATE funding, from the perspective of leaders, would particularly impact their ability to provide case management services at the intensity available through ELEVATE.

However, even if ELEVATE funding were to end, across counties, leaders and staff emphasized that they had no plans to revert to the "old way" of doing things. From their perspectives, ELEVATE had led to a shift in staff mindsets towards a more help-based orientation, provided agencies and staff the skills and experience needed for providing services differently, and provided a roadmap for new ways of connecting families to supports and resources.

> "[Ending ELEVATE] would have an impact on us as far as having case managers from [Partner Agency], because how are they going to get paid if we don't have that funding? But at the same time, we have new child support staff who have come on board with a different mindset. They want to be helpful and resourceful, and they have different backgrounds that they bring to the job." – **Project Lead**

- **ELEVATE leaders and staff hoped that the next version of ELEVATE would include more intensive resources available through ELEVATE and more opportunities to learn from each other.**

Interview participants shared several ways that they hoped a future version of ELEVATE might work a bit differently, should the program continue, and made suggestions for resources that they would like to see in a future version. One frequently-raised suggestion was for financial resources that could be used to help participants access fundamental and lacking supports—in particular, financial resources for housing. Staff and leaders described that housing in their communities—and local resources to help with access to housing—were broadly lacking and often financially inaccessible to parents served by child support.

> "I think help with a security deposit and first month's rent is the most logical or cost-effective thing if they are struggling with that, and I think some emergency funds for housing would be good. There's a lot of people who get evicted and they're a little short, or they're just behind that one month. I had a few people living out of their car and trying to juggle finding employment while doing all that." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

Interview participants also suggested that a future iteration of ELEVATE should include more financial resources available directly through the ELEVATE program for education and training for specific occupations. They stressed that to overcome barriers to participation, paid stipends—ideally offering a living wage—should accompany a participant's engagement in training. Another frequent suggestion was for a future program to find a way to temporarily pause child support orders during participation in the program. Without such a pause, they noted, many participants were unable to step away from other income-generating activities to take part in education or training—even if these activities were likely to benefit their financial circumstances in the long term.

> "What I'd like to see is, one, we would be able to help them with their schooling. If they kept up their grades, they would get X amount of dollars to stay there. By the same token, I'd like to see if they were paying child support, that they would not have to pay child support while they were going to school if their grades kept up, and they stayed on track… In the end, it would pay itself off because that person would have a decent job. They would be able to make their child support payments. The families would be better off. They would have better self-esteem and confidence. To me, it would be a smart way to go." – **ELEVATE Case Manager**

In addition to these primary suggestions for services and resources, interview participants also shared other ideas including: a return to group-based job readiness classes; financial supports to help participants access services related to substance use, physical health services, and mental health counseling; and peer-support spaces for parents outside of the realm of traditional parenting classes. With these services, some interview participants also called for a greater emphasis on engagement and accountability, including tying receipt of some financial supports to continued engagement; more support for verifying and monitoring employment; and, from the perspective of some, a swifter return to enforcement when participants do not engage in services. Several also called for clearer guidance on what thresholds of spending, such as on a given participant over time, could be allowable.

Participants also described changes that they would like to see regarding sharing information with each other. Some suggested a future version of ELEVATE would benefit from regular, in-person gatherings of the whole ELEVATE team. They wanted the opportunity to get to know each other less formally, see each other face-to-face, and share with and learn from each other. They felt these convenings would help foster cohesion across counties and provide the chance to learn about the challenges other counties encounter and strategies to address them.

They also suggested that future regular monthly meetings could include more time for counties to share their experiences with each other—such as in sessions organized around a particular topic with each county taking turns as leading presentation and discussion in a given month—as well as to bring in experts to share information relevant for ELEVATE. Several interview participants who had taken part in CSPED highlighted the CSPED monthly Learning Community Calls, and CSPED annual meetings, as potential examples of the forums they would find helpful.

> "I think when you have that informal opportunity to dialogue, you get more honest admission of challenges you're up against. You can't solve things in a vacuum, you know? And sometimes, you don't have the best idea about how to solve them. Somebody else does, because they're from the outside perspective, or they might be smarter than you, or whatever. They might have experience. We just don't have that at all, and I think that's an omission that I'd like to overcome." – **Project Lead**

In addition to these changes related to how ELEVATE is operated, a number of interview participants highlighted a desire to see change in state policies related to arrears—not only for ELEVATE participants, but for all parents with support orders. They noted the role that state polices for charging interest on arrears plays in rapid accrual of debt; frustration with the child support program overall; and when debts become large enough, demotivation for participation in the formal labor market. These participants expressed a desire to see a reduction in (or the elimination of) interest on arrears, as well as the expansion of ELEVATE to include participants with arrears-only debt.

CHAPTER 3. ELEVATE SERVICE RECEIPT

Data Overview

The ELEVATE program included four core service types: case management, employment, parenting, and child support. For case management, employment, and parenting services, each of the five ELEVATE counties collected service provision data throughout the evaluation. Individual county staff recorded services provided for each category within a template spreadsheet and submitted completed spreadsheets to IRP each month. Recorded data included participant information, the type of core service, more specific information about each service the client received within that category, the date of service, and who provided it. IRP worked with DCF and county child support staff to develop and revise the spreadsheet throughout the course of the evaluation. Based on feedback from counties, IRP substantially revised the spreadsheet template in August 2021. Thus, the data discussed in this chapter consist of services rendered to participants who were enrolled in August 2021 through the end of the enrollment period (December 2022). Child support services were tracked via administrative data and are discussed later in this section.

Case Management, Employment, and Parenting Services

Data and Methods

About the Services Data

Within each of the three core service categories reported by ELEVATE staff, staff provided further information on the "subtype" of services. In addition, staff reported referrals (including subtypes of referrals, counted as case management services) and work supports (including subtypes of work supports, counted as employment services). Table 2 shows the working definitions counties used to categorize services and Appendix B shows the full definitions for each of the service subtypes.

Table 2: ELEVATE Service Definitions, Corresponding to Core Services

Core Service	Definition, Including Service Subtypes
Case Management	**Case management**: Activities related to case management provided to an enrolled participant **Referrals**: documented when a caseworker referred a client to an agency that is not receiving ELEVATE grant funds
Employment	**Employment services**: Activities related to direct employment services funded under ELEVATE or through an ELEVATE employment partner **Work supports**: Work supports funded through ELEVATE provided to an enrolled participant
Parenting	**Parenting services**: Activities related to parenting services funded under ELEVATE or through an ELEVATE parenting partner provided to an enrolled participant

Note: See Appendix B for complete definitions of all services including service subtypes.

IRP developed these definitions with substantial input from county partners, and each subtype also included an "other" category, allowing for text entry. Clarifying which category was most appropriate for

each service was a particular subject of discussion while revising the spreadsheet, although some variation in data collection and classification across counties remained.

Data Cleaning and Processing

IRP completed two key steps in processing the services data before analysis. First, to create a consistent analysis sample, the data described in this chapter were limited to services provided to ELEVATE participants within the first 12 months after enrollment. Second, we recategorized several services with "other" subtypes into different, more appropriate categories based on a row-by-row review of these services. In some cases, we constructed new service subtypes for commonly provided services. For example, a frequent case management "other" description was related to ELEVATE staff assisting participants in securing a car or driver's license; as a result, we constructed a new "transportation activity" subtype under this core service.

Findings: Service Receipt Among ELEVATE Participants

Services Receipt by Category

As reported by ELEVATE staff, a total of 655 NCP participants in the revised service data sample[5] received at least one service. Figure 5 shows that the overwhelming majority of participants (96%) received at least one case management service, including 42% who received at least one referral. Over three-fourths of participants (78%) received at least one employment service, including 56% who received work support services. Nearly half of the group (49%) received at least one parenting service. Of these 655 parents, 83% received at least one service on a date after ELEVATE staff recorded their initial service(s) on the spreadsheet.

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[5]The ELEVATE evaluation enrolled a total of 992 participants. The subpopulation reported on in this chapter includes the 655 participants who had at least one of the three core services documented in the spreadsheets (i.e., case management, employment, parenting), whose earliest documented service was between August 2021 and December 2022, after substantial revisions to the service data collection spreadsheet were implemented.

Figure 5: Rate of Service Receipt across ELEVATE Core Services (N = 655)
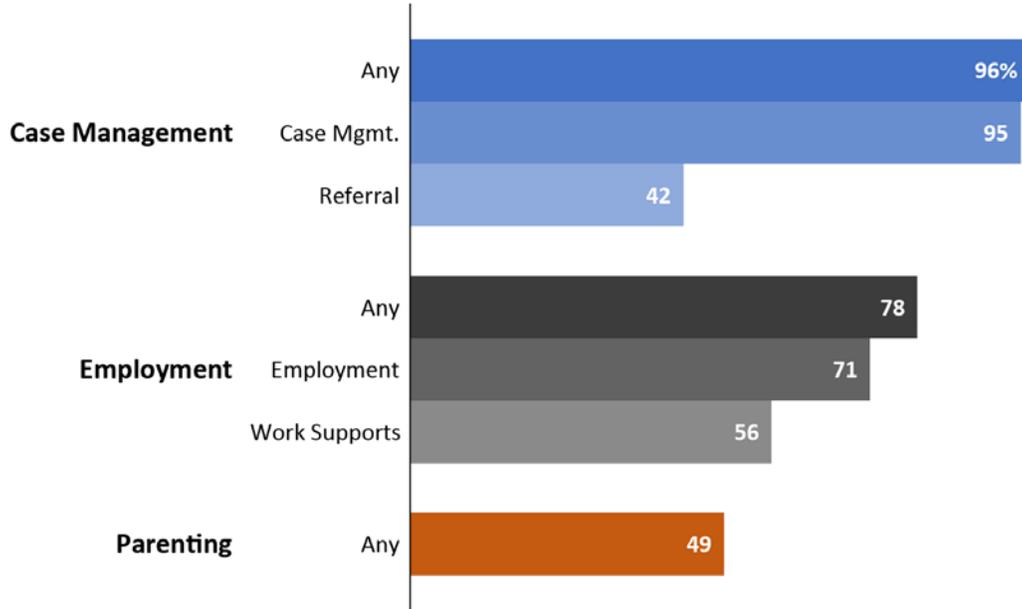
Service Receipt Across Multiple Core Categories

Most ELEVATE participants (81%) received services in at least two core categories. Figure 6 shows that the most frequent combination of core services was receipt of all three: 42% of participants were recorded having received at least one case management, employment, and parenting service. The next most common combination was case management and employment; 35% of participants were reported to have received at least one service in both of these categories. Participants who received services in just one category were most likely to have received case management (15%).

Figure 6: Rate of Service Receipt Across Multiple ELEVATE Core Categories (N = 655)
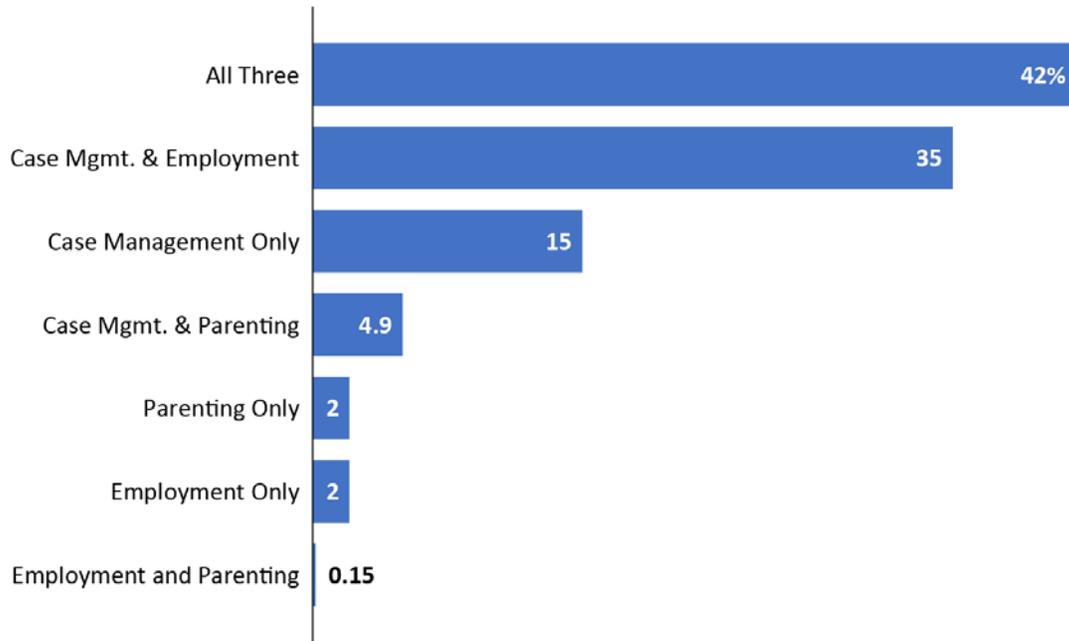
Service Subtypes

Tables 3-5 show the rates of each service subtype across the case management, employment, and parenting core services.

Table 3: Percent of ELEVATE Service Recipients Receiving Case Management Core Service Subtypes

	Receipt Rate (%)
Case Management Subtypes	
Ongoing Case Monitoring	82.0
Initial Intake/Needs Assessment	68.6
Staffing/Collaborative Work with Other Providers	26.1
Transportation Activity	15.7
Housing Activity	11.5
Other	5.3
Child Support Order Activity	3.4
Legal Activity	3.1
Financial Literacy	2.3
Public Benefits/Eligibility	1.7
Education: GED/HS Completion	0.5
Total ELEVATE Recipients	**655**
Referral Subtypes	
Other	22.1
Employment: Short-Term Job Skills Training	6.1
Custody & Visitation	4.7
Housing Assistance	3.8
Employment: Subsidized/Supported/Transitional	2.9
Legal	2.9
Mental Health	2.6
Employment: GED/HSED	2.4
Other Public Benefit Programs	2.4
Employment: Vocational Training	2.3
Family/Domestic Violence Services	1.8
Child Care	1.4
Alcohol/Substance Use	1.2
In-House Referral	1.2
Financial Literacy	0.9
Other Wellness	0.9
WIOA	0.9
SSI/SSDI	0.8
SNAP	0.6
Employment: Post-Secondary Education	0.5
Physical Health	0.5
Expungement	0.3
LIHEAP	0.3
Anger Management	0.2
Total ELEVATE Recipients	**655**

Table 3 describes the range of services provided in the case management core service. Most participants (82%) received ongoing case monitoring and 69% were recorded as receiving an intake assessment. Notably, about 16% of respondents received direct transportation, often described by ELEVATE workers as transporting a participant to an appointment or agency. Participants received a wide variety of

referrals with no specific category of referrals emerging as dominant; the most common category of referral was "other" (22%). Few participants were referred to external employment services such as short-term job-skills training (6%), subsidized employment opportunities (3%), GED/HSED programs (2%), vocational training (2%), or post-secondary education (0.5%).

Table 4 reveals that the most common employment services provided were related to job searching. For example, 39% of the services data sample received job search services; 28% had an employment plan, and 13% received help with their resume. In terms of work supports, transportation (e.g., gas cards, bus passes, ride share, OWI assessments, driver license fees) services were most common. Nearly half (43%) of the 655 participants received at least one gas card; this was by far the most frequent subtype of work support provided in ELEVATE. Fewer ELEVATE participants received job follow-up/retention services (28%) or training (14%).

Table 4: Percent ELEVATE Service Recipients Receiving Employment Core Service Subtypes

	Receipt Rate (%)
Employment Subtypes	
Job Search	39.0
Employment Plan	28.0
Job Follow-Up/Retention	28.0
Training	13.9
Resume	12.5
Employment Needs Assessment	7.5
Job Placement/Job Development	7.5
Other	3.2
Subsidized Employment	0.3
Total ELEVATE Recipients	**655**
Work Support Subtypes	
Gas Cards	43.4
Work Clothes/Equipment	8.1
Other Transportation Supports	7.6
Driver's License Reinstatement Fees	7.0
Bus Passes	6.1
OWI Assessments	4.7
Other	3.7
Ride Share/Taxi	3.4
Telecommunication Supports	2.9
Housing Supports	2.3
AODA Assessments	1.1
General Education Costs/Fees	0.8
Vocational/Skills Training Costs	0.5
Total ELEVATE Service Recipients	**655**

Table 5 shows that about a quarter of ELEVATE participants received a parenting needs assessment, and 24% were reported as participating in a parenting class or support group.[6]

Table 5: Percent of ELEVATE Service Recipients Receiving Parenting Core Service Subtypes

Parenting Subtypes	Receipt Rate (%)
Parenting Needs Assessment	24.7
Parenting Class/Support Group	23.4
Mediation/Parenting Time/Access & Visitation	8.4
Individual Parenting Counseling	6.9
Other	5.7
Total ELEVATE Recipients	**655**

Limitations of the Services Spreadsheet Data

While these data provide a helpful window into our understanding of what services ELEVATE participants received during their time in the program, several limitations must be kept in mind. First, the service data collection process evolved throughout the evaluation, and the data presented here represent service provision information for only about two-thirds of the full ELEVATE evaluation sample, and only those enrolled August 2021 or later. Second, we observed that each of the five ELEVATE counties had different approaches to recording services and the granularity with which they reported them. As a result, we suspect that some services may be over—or under—reported. It is also possible that participants received services that were not reflected in the data, meaning that more support activities took place than we are able to show. Third, despite IRP's consistent collaboration with county staff and input on the spreadsheet template, staff members may still have interpreted service definitions differently. For example, what one ELEVATE staff may have recorded as "resume help," another may have recorded as "job search." While we tried to discern specific patterns of variation across counties, this ultimately proved impossible. Thus, we are left with a rather imprecise analysis of the existing data, primarily at the core service level. Future analyses using survey data may help us triangulate staff reports with participant reports. Another limitation is that the services data do not show what happened after staff made a referral, i.e., we can't see whether a participant actually received that external service, what specific activity that constituted, or its dosage or quality. Finally, although we attempted to gather information about the time spent providing each service, these data ultimately were unusable due to selectively missing and unreliable data entry. In combination, these limitations make it difficult to use these data to provide contextual insights regarding treatment dosage or to precisely inform staffing efforts for future programming.

Enhanced Child Support Services

ELEVATE was also designed to provide enhanced child support services to enrolled parents. All parents were expected to receive a desk review,[7] suspension of administrative and judicial enforcement (if

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[6]In the evaluation planning phase, IRP discussed getting data directly from parenting services providers to construct "dosage" measures (e.g., attendance at classes, multiple referrals, etc.). As noted in the previous chapter, however, variation in services provided, disruption in services due to COVID-19, and turnover in parent service staffing made this impossible. Thus, we have little detail beyond whether "any" of the parenting services as categorized were received by recipients.

[7]All ELEVATE parents were to receive a desk review upon enrollment; however, we were not able to identify whether or when this action occurred using the administrative data available for the evaluation.

applicable), and assessment for expedited review and adjustment of orders. Parents were also able to receive order modifications, lifting of license suspension, and a reduction in state-owed arrears.

Data and Methods

Receipt of enhanced child support services was measured using administrative data from the Kids Information Data System (KIDS), which were available to IRP through the Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC). We selected administrative data measures for these services to minimize the data collection burden for ELEVATE service staff and ensure more systematic measurement of service provision across counties. Because we use administrative data, we are able to measure receipt of enhanced child support services for all 992 parents enrolled in the ELEVATE evaluation. We also include measures of enforcement actions. We detail the specific KIDS data used for each measure below.

Findings

Summary

The proportion of parents who received each service is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Enhanced Child Support Services Receipt and Enforcement Actions

	N	Mean/ Proportion
Enforcement (12 months following enrollment, unless noted)		
License Suspension Issued	51	5.1%
License Suspension Removed in 3 Months Following Enrollment - Full Sample	86	8.7%
License Suspension Removed - Full Sample	185	18.7%
Contempt Hearing	234	23.6%
Income Withholding Order Established	768	77.4%
Orders		
Current Support Order Was Modified in the First 6 Months Following Enrollment	**182**	**18.4%**
Support Order Modified Upwards	91	9.2%
Support Order Modified Downwards	91	9.2%
Current Support Order Was Modified in the 12 Months Following Enrollment	**294**	**29.6%**
Support Order Modified Upwards	122	12.3%
Support Order Modified Downwards	172	17.3%
Change in Order Amounts in 12 Months Following Enrollment (Sample With a Change)		
25%		-$248.00
Median		-$88.00
Mean		-$62.75
75%		$146.00
Arrears		
Decrease in State-Owed Arrears in the First 12 Months	**107**	**10.8%**
Decrease in State-Owed Arrears for Current Support	30	3.0%
Decrease in State-Owed Arrears for Birth Costs	97	9.8%
Change in Total Arrears Amount in 12 Months	**107**	**-$873.47**
Change in Current Support Arrears Amount	30	-$899.80
Change in Birth Cost Arrears Amount	97	-$763.43

Enforcement

Suspension of enforcement actions comprised a key piece of enhanced child support services in the design of ELEVATE. To understand services received regarding enforcement, we examined enforcement actions experienced by each ELEVATE parent in the 12 months following their enrollment into the evaluation. First, we investigated whether the participant had a contempt hearing or received a license suspension within 12 months of enrollment, given that participation in ELEVATE may have reduced the number of parents who experienced these types of punitive enforcement actions. We found that although only a small number of parents experienced license suspension (5.1%), nearly one-quarter (23.6%) of parents were required to attend a contempt hearing within a year of enrollment. On average, contempt hearings, for those who experienced them, were held 6 months after enrollment, indicating that parents may have experienced a cessation of this enforcement action in the months immediately following enrollment, but that did not continue for a full 12 months.

Next, we examined the occurrence of less punitive enforcement actions, such as the removal of license suspensions and income-withholding orders. Approximately 18.7% of all evaluation participants had a license suspension removed in the 12 months following enrollment, including 8.7% who had this occur within the first three months of enrollment, which is the time period when we would most expect this action to occur. Limiting the sample to only those with a license suspension prior to enrollment (n=108), 45% had a license suspension removed in the 12 months following enrollment; 25% had this occur within the first three months of enrollment.

Just over three-fourths of ELEVATE participants (77.4%) had an automatic income-withholding order established in the 12 months following enrollment. This indicates that the majority of participants either had an order modified or established, or began working for a new employer, in the 12 months following enrollment.

Orders

Order modification was another important enhanced child support service included in the ELEVATE service array. To identify order modifications for ELEVATE participants, we examined monthly order amounts in KIDS in the 12 months following enrollment. We created measures identifying orders that had any change within this period, and then measures specifically noting whether this was an upward modification (order increase) or a downward modification (order decrease).

In theory, we might expect most ELEVATE participants to have downward modifications, particularly early in their participation, entailing a "right sizing" of their orders. If, however, ELEVATE participants gained employment (or better employment) because of their participation in the program, this may have led to an increase in order amount. To differentiate between services received upon enrollment and changes that may have resulted after participants had been involved in ELEVATE for a while or disengaged from services, we looked first at order modifications occurring within 6 months after enrollment and then within the full 12 months post-enrollment.

Approximately 18% of ELEVATE parents experienced an order modification in the first 6 months following enrollment into ELEVATE. Modifications were split equally between upward modifications and downward modifications during this period.8

A larger number of ELEVATE parents (29.6%) experienced an order modification in the full 12-month follow-up period. A slightly larger proportion of these were downward modifications (17.3%) compared to upward modifications (12.3%). The median change in order amount over the 12-month post-enrollment period was a decrease of $88 per month.

Arrears

ELEVATE parents could also receive a reduction in state-owed arrears as part of their participation in the program. Counties assessed cases for eligibility for this service based on achievement of various program milestones, including consistent payments or participating in parenting classes. Using administrative data from KIDS, we identified the proportion of ELEVATE enrollees who may have received this service in the 12 months following enrollment, although we cannot be certain that arrears reduction occurred directly as a result of ELEVATE participation.9

We find that arrears reduction was not a common experience for most ELEVATE parents. Approximately 11% of parents had a reduction in state-owed arrears in the follow-up period; most of these parents (9.8%) received a reduction in state-owed arrears that were incurred from birthing costs. The median amount of this decrease was $426.

In sum, although some NCPs were spared punitive enforcement actions, received order modifications, and/or had their state-owed arrears decreased, these experiences were more the exception than the norm. As noted in the Chapter 2, this may have been because of broader changes in child support practices in ELEVATE counties. Further implications of the child support service findings on the evaluation results are discussed in Chapter 5.

8One-third of the participants with an upward modification (n = 30, or 3% of the evaluation sample) experienced an upward modification because of a new case or order established during this period.

9To determine participants who may have received this service, we identified ELEVATE participants whose state-owed arrears balance decreased in the 12 months following enrollment without a corresponding payment as indicated in the administrative data. We note that we cannot determine with certainty whether arrears reductions for ELEVATE participants was a result of their participation in ELEVATE.

CHAPTER 4. ELEVATE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

As the target of the ELEVATE intervention, ELEVATE program participants provide a unique vantage point for understanding how program services were implemented; how services available through programs aligned with participant needs and goals; and the strategies used to engage, retain, and support participants. To that end, this chapter describes the experiences of participants in the ELEVATE program. It addresses the following research questions:

- How did ELEVATE participants learn about the program?

- What were ELEVATE participants' motivations for enrolling in the program?

- What were ELEVATE participants' experiences with program staff and services?

Data presented in this chapter are not generalizable to all ELEVATE participants and should be interpreted with caution. We interviewed only a small subset of ELEVATE participants, and data were collected only from participants who enrolled during a specific point in time during the intervention. Additionally, the views of participants who were willing to take part in interviews may differ from those who were not. Nonetheless, the views of ELEVATE participants who we spoke with provide helpful insights for future programs seeking to enroll, retain, and provide services aligned with parent needs.[10]

Data and Methods

Recruitment

To learn about the experiences of ELEVATE program participants at full program implementation across all ELEVATE county programs, we recruited a sample of ELEVATE study participants to take part in semi-structured interviews about their experiences with the program. The research team used the ELEVATE baseline survey to draw a sample of ELEVATE program participants, then mailed letters to a total of 149 participants who enrolled in the program between May and December of 2022.

The letters provided two ways to express interest in participating: (1) a telephone number, which connected the sample member to an IRP study team member, and (2) a link or QR code to a Qualtrics screener. All interested participants completed a short screening questionnaire online or by phone to indicate availability, preferred contact information, and whether the participant took part in ELEVATE services after enrollment. A study team member reached out to program participants who received a letter but did not respond to the mailing within a week, with up to three outreach attempts by telephone or email. In total, 23 parents (4 to 5 per county) participated in interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was approved and overseen by the UW–Madison Institutional Review Board. Interviews were conducted by one or more study team members via telephone or Zoom based on participant

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[10] The ELEVATE evaluation team also conducted a study of custodial parent perspectives on programs and services for parents who owe and are due child support. Please see Vogel et al. (2023) for a report summarizing findings from this research.

preference. A semi-structured interview protocol to guide discussions and interviews lasted 30 minutes, on average. After taking part, all study participants received a $50 electronic gift card, via email, to a store of their choosing (e.g., Target, Amazon, or Walmart). All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed; transcribed quotes presented below were sometimes lightly edited for clarity or brevity. 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.

Findings

Coming to the ELEVATE Program

- **Participants learned about ELEVATE through community resources, outreach from ELEVATE or child support staff, and referrals from other people or programs.**

Participants reported learning about the ELEVATE program through an array of sources. Some learned about ELEVATE through interactions with their local Wisconsin Job Center. Participants reported coming to the Job Center for help with employment difficulties, such as job loss or encountering barriers to finding work, or questions about child support. Job Center staff referred parents to ELEVATE, or ELEVATE staff located at the Job Center shared information about the ELEVATE program. Other participants described that they saw a flyer for ELEVATE at a Job Center, public benefits office, or other community service programs, and reached out to ELEVATE on their own initiative. As one participant described, seeing the flyer, together with previous positive interactions with his county's ELEVATE coordinator, led him to reach out to the program for help.

> "Basically, I, myself, sought out ELEVATE because I have just become a payer of child support recently this year. Before, I was like the payee, not the payer. And I just had some custody issues, yada, yada. So, I actually sought out all the programs I could at the Job Center to kind of help me work through that." - **Participant**

Participants also learned about ELEVATE through interactions with the child support agency. Some participants reported proactively reaching out to child support to get caught up on or to avoid falling behind on child support—for example, after being released from prison or in response to losing a job**.** Others reported learning of the program through direct outreach from their child support worker or their county's ELEVATE coordinator, or child support agency staff, such as reception staff. Participants described that in these interactions, staff explained what the ELEVATE program was and how it could potentially help them.

> "When I first heard about ELEVATE, I just got out of jail, and I was behind on child support. I went to the child support office to talk to them about it, so I wouldn't be put under arrest…I have a hard time finding jobs because I've been arrested a number of times. They told me that the ELEVATE program would help me find work and possibly give me training and counseling." - **Participant**

Additionally, several participants reported learning about ELEVATE from people outside of the agencies, including friends enrolled in the program, a lawyer, or another social service program. A few said that they heard about ELEVATE through their participation in Children First, a court-mandated program.

- **Participants perceived that ELEVATE could help them address employment issues.**

When asked about their first impressions of the ELEVATE program and how it might be helpful, participants overwhelmingly reported perceiving that the ELEVATE program would be helpful in assisting them with finding or keeping employment through services such as resume building, job search, job skills training, and transportation assistance. A few believed that ELEVATE could help with custody or visitation issues, their rights and responsibilities regarding their child support orders, obtaining access to housing, or help with budgeting and personal finance. Participants' perceptions of how ELEVATE might be helpful to them was shaped both by their pathways into the ELEVATE program as well as their initial interactions with ELEVATE staff.

> "[ELEVATE Coordinator] told me that the program helps with training first-time parents and teaching them how to be more responsible with budgeting and with anything that has to do with money. And he also offered me classes to learn how to become a better father, for first-time fathers, and stuff like that." -
> Participant

- **Participants were motivated to participate in ELEVATE to get help with employment, child support issues, co-parenting issues, or relationships with children.**

Most participants described being motivated to enroll in ELEVATE due to unemployment and financial need. Some hoped participating in ELEVATE could help them overcome other barriers to employment, such as a criminal record, mental health issues, major life changes (e.g., the loss of a family member for one participant), inability to afford transportation, and lack of access to childcare. Participants noted that many of these barriers made it difficult to even apply for jobs, in addition to obtaining and keeping employment.

> "Just hoping that they could help with, you know, monetary things like gas cards, help me build some skills to keep find employment. I know they also could potentially help with car repairs if you needed things like that just to help you get on your feet—stay on your feet." -
> Participant

Some participants enrolled in ELEVATE hoping to advance their education or obtain training to get a better job. While some participants came to ELEVATE with significant experience in certain fields and a desire to pursue further training in those areas, others discussed wanting to learn a trade to access a career path and improve earning potential. These participants perceived that access to training could benefit their career prospects and help them to demonstrate that they were working to better themselves for their families.

> "My biggest motivation—until I got incarcerated last time, I was always a little bit ahead of my child support. And it really bummed me out, you know, falling behind, because I love my little boy, and I want to support him. So my biggest motivation to get into the ELEVATE program was to get back on track and get caught up with child support again." -
> Participant

Issues related to paying child support was another common motivator to join ELEVATE. Some participants reported having orders set at levels they struggled to pay or were unable to meet. Others were motivated to participate to obtain relief from enforcement sanctions as they tried to find employment. Across both groups, many participants expressed a desire to get back on track supporting their children financially.

Additionally, some participants were motivated to participate in ELEVATE to improve relationships with co-parents and/or children. They hoped their participation would demonstrate responsibility, show commitment to repairing aspects of their lives, mitigate some of the conflict they experienced with a co-parent, or potentially lead to more contact or reunification with their children.

> "The biggest motivation for me was that [ELEVATE] counts towards compliance with child support. That was a big concern for me with struggling to find a job. I still had three boys at home with me. Without being able to find daycare, I wasn't able to find a job. So it was reassuring to be a part of this program knowing that not being compliant wasn't going to factor into me losing other benefits. - **Participant**

- **While some participants viewed ELEVATE as a voluntary program, others perceived participation as less than a true "choice."**

When asked about their motivations for participating in ELEVATE, some participants described experiencing and appreciating ELEVATE as a voluntary program. Some described their participation in ELEVATE as voluntary and preferable to Children First, a court-mandated program. One parent contrasted ELEVATE to Children First as "more of a probationary type of deal" and described feeling that "…every other program claims that they're there to help you. They're not there to help you." Other participants spoke of their choice to participate in ELEVATE as a kind of "agreement," rather than a mandate, that resulted from building rapport with ELEVATE coordinators who explained what they would need to do to be successful in the program. Another participant saw participating in ELEVATE as voluntary but noted that it also provided a way to ensure that he could look for work free of the possibility that he might go to jail for nonpayment.

> "[ELEVATE Coordinator] even said if I don't want to be in this program, I don't have to. But I'm staying. I'm sticking to it. I'm done with jail. I am really doing my part in looking for work, so. Being in jail, you can't look for work." - **Participant**

For other participants, though they were offered a choice to participate in ELEVATE, the potential for "repercussions" that could result from declining participation in a program that offered relief from enforcement made participation feel less than voluntary—child support obligations are court-ordered, and noncompliance comes with sanctions. Most participants who expressed doubt that the program was truly voluntary had come to ELEVATE having already experienced prior enforcement. Some noted that when ELEVATE was suggested to them, they accepted it as something they had to do because of being behind on child support and lacking other options; others questioned their ability to truly have a choice about enrolling due to the power dynamics between themselves and child support. Finally, one participant reported believing that he had been court-ordered to participate in the program, and therefore felt he had no choice about taking part.

> "I just accepted it as part of what child support was suggesting that I do. I didn't have any—I don't know. You're kind of backed into a corner. You can either do this, or these are the repercussions… It's completely voluntary, but if you don't do it, then you face repercussions." - **Participant**

Program Services

Participants described significant variation in their perceptions of the services available through the ELEVATE program. Some perceived that the program had a broad array of services and connections to community resources, and others perceived more limited offerings, with substantial variation across counties and some variation within counties. Participant engagement in services also varied, with some participants reporting taking part in multiple service domains in the months since their enrollment, and others reporting minimal or no engagement in services.

- **Most ELEVATE participants described being offered resume assistance, job search activities, and work supports aimed at transportation barriers.**

Most ELEVATE participants we spoke with who reported receiving employment services took part in them one-on-one, either with the ELEVATE coordinator or another ELEVATE staff member. Nearly all reported being offered help building or improving their resume, and most reported being offered transportation assistance in the form of gas cards or bus passes. Most also said that the program offered help looking for a job. Some participants worked in tandem with an ELEVATE staff member to look for jobs together, while others were directed to search for jobs on employment sites independently or at the Job Center. Some participants reported that they received emails from ELEVATE staff with job leads.

Several participants, particularly from two counties, described that ELEVATE staff explained education and occupational training options (such as Commercial Driver's License, or CDL, training; forklift training; or certified nursing assistant, or CNA, training) that the program or other community resources could connect them to and pay for. A few reported participating or intending to participate in these activities.

Participants described that ELEVATE provided them a variety of other forms of assistance related to barriers to work. Some described that program staff helped them find childcare or housing, worked with them on computer skills, or helped navigate issues related to a criminal record. A few described that ELEVATE helped pay for larger personal expenses that improved stability and addressed barriers to employment, such as assistance with rent or a down payment on an apartment, paying for auto insurance, or covering the cost of an expensive car repair.

> "The caseworker who I had would sit down with me and help me with my resume. She actually took my resume and totally critiqued it and edited it and made it shorter and better…she would email me on a weekly basis for jobs in the area that would interest me or that I have experience in or am interested in." - Participant

> "I got help with someone about a trade. They're getting me involved in CDL training. It's a [paid] 8- to 12-week program and I'm currently in it…They also connected me to a pro bono lawyer. It was $0 down to get me back in front of the judge to set things in motion [for a modification]. That was very helpful… [The CDL training and legal assistance] go hand in hand. One helped me with a trade, so I can provide and make more money. And the other helped me get everything in order [with child support]." – Participant

> "I don't think anything changed on the child support order itself. But they did help me with a car repair, and that did help a lot with my child support because I would have [otherwise] been in a financial hard spot at that time… And when I moved to a bigger place, they helped me out with $500 for rent." - Participant

A few ELEVATE participants described that ELEVATE staff helped them to co-enroll into another program that provided additional employment services, such as the Foodshare Employment and Training (FSET) program or a W-2 employment training program. Participants shared both benefits and challenges related to co-enrollment. On one hand, as a participant co-enrolled in ELEVATE and FSET described, the FSET program helped him access a broader array of employment training opportunities than would have been available through ELEVATE alone, and he found his FSET caseworker to be a helpful source of regular support. On the other hand, co-enrolled participants sometimes found the services available across programs redundant, encountered communication challenges, and experienced confusion about which program provided which services.

> "After a while it became redundant because I was already working with this FSET program, and they offer a lot of services similar to ELEVATE. They kind of work in tandem, so I was able to kind of piggyback the appointments." - **Participant**

- **Some participants thought the employment services offered to them aligned with their needs, while others wanted more job placement and occupational training options.**

Some of the participants we spoke with described the ELEVATE services that they received—whether they were limited to resume, job search, and transportation assistance or whether they included more intensive services such as occupational training—as helpful and well-aligned with their needs. Participants were more likely to describe services as helpful when they were working with ELEVATE staff to get help dealing with specific barriers to employment. For example, several participants described that they came to the program without a resume or with limited computer skills, and ELEVATE staff addressed these barriers by helping them build a resume and get comfortable using the computer to search for job leads. Another participant described that their criminal background had created barriers to participating in CNA training, and the ELEVATE coordinator helped them complete paperwork to access a Caregiver Rehabilitation Review.[11] This process was underway at the time of the interview and the participant expressed appreciation for the coordinator's efforts, which, if successful, could make it possible to participate in the training. Similarly, several participants who were mothers with children at home described that ELEVATE staff provided help that allowed them to balance children's needs with job search activities—such as by guiding them to jobs with flexible schedules or remote work options—and connecting them to resources related to children's needs, such as diaper banks.

> "Due to being on a wait list for daycare, she gave me some ideas on places I should call that might have remote work that they might not advertise. So that was definitely helpful." - **Participant**

Participants who described being offered occupational training or educational opportunities, including several participating in these activities at the time of their interview, greatly valued these resources. These participants saw education and training as an important vehicle for gaining the skills to obtain a better-paying job. Others described that while they were unable to participate in such activities currently—for example, due to the recent birth of a child, a health issue, or other life circumstances—they appreciated their availability and hoped to pursue them in the future as their circumstances changed.

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[11]Wisconsin's Caregiver Law bars some individuals from working in licensed or certified facilities due to certain criminal offenses. The Caregiver Rehabilitation Review is a process available to some individuals, depending on the relevant offense, to remove the bar. For more information, see: https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/rehab-review.

Some participants came to the program hoping for job placement assistance or access to occupational training but reported that these services were not offered to them. These participants were disappointed to find that the employment services offered by ELEVATE focused on more basic activities such as job search and resume building. They had expected the program to have relationships with employers or to help them access training opportunities for better-paying jobs and felt disappointed when their experiences did not align with these expectations.

"I guess my version of a program helping you to find a job is to have some employers who have jobs open already lined up. And then saying, 'Hey, I've got this candidate,' and then they'd reach out or something. Something other than, 'Here's the link. Click on this'…I mean, if the program is designed to help parents get caught up on their child support and find a job, then have that for them." - Participant

- **Participants who received help with child support issues valued this assistance, though some had limited access to or information about child support services available through the program.**

Participant experiences with child support services through ELEVATE varied and fell into three groups. Most participants we spoke with described that they unaware if a review had occurred on their case, and many reported being unaware that ELEVATE involved order reviews. A second group of participants described that they had been told by an ELEVATE staff member that their order had been reviewed, but were either told that they were not eligible for a modification, or the staff member encouraged them to file a pro se motion on their own without the help of the program due to the amount of time it would take for a modification to occur through the child support agency's filing of the motion. This experience was frustrating for participants, due to the complexity of the pro se modification request process.

"I've asked everyone at [ELEVATE] for help with my child support order. Apparently, the only way you can do that is if you bring a motion up yourself for the child support. No one in that building can help you with anything outside of there…All they can do is point you in the direction of the court and that's it. There is zero help with child support." - Participant

Finally, some participants reported being told by staff that their order had been reviewed and the agency had initiated a modification. For several participants, the modification request was in process (but unresolved) at the time of their interview. Others had successfully obtained a modification, and those who did greatly valued this help. Whether resolved or not, participants expressed appreciation that staff listened to them, took time to review their case, and communicated with them as the process unfolded.

"They put me back in front of the court, so we can actually talk about payments to get payments more affordable. So, like, yeah, they helped me with that part of child support." - Participant

Regarding relief from enforcement actions, some participants described that the program helped alleviate enforcement sanctions that had been initiated by the child support agency prior to their enrollment in ELEVATE. The type of help they received depended, in part, on what sanctions the agency had previously imposed. For example, many participants shared that they had lost their license prior to enrollment due to nonpayment of child support, and one participant described that he came to the program with a lien on his vehicle. Participants who received relief from enforcement

"The most helpful was them trying to get my driver's license fee waived, my suspension fee waived." – Participant

actions reported these services as beneficial for addressing barriers to employment. Participants especially valued help with enforcement actions that impeded their abilities to drive to work, including assistance with license reinstatement, waiving of CSA-imposed fees, and lifting vehicle liens.

However, a few participants reported that enforcement actions resumed after several months in the program, while they were still searching for a job. One participant explained that his ELEVATE coordinator tried to intercede on his behalf, though child support agency enforcement actions continued.

- **Few participants reported taking part in parenting activities. Those who did found peer-based support groups and one-on-one conversations with staff particularly helpful.**

About half of the ELEVATE participants we spoke with reported being offered parenting classes or groups, and only a few reported participating in these activities. A few participants wanted to participate but could not, due to transportation barriers, schedule conflicts, or because they needed to attend to other priorities. Most commonly,

> "I'm not really interested in [classes]. We have a pretty busy schedule already. And I have five kids, so I'm pretty familiar." - **Participant**

however, participants described feeling that they did not need parenting classes. Particularly for parents with shared placement or regular involvement with children, parenting classes felt unnecessary for their situations.

Two participants from the same county described taking part in parenting activities that they described as support groups or workshops (rather than parenting classes) specifically for fathers and found these groups supportive and helpful. These participants also took part in and valued one-on-one conversations with ELEVATE staff about co-parenting challenges.

> "I'm having group meetings with other fathers, guys who are in the same position as I am. And we all talk, and we can help each other out with support and ideas and stuff like that. I really get a lot out of the workshops that they have." - **Participant**

The rest of the participants we spoke with reported that they were not offered parenting classes, groups, or activities. Some said that they were not looking for these sorts of supports and would not have pursued them if they had been offered. Several others, however, expressed a desire for ELEVATE to provide services aimed at improving the co-parenting relationship, mediation services, or help with obtaining placement or visitation.

- **ELEVATE participants appreciated and valued referrals to community resources beyond those available through ELEVATE, particularly when tailored to their individual needs.**

Some participants reported that ELEVATE staff provided them with information about other resources available in the community. These included resources for help meeting basic needs (e.g., food banks, housing authorities, and public benefits programs), employment resources (e.g., clothing for job interviews, contact with staffing agencies, and other employment services), and, in one county, legal services. Others reported not receiving information about these

> "They had connected me with [legal services]. They got me somebody where it was pro bono, $0 down, to get me back in front of the judge to set different things into motion. So, I think that was very helpful." - **Participant**

resources or receiving information about them but not pursuing them due to lack of need.

Participants who reported receiving information about these resources described learning about them in one of two ways. Some participants were provided with a list of local community service providers and their offerings. Some participants found this resource list helpful while others wished for direct referrals to specific programs, more tailored to their unique needs. In other cases, participants described being directly referred to specific community providers to meet a particular need, such as assistance with clothing for interviews or help with housing. Participants described these targeted referrals as particularly helpful.

> "They kept referring me to that one sheet that they gave me in the beginning that just had some websites and things on there, some links. I thought there'd be a little bit more…but they weren't even like referring me to, like, go there and do anything." - **Participant**

Participants who received referrals for low- or no-cost legal services described these services as very helpful for addressing child support issues and child custody issues. They explained that hiring a lawyer without assistance was prohibitively expensive, and valued the benefits yielded by these services. One participant described that ELEVATE connected him to a pro bono attorney who represented him in several court matters and was successful in both obtaining a downward modification on his behalf and helping him secure visitation with his child.

> "My interactions with [ELEVATE Coordinator] in particular were very positive. He knew where I was coming from. [I am] somebody who doesn't need the specific help that you're giving, you know what I mean? But just my interactions were great…He is very empathetic towards that because he sees guys like me every day." - **Participant**

- **ELEVATE participants often described ELEVATE staff as supportive, empathetic, and caring—even when they were dissatisfied with the services available through ELEVATE.**

Most participants we spoke with expressed appreciation for the ELEVATE staff, especially ELEVATE coordinators, who they worked with through the program. They described them as compassionate, kind, and dedicated advocates who took time to get to know them and understand their needs and circumstances. Many shared that ELEVATE coordinators contacted them frequently during their time with the program to check in, offer encouragement, and discuss barriers to work.

> "I have nothing but good things to say about them. They've helped me with everything that I've ever asked for help with. They call me to make sure I'm okay when I don't show up… They do everything they can." - **Participant**

Several participants drew a contrast between their interactions with ELEVATE staff and their prior or typical interactions with child support. For example, one participant described ELEVATE staff as "supportive much more than the child support agency" and another characterized her interactions with ELEVATE staff as "more personal, more understanding, and not so harsh," as other experiences with child support. For some participants, the empathy demonstrated by ELEVATE staff played an important part in combating the stigma they had previously encountered in their child support interactions.

> "Most of it was actually through text message. Which, for me, being a single mom of three boys, was a lot easier to maintain. Like I would get a text. She would check in on me monthly saying, 'Hey, how is it going?' It was a lot easier to respond to a message than to try and answer a phone call. So that method worked out very well for me." - **Participant**

Notably, several participants who expressed dissatisfaction with the intensity or breadth of service offerings available through ELEVATE nonetheless appreciated the efforts of and their interactions with ELEVATE program staff. As one participant stated, "It was always upbeat when it was with [ELEVATE Coordinator]. It was upbeat with all the individuals. There just wasn't enough provided, from what I believe."

- **ELEVATE participants described receiving services in a broad array of formats that often matched their preferences, though some wished for more face-to-face options.**

All ELEVATE participants reported an initial face-to-face meeting with an ELEVATE staff member, at the time of baseline survey completion. After that initial meeting, how staff and participants interacted varied. For some participants, especially those with jobs or childcare constraints, virtual methods (i.e., phone, text, and email) aligned with their preferences. Others expressed a preference for face-to-face services. As one participant described, "I like talking to people in person. I can tell if you're, you know, genuine or serious or not. Over the phone you can't tell. I guess I'm more old school."

Most participants described in-person meetings as an option available to them; however, a few participants described being offered only virtual options and expressed a desire to have the option for in-person meetings as well.

> "I would have probably preferred it to be in person. I actually meant to meet [the caseworker] the first time with my resume. I went to the office thinking [the caseworker] would be there. [The caseworker] wasn't and explained they only do it over the phone…I think an in-person, at least biweekly or something like that would be better because I had no idea who [the caseworker was] besides the phone call. I don't know if more questions and things could have been answered. I would have preferred some in-person action when you're in a program like that." - **Participant**

Participation and Engagement in Services Over Time

- **Some ELEVATE participants engaged in program services long-term. Others reported that they chose to stop participating, or that communication from the program dwindled over time.**

Participants described a range of experiences in terms of taking part in program services over time. On one end of the spectrum, some participants described having been actively involved in services since their enrollment. On the other end, a few participants described being involved for only a short time and having no real engagement with the program.

> "I was involved in it at an arm's length to begin with…I don't need someone's help or someone to hold my hand, in essence, to find a job. I'm capable of doing that on my own. So, I didn't make much of an effort to contact them back." - **Participant**

Participants saw their current status with the program differently, depending on their circumstances. One group of participants considered themselves actively involved in the program at the time of their interview. Some of these participants were still looking for a job and meeting with ELEVATE staff. Some of these participants had obtained employment but were working toward other goals. Others

> "Yeah, I'll talk to [ELEVATE Coordinator] every so often. That's how I get the gas cards still. They still help with the gas cards, $20 gas cards every other week." - **Participant**

had found work or otherwise completed their goals but considered themselves still "in the program" because they stayed in touch with the ELEVATE coordinator. The coordinator would reach out

periodically to check in and offer assistance, or the participant would reach out to the coordinator to share updates.

A second group of participants considered themselves to be no longer participating in the program. Some of these participants had obtained work and reported making child support payments, and in some cases completed other goals that they had coming into the program, such as obtaining help with their child support. These participants saw themselves as having completed the program and found it natural that their time would come to an end. A few participants described that they had enrolled in the program, did not find it useful, so stopped responding to calls from program staff.

> "I kind of felt like, as soon as you get a job with ELEVATE, you're done with the program. So that part I didn't really understand. I didn't understand if there was more help out there through ELEVATE. I was never told anything about that... once I got a job, they kind of made it seem like there was no more resources they had to like offer." - **Participant**

A third group of participants were uncertain about their current status in the program. From their perspectives, communication from the program seemed to dwindle over time, particularly after they obtained a job. When this happened, participants felt confused about whether they were still in the program, or perceived that services were no longer available once they obtained work. Some wished that staff would have stayed in touch longer, to provide ongoing support or additional resources.

> "I was pregnant [at the time of enrollment]. So the stuff me and [the Coordinator] talked about, I still want to do them. I just had to wait until I had the baby, and now the baby's breastfeeding. So, I still want to, you know, go forward with it. I've just got to deal with one thing at a time." - **Participant**

Finally, some participants described that they had "paused" their participation due to encountering barriers to participation. For example, one participant moved out of state unexpectedly, and another had a baby. These participants were not actively involved in services but expressed a desire to someday return to the program.

Perspectives on the Program

- **Participants held a wide range of opinions on the ELEVATE program's helpfulness. Their views were often shaped by the alignment between their situations and the services they received.**

Many participants viewed ELEVATE as a helpful program that supported them in making progress toward their goals for work and child support. These participants experienced ELEVATE as an important source of motivation in their journeys and described that ELEVATE played a positive role in their lives. Several participants described that the package of employment services and child support services together made ELEVATE particularly helpful for their situations.

> "Sometimes I have a hard time even motivating myself. But since I've been in this program, it's been helping me motivate myself every day. You know, 'Get up!', you know, to look for work and stuff, and you can't be lazy. I mean, there's times I do want to be lazy, but I keep telling myself, 'Don't.' And I tell myself, 'OK, you want to keep going to jail?' And I'm like, no. So. It basically motivates me to get up and do it every day." - **Participant**

In general, participants who viewed the program as helpful found that the services offered to them aligned well with their needs and circumstances. For example, participants who came to the program with a goal of obtaining work and looking for help with resume building, job search help, or transportation assistance valued these services and experienced them as helpful for finding jobs. Similarly, parents who needed help with a child support issue or accessing legal services, and who received services that addressed these needs, described the program as very helpful.

Participants who held more negative views raised two primary concerns. First, some participants felt that the program did not live up to its advertised benefits. They perceived that the program had not been transparent about the program's actual service offerings and found that the services available to them matched poorly with their needs. For example, when participants came to ELEVATE expecting that the program would place them in or match them with well-paying jobs or help them access employment training—but did not receive the services that they expected—participants felt disappointed or perceived the program as a "waste of resources." Some of these participants felt that the services available through ELEVATE did not go beyond the activities they already engaged in independently to find work or that were already available through other programs. These participants described feeling "on their own" in ELEVATE, beyond receiving gas cards and emails with job leads.

Similarly, when participants came to the program believing—based on advertisements or conversations with program staff or others—that the program would help with their child support issues, when these services were not offered or they were told they were not eligible for review or a modification, they felt disillusioned and misled. For some, these feelings reinforced previous perceptions that child support "doesn't care" about their circumstances.

> "Man, marvelous. I mean, it's probably one of the most positive things that we have in the city to actually help people who are having problems with child support issues or people who have problems with finding training because you are a felon…They clear things up for you." - **Participant**

> "I don't know if a lot of these services are, like, you have to ask, and if you don't ask you don't get it. It should be something where they reach out to you and be like, 'Hey these are some of the services we provide.' I didn't get any of that. That's why I didn't necessarily participate in the program because I just felt like FSET was doing all of that stuff and better, you know what I mean. So, I didn't think much of the program." - **Participant**

> "I did go in for a meeting and the lady there was going to help me apply to jobs through Indeed. But when I was there, I let her know that that's actually what I was already doing…So, on that aspect, it wasn't really helpful." - **Participant**

> "It was subpar, it was subpar. I guess my understanding of the ELEVATE program and what was said to me, versus what came out of it, was totally two different things. I almost feel cheated, if you will." - **Participant**

- **Some participants we spoke with experienced barriers to work and that also limited their abilities to participate in program services.**

Some of the participants we spoke with described that their circumstances precluded them from work and participating in program services, in either the short- or long-term, or had situations that appeared misaligned with ELEVATE's eligibility criteria. Several participants were unable to participate in work-related activities at the time of enrollment due to work-limiting health conditions or family circumstances, and another participant was unable to fully participate in work search activities due to

constraints related to a union contract. These participants found that ELEVATE was limited in its ability to help them due to their circumstances.

Looking to the Future

- **Many participants valued the program and hoped it would continue, though some called for more intensive services to be made broadly and consistently available.**

Many participants expressed hope that the program would continue to be offered in the future. Participants appreciated ELEVATE's supportive approach in lieu of more traditional, enforcement-heavy child support approaches. Some participants were happy with the service offerings available through ELEVATE and thought the program should continue in its current form without changes.

> "I love it the way it is… I have no complaints. The communication, great. Actually, the motivation to get stuff done is great. The help is great. It's just great." - **Participant**

Other participants expressed a desire to see changes to the core services offered to all ELEVATE participants—most often in the realm of employment services and enhanced child support services. Many participants expressed hope that service offerings such as transportation assistance, resume help, and relief from enforcement actions would continue. Yet, participants who believed the program

> "Deliver on what the program's about. If you're going to say you're going to help someone get a job, help them get a job. Have employers already lined up to work with us." - **Participant**

would make more intensive employment services—particularly job placement and occupational training—as well as participants who expected to receive help with their child support order but did not, called for these more intensive services to be offered more broadly and consistently. Some also wanted future programs to offer more peer-support based parenting groups. Participants' suggestions for expanded future program offerings included more connections to low-cost legal services; expanded mediation resources and co-parenting activities; suspension of child support orders during program participation; and more supports to address barriers to work, including childcare and housing assistance.

While many participants expressed hope that the program would continue, several participants felt differently. These participants viewed the program as an inefficient use of taxpayer resources, duplicative of services available in the community, or misaligned with noncustodial parent needs. One participant felt strongly that noncustodial parents primarily need assistance with legal services to navigate child support and parenting time issues, rather than employment assistance.

> "What I need help with is the courtroom and legal beagle stuff. Attorneys get expensive…the thing I don't see with all of these programs funded by the state is like legal services or representation or anything like that. That's the one thing I've searched up and down, and cannot find anything." - **Participant**

- **Participants greatly appreciated the support and empathy offered by program staff, though some wished for more consistency and communication.**

Participants often found the help and support provided by ELEVATE case managers as motivating and encouraging and appreciated their personalized care and support. Some participants felt that future

programs could be improved by providing information to participants about all services available through ELEVATE proactively and consistently.

Some participants also called for more communication, or more consistency in communication, from the ELEVATE staff to participants. Several participants described wanting more follow-up from ELEVATE staff—either in general, or to let them know the outcome of specific issues. Others described experiencing communication gaps. For example, a few participants shared that parenting activities were mentioned at intake, but they never received a follow-up call about taking part as promised by staff. Several felt uncertain about their status with the program and wished for more communication from program staff. A few participants wanted more communication between ELEVATE and the courts. They felt surprised and confused when they reported their participation in the ELEVATE program in court, and it appeared to them that court officials were not aware of the program. Finally, one participant called for more communication and outreach to parents not yet enrolled in ELEVATE—and particularly noncustodial mothers, who they felt might perceive ELEVATE as father-oriented—to advertise the potential benefits of the program.

> "Really sit down with the people that you're trying to help and let them know all of the things that specific area provides, or really sit down with them and ask them questions like, 'How are you liking your job? How are you liking your court order?' You know, be present with them and ask a lot of questions so you can be providing the best service you want to. That's the whole point of this program, right?" - **Participant**

Summary

Interviews with ELEVATE participants suggest that experiences with program services varied substantially - with regards to the services participants were offered and participated in, their perceptions of the helpfulness of services, and the duration and intensity of their participation. Interviews reveal several factors that affected program participation for parents, including alignment between their needs and goals, programmatic offerings, and life circumstances. These findings suggest that flexibility in offerings is important for ensuring that participants can access services addressing their needs. Findings also suggest that some participants came to the program seeking services related to job placement and training and child support assistance—offerings that only some participants described were offered to them through the program. This suggests an opportunity to facilitate greater consistency in the services made available to participants, within and across participating counties.

Program participants who reported high levels of satisfaction with the program generally described being offered an array of services aligned with their needs, feeling supported by staff, and experiencing helpful and regular communication from the program. Participants whose experiences were less than positive generally described feeling that the program lacked transparency in the services available relative to services advertised, felt services offered did not align with their needs, wanted more clarity and proactive communication, and expressed uncertainty about their status with the program. Interviews also suggest that some enrolled participants' situations may have limited their abilities to engage fully in services, suggesting an opportunity to reconsider alignment between the goals, target population of parents, and eligibility criteria and screening processes in future interventions.

Importantly, regardless of participant experiences with ELEVATE services themselves, most participants we interviewed appreciated the empathy, compassion, and helpfulness demonstrated by the ELEVATE coordinators. These findings speak to the potential for future programs to build on these successes as they embrace new approaches to service delivery in the future. Many program participants expressed

hope that the program would continue, either in its current form or with the inclusion of more intensive employment services, broader access to occupational training, and additional services related to access and visitation and legal needs.

CHAPTER 5. IMPACTS ON CHILD SUPPORT AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

As noted in Chapter 1, the ELEVATE impact evaluation was designed to measure whether participation in ELEVATE was associated with improved outcomes in the domains of child support payment, employment and earnings, parenting behaviors, and attitudes toward the child support program. In response to a request from DCF to expedite the sharing of findings regarding child support and employment outcomes to inform current programming, this report focuses on impacts in these domains, providing results for confirmatory measures drawn from administrative data. Specifically, this chapter answers the following research questions:

1. Do NCPs who were enrolled in ELEVATE demonstrate significantly better change in child support outcomes in the 12 months following enrollment than demographically comparable NCPs in counties without an ELEVATE program?

2. Do NCPs who were enrolled in ELEVATE demonstrate significantly better change in employment and earning outcomes in the 12 months following enrollment than demographically comparable NCPs in counties without an ELEVATE program?

Below, we describe the data and methods used to answer these research questions and report impacts on our primary child support outcomes and primary employment and earnings outcomes. A future report, expected in 2025, will focus on parenting outcomes and outcomes related to NCP interactions with the child support program as measured by the ELEVATE survey.

Data and Methods

The ELEVATE impact evaluation uses a quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of ELEVATE on the pre-determined confirmatory outcomes (i.e., measures in the domains of child support, parenting, employment, and child support engagement). The confirmatory outcomes included in this chapter and how they are measured are indicated in Table 7.

Randomized control trial designs, or RCTs, are considered the gold standard in policy and program evaluation because they are designed to ensure that program participants and non-participants are similar at the time of enrollment, thereby increasing confidence that any changes in outcomes are due to the program rather than due to differences between participants and non-participants. CSPED employed an RCT design. For ELEVATE, DCF chose not to implement an RCT. Therefore, the evaluation uses quasi-experimental methods, which aim to mimic an RCT by isolating the causal effect of the program as precisely as possible using available data.

Table 7: Confirmatory Outcome Measures—Administrative Data

Domain	Definition	Data Source
Child Support Orders	(1) Change in average current monthly orders for all cases, months 1-12, compared to 12-months pre-enrollment	KIDS data from WADC
Child Support Paid	(2) Change in average current monthly payments for all cases, months 1-12, compared to 12-months pre-enrollment	KIDS data from WADC
Child Support Compliance	(3) Change in total monthly current paid for all cases divided by total monthly current due for all cases, months 1-12, compared to 12-months pre-enrollment	KIDS data from WADC
NCP Employment	(4) Change in proportion of quarters employed during quarters 1-4, compared to the four quarters pre-enrollment	UI wage data from WADC
NCP Earnings	(5) Change in average earnings during quarters 1-4, compared to the four quarters pre-enrollment	UI wage data from WADC

Approach

For the administrative data outcomes included in this chapter, the impact analysis uses a difference-in-differences design.[12] This design compares changes in the levels of pre-determined outcomes before and after enrollment in ELEVATE with changes in the levels of the same outcomes, over the same period, for a comparison group designed to be similar to ELEVATE participants. The comparison group was constructed using propensity score matching by first using administrative data to create a sample universe of obligors from non-ELEVATE counties who met the ELEVATE eligibility criteria and then selecting those who were most similar to ELEVATE participants on a variety of relevant characteristics. We describe our data and methods in greater detail throughout the chapter.

Data Sources

The ELEVATE evaluation included a baseline survey administered at the time of enrollment. We use the baseline survey to identify ELEVATE enrollees, their enrollment dates, and their county of enrollment. All other data for this portion of the impact evaluation are drawn from administrative data sources.

The Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC) is the primary data source for the ELEVATE impact evaluation. The WADC contains administrative data drawn from a variety of Wisconsin state programs

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[12]For parenting and child support program interaction outcomes, using survey data, the evaluation will employ a different approach: a pre-/post-analysis, given we will only have data for the treatment group on these outcomes. Results from these analyses will be presented in a forthcoming publication.

across multiple years of program history, all of which can be linked together using individual-level identifiers. For the ELEVATE impact evaluation, many measures are drawn from the KIDS data system housed within the WADC, including monthly measures of child support order amounts, child support payments, arrears balances, and enforcement events. We also use the WADC to identify the county (or counties) in which an obligor has an open child support case.

The WADC also includes quarterly wage records from the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program. We use the UI data to determine obligor employment and wages in the four quarters prior to and following enrollment in ELEVATE.[13]

We use additional measures from the WADC for matching and as control variables in our multivariate regression models. The WADC includes demographic data drawn from administrative programs, such as race and ethnicity measures, birth date (which we use to determine the age of the obligor), and sex. We also use additional programmatic measures from other Wisconsin state data, including indicators of incarceration from the Department of Corrections (DOC), disability program receipt (i.e., Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Income), and FoodShare and BadgerCare participation from Client Assistance for Re-Employment and Economic Support (CARES).

Data elements from KIDS administrative data are drawn from the biannual extracts of the KIDS system and are not available as part of the WADC data files. These include indicators for whether all current support cases are nonmarital or divorce cases, as well as the date of birth of the youngest child on the case.

ELEVATE Evaluation Enrollees Sample

As described in Costanzo et al. (2024), noncustodial parents were eligible to enroll in ELEVATE if they had a current child support order, met established criteria that defined unemployment or underemployment, and demonstrated either nonpayment of current child support orders or being at risk of nonpayment.[14] For purposes of the evaluation, NCPs also had to be receiving child support services in one of the five ELEVATE counties (or live close enough to access ELEVATE services), over 18 years old, fluent in English, have a valid SSN, and be medically able to work (i.e., not currently receiving disability benefits).

The 992 participants who enrolled in the ELEVATE evaluation comprise a diverse group of obligors. With its rich measures, the baseline survey captures this diversity across multiple domains;[15] the

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[13]Because we use data from the Wisconsin UI program, we do not have wage or employment records for workers who are not covered by the UI system. This includes workers who work outside the state of Wisconsin, are self-employed, or independent contractors. Employment outside the formal labor market, including "under the table" or other informal employment is also not included. Finally, wages from certain employers (e.g., some religious institutions) are also excluded. The survey-based outcomes report will use a self-report measure of employment that may capture some of these alternate employment situations.

[14]The ELEVATE Policies and Procedures manual (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2020) details the established criteria. Non-payment or risk of non-payment is defined as the following: "(a) the parent paid less than 50% of the ordered amount for at least 1 month (including those that have made no payments for 1 month) or (b) they have made zero payments since order was entered or modified." Unemployment or underemployment is defined as a self-report of "(a) being unemployed at the time their court order is entered or modified, or (b) that being unemployed or underemployed causes them to be unable to pay or puts them at risk of being unable to pay, and/or (c) that improving their employment situation could help improve their compliance with their child support order." For more information about enrollment criteria, see Vogel et al., 2021.

[15]See Costanzo et al. (2024), which details the characteristics of parents participating in the ELEVATE program at the time of enrollment using the ELEVATE baseline survey.

administrative data offers comparatively less insight into ELEVATE enrollees. Demographic information about the sample of enrollees using the administrative data is described below in Table 8.

ELEVATE participants were on average just over 35 years old at the time of enrollment. Most were male. Obligors came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. On average, ELEVATE participants had 1.7 current support cases, and most had only nonmarital cases (74.7%). Participants owed, on average, just under $400 each month across all open support cases. Most participants received FoodShare benefits in the year prior to enrollment, and participants were employed, on average, just over half of the four quarters preceding enrollment (2.27 quarters).

Table 8: Full ELEVATE Evaluation Sample (n=992)

Variables	Mean
Age at Enrollment	35.32
Male	89.5%
Race	
White	55.0%
Black	26.6%
Hispanic	13.5%
Other	5.9%
Number of Open Cases	1.66
All Cases Are Nonmarital	74.7%
Age of Youngest Child	7.29
SNAP Receipt Prior to Enrollment	65.3%
Monthly Order Amount (at Enrollment)	$391.78
Monthly Payment Amount	$232.80
Quarters of Employment (of Last 4 Quarters)	2.27
County	
Brown	22.3%
Kenosha	17.1%
Marathon	26.5%
Racine	19.3%
Wood	14.8%
Enrollment Cohort	
Cohort 1 (Jan–June 2020)	8.7%
Cohort 2 (July–Dec 2020)	13.2%
Cohort 3 (Jan–June 2021)	17.7%
Cohort 4 (July–Dec 2021)	22.9%
Cohort 5 (Jan–June 2022)	21.9%
Cohort 6 (July–Dec 2022)	15.6%

Comparison Group Universe

To construct a comparison group of obligors by matching, we first created a sample universe of obligors, or obligors who could potentially be part of the comparison group, using the ELEVATE evaluation enrollment criteria. We started with obligors over 18 years of age with open current support cases in non-ELEVATE counties in Wisconsin during the ELEVATE enrollment period (2020-2022). We excluded incarcerated obligors and obligors who received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security

Disability Income (SSDI) for their own disability to omit obligors who were not likely to be seeking employment and who likely would not have been eligible to enroll in ELEVATE.

We were also purposeful in excluding all obligors with any open current support case in one of the five ELEVATE counties.[16] Even though not all eligible obligors in the five counties participated in ELEVATE, given the substantial change in service approach taken by the counties, we were concerned about the possibility of spillover effects, in that other obligors in ELEVATE counties may have experienced differences in services, similar to the intervention received by ELEVATE participants. Including these obligors in our comparison group sample would make it difficult to isolate the effect of ELEVATE.

To further proxy the ELEVATE enrollment criteria, we restricted the sample universe to obligors who were behind on their child support or at risk of becoming behind. In practice, the counties had some discretion over how to operationalize these criteria. For the impact analysis, this meant that we included NCPs who either made payments equivalent to less than 50% of all current orders for at least 1 month in the 12 months prior to the constructed enrollment date *or* whose formal earnings in the 12 months prior to the constructed enrollment date were less than half of their total child support obligation. To do this, we randomly assigned each obligor a synthetic enrollment date that lay within the ELEVATE evaluation enrollment period (Gifford et al., 2020). This resulted in a sample universe of 105,889 obligors who could potentially be included in the comparison group.

Propensity Score Matching (PSM)

After we created the sample universe of eligible obligors based on available administrative data, we used matching to construct the comparison group. Matching methods attempt to replicate RCTs by achieving balance on observed characteristics between treatment and comparison groups. We considered two different matching approaches: (1) traditional Propensity Score Matching (PSM) and (2) Inverse Probability of Treatment Weighting (IPTW). As the use of PSM yielded the least biased comparison group, we used this method to construct the matched comparison group.

Using the sample universe of eligible obligors and ELEVATE participants (n = 105,889), we estimated a model predicting the likelihood of enrolling in ELEVATE, resulting in a propensity score, or estimated likelihood of being in the treatment group, for each obligor in the sample universe. Table 9 includes the measures from the administrative data included in our PSM model. We selected these measures because of their potential association with the likelihood of enrolling in ELEVATE, or a program similar to ELEVATE (e.g., Cancian et al., 2019; Costanzo et al., 2024).

We used nearest-neighbor matching without replacement and a caliper of 0.04, which means each ELEVATE enrollee was matched to its nearest (i.e., "most similar" as determined by the propensity score) obligor within the sample universe. These "most similar" obligors make up our comparison group.[17]

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[16]This also allowed us to exclude any former SPSK participants from the comparison group.

[17]Following best practices, we drop 26 participants for whom we do not have an acceptable match in the comparison group. This results in a final analytic sample of 966 ELEVATE participants.

Table 9: Administrative Data Measures Predicting Treatment, Matching Model

Category	Measures
Demographics	NCP Sex
	NCP Race
	NCP Age
Child Support	Age of Youngest Child
	Compliance in Year Before Enrollment
	Average Monthly Payment in Year Before Enrollment
	Number of Months with Payments in Year Before Enrollment
	Average Monthly Order Amount in Year Before Enrollment
	Only Nonmarital Cases
	Number of KIDS cases
	Arrears Balance as of Enrollment Date
	Contempt Enforcement Event in Year Before Enrollment
	Drivers' License Enforcement Event in Year Before Enrollment
Earnings & Employment	Number of Quarters Employed in Year Before Enrollment
	Annual Earnings in Year Before Enrollment
	Child Support Burden in Year Before Enrollment[18]
Other Benefits	Food Share Receipt in the Year Before Enrollment
	Medicaid Enrollment in the Year before Enrollment

Figure 7 shows the standardized difference (i.e., a percent-based measure showing how substantially group averages diverge) between ELEVATE participants and obligors in the comparison group across the matching measures. Prior to matching, ELEVATE participants and obligors in the sample universe (or obligors who could potentially be part of the comparison group) differed significantly across almost all measures included in our matching model. Importantly, they differed on various demographics, child support case characteristics and payments, and employment. These differences suggest that ELEVATE participants may be distinctively different than the overall population that was eligible for ELEVATE, and verify the need for a matching strategy to make the treatment and comparison groups more similar.

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[18]Burden is measured as the proportion of child support due over earnings.

Figure 7: Standardized Differences across Coefficients for Matched and Unmatched Sample
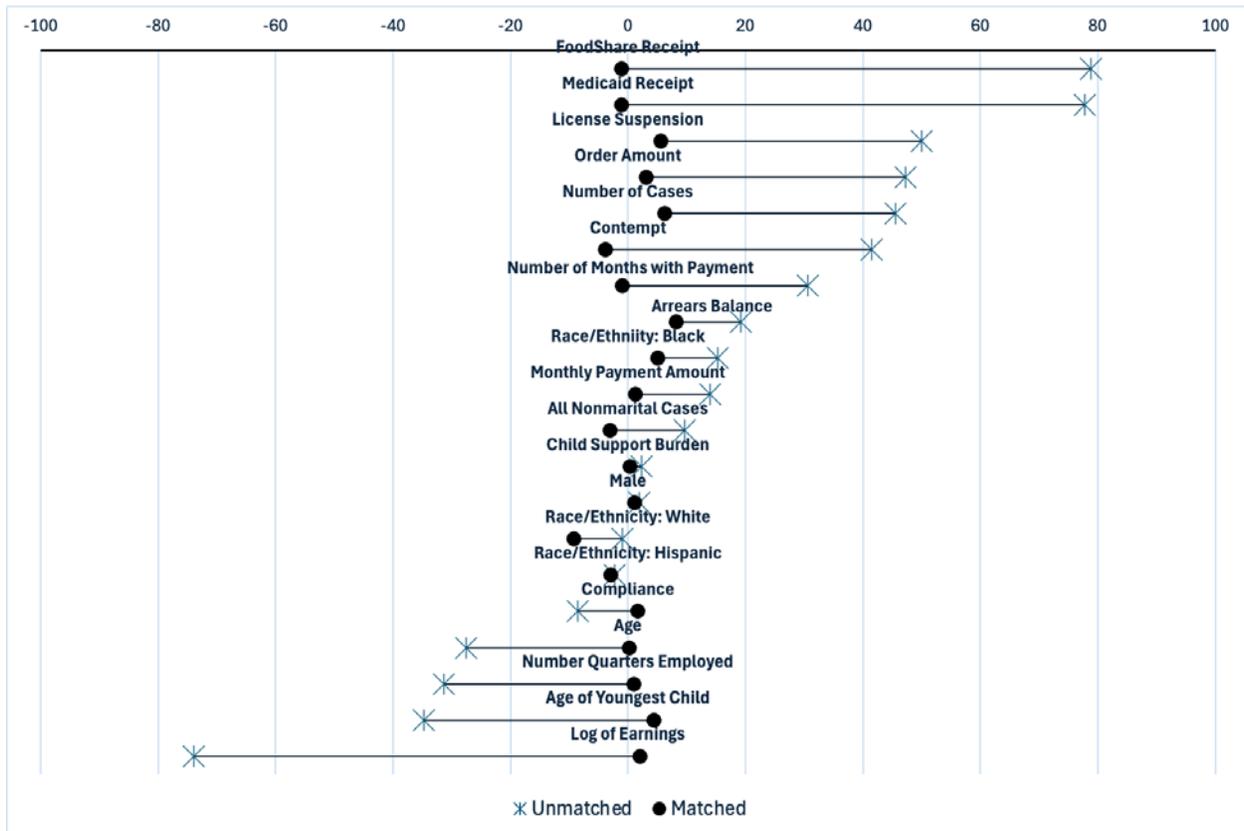
After matching, the standardized bias for the measures in our matching model converged to near 0%, indicating similar averages between ELEVATE enrollees and obligors in the comparison group. This suggests that we were able to reduce bias and achieve acceptable balance. In addition to matching ELEVATE enrollees to comparable obligors in the sample universe, the matching process produced weights for participants in the comparison group, which also give larger or smaller weight to members in the comparison sample depending on their similarity to the ELEVATE sample as a whole. The weighted means for the ELEVATE group and the matched comparison group are shown in Table 10. After matching, there are very few statistically significant differences in overall characteristics between ELEVATE participants and obligors in the comparison group, which indicates that we achieved balance and that the ELEVATE enrollees and the comparison group are well-matched statistically. As such, we can be more confident that any impacts on outcomes are due to the ELEVATE program.

Table 10: Impact Analysis Sample, including Matching Weights

Variables	ELEVATE Mean	Comparison Group Mean	Diff	P-value
Age at Enrollment	35.10	34.60	-0.50	0.25
Male	0.90	0.90	0.00	0.63
White	0.55	0.57	0.03	0.64
Black	0.23	0.22	-0.01	0.78
Hispanic	0.14	0.14	0.01	0.99
Other Race/Ethnicity	0.08	0.07	-0.01	0.46
Number of Open Cases	1.67	1.71	0.04	0.88
All Cases Are Nonmarital	0.76	0.79	0.03	0.14
Age of Youngest Child	7.2	7.0	-0.2	0.36
SNAP Receipt Prior to Enrollment	0.64	0.66	0.02	0.50
Medicaid Prior to Enrollment	0.64	0.66	0.02	0.50
Any Enforcement Action	0.31	0.32	0.01	0.80
Number of Quarters Employed	2.70	2.76	0.06	0.35
Annual Earnings	$11,633.86	$12,693.15	-$1,059.29	0.48
Number of Months with Any Payment	5.85	5.88	0.03	0.89
Arrears Balance	$20,455	$19,642	-$813	0.69
Child Support Burden	2.07	1.77	-0.30	0.37
Average Monthly Payment	$1,315	$1,356	$40	0.88
Average Monthly Order	$417	$423	$5	0.91

Notes: The "Other race/ethnicity" group includes individuals who identify as American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander; as two or more race or ethnicity groups (excluding non-white Hispanics, who are part of the Hispanic race/ethnicity category); and those who did not indicate belonging to any race or ethnicity group. Annual earnings were top coded, where values greater than the value at the 90th percentile were replaced with the latter value.

Impact Analysis: Difference-in-Differences

We used a difference-in-differences (DD) design to evaluate the impact of ELEVATE on our confirmatory outcome measures (see Table 7). Difference-in-differences approaches evaluate policy and program changes by comparing the change in outcomes for two groups over time, where one group is exposed to the policy or program (treatment group) and the other group (comparison group) is not. Though both the treatment and comparison groups might experience a change in outcomes between the two time points (e.g., improved employment outcomes in an improved labor market), DD looks at the difference in the magnitude of the change between the treatment and comparison groups. In this way, DD accounts for both characteristics that may differ between the two groups and any other changes that may result from the passage of time, ideally isolating the effect of the policy change or program on the treatment group. In the ELEVATE impact evaluation, we compare changes in outcomes between the sample of ELEVATE enrollees and obligors in our matched comparison group.

Table 8 described the confirmatory outcome measures for the impact evaluation. We used KIDS data available through the WADC to measure child support orders and payments, and to construct a measure of compliance. KIDS data includes monthly order amounts and detailed monthly payment receipts for all open child support cases in Wisconsin. We sum orders and payments across all open current support cases for obligors in our sample. To construct the measure of compliance, we divide the payment amount by the order amount. We also used the UI data to measure the obligor's employment status and wages.

The pre-treatment period for child support measures, which are measured monthly, was the 12 months prior to ELEVATE enrollment for the ELEVATE participants and the 12 months prior to the synthetic enrollment date for the comparison group. The post-treatment period for these measures was the 12 months following the enrollment date (either ELEVATE or synthetic). The post period began the first month after the month of enrollment, thereby excluding the month of enrollment. For employment and earnings outcomes, which are measured quarterly, the pre-treatment period was four quarters prior to enrollment and the post-treatment period was the four quarters after enrollment.

We also included a parsimonious set of covariates intended to control for any potential differences between the ELEVATE participants and obligors in the comparison group. These include obligor sex, obligor age at date of enrollment, obligor race/ethnicity, number of open KIDS cases, an indicator for whether the obligor has only nonmarital cases, and the age of the obligor's youngest child. Further, we included a county-level control for whether the county had a Children First program as, theoretically, this may be correlated with both ELEVATE enrollment and our confirmatory outcomes. We also included cohort fixed effects; the latter is based on which six-month period the obligor enrolled in ELEVATE. As a sensitivity test, we included county fixed effects which allowed the model to control for differences across counties that we cannot observe but are stable throughout the study period. Similarly, cohort fixed effects control for characteristics that we cannot observe but change across time uniformly across the entire state.

Our analytic model is represented in the equation below:

$$y_{it}=\beta0+\beta1*Post-Enrollment_t+\beta2*ELEVATE_i+\beta3*(Post*ELEVATE)_{it}+x\gamma_i+x\gamma_c+\delta_c+\delta_q+\varepsilon_{it}$$

in which y_{it} represents the confirmatory outcome for NCP i at time t; Post−Enrollment$_t$ indicates whether time t lies in the period following ELEVATE enrollment; ELEVATE$_i$ indicates whether the NCP$_i$ is enrolled in the ELEVATE program; Post∗ELEVATEit is the difference-in-differences indicator (whether NCP$_i$ is enrolled in the ELEVATE program and time$_t$ lies in the period following the NCP's enrollment in ELEVATE). $x\gamma_i$ represents individual-level covariate measures described previously. $x\gamma_c$ represents the county-level indicator for whether the county in which the NCP receives services operates a Children First program. δ_c represents county-level fixed effects. δ_q represents cohort fixed effects. Each β in the equation reflects the effect of each study variable on the confirmatory outcome. β3 represents the effect that enrolling in ELEVATE has on the treatment group, which contains NCPs that enrolled in ELEVATE.

If ELEVATE is effective in supporting NCPs to make child support payments or increase compliance with child support orders, we expect that the ELEVATE group will have a greater increase in average monthly child support payments and compliance than the comparison group. Similarly, if ELEVATE is successful in supporting obligors in employment and earnings, we would expect that the ELEVATE group will have a greater increase in average employment and earnings than the comparison group.

Importantly, because we are relying on quasi-experimental methods, we are limited in our ability to make causal claims about the ELEVATE program. In other words, although these methods allow us to isolate the impact of ELEVATE more precisely than a purely descriptive analysis, without an RCT we still may not be confident that any differences in confirmatory measures between the pre and post period are indeed due to the ELEVATE program rather than some other unmeasured cause.

In addition to our primary specification, we conducted sensitivity analyses for each outcome. These included running the model without individual covariates, with county fixed effects, and without cohort

fixed effects. To test the sensitivity of our estimates to the operationalization of our post-treatment period, we also estimated models where the post-treatment period included the month of enrollment for child support measures and the quarter of enrollment for employment and earnings measures. Finally, we estimated models with and without the weights generated by the matching process.

To share our findings, we first present a graphic depiction of the unadjusted, raw means for the ELEVATE and comparison groups in the periods before and after enrollment. These means do not include statistical controls to account for potential differences between the two groups, and we do not conduct statistical tests on the means. We present these for ease of interpretation.

Our main findings are presented in typical difference-in-differences tables. These include the regression-adjusted means for the ELEVATE and comparison groups in the period prior to enrollment and the difference between the two groups, the regression adjusted means for the ELEVATE and comparison groups in the period following enrollment and the difference between the two groups, and, finally, our difference-in-differences estimates.

Findings

Child Support Impacts

The goal of ELEVATE was to increase obligor's compliance with child support orders, thereby potentially increasing regular child support payments. Thus, confirmatory child support outcomes were selected in advance to measure the impact of ELEVATE participation on child support payments and compliance. These measures include current child support orders, current child support payments, and child support compliance, defined as the ratio of payments to orders.

- **ELEVATE had no impact on NCPs' average monthly child support order amount.**

In theory, ELEVATE may have resulted in *lower* child support order amounts by "right-sizing" of orders, as was the case with CSPED (Cancian et al., 2019). If, however, ELEVATE produced increased employment and wages, we might expect *higher* order amounts; although, we might anticipate any increase in orders to occur later in the follow-up period. We found that, on average, ELEVATE did not have an impact on the amount that obligors were expected to pay each month. Considering the basic means (non-regression-adjusted), the mean monthly order amounts for ELEVATE participants and the comparison group in the 12 months prior to ELEVATE were statistically equal at $417 and $423, respectively. Neither group experienced a statistically significant change in the post-period (unadjusted amounts = $429 and $418, respectively). This also holds true in our difference-in-differences analysis. We find that ELEVATE participants with an order owed approximately the same regression-adjusted amount ($306) each month across all cases in the 12 months before ELEVATE enrollment and owed a statistically similar amount in the 12 months following enrollment.[19] This pattern is similar, and not statistically distinguishable from, the pattern of order amounts for the comparison group, as depicted below in Figure 8 (unadjusted) and Table 11.

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[19]Counties could enroll participants in ELEVATE as early-intervention cases. As a result, 1.8% of participants in our analytic sample (n=14) had no order/payment/compliance data available in the 12 months prior to enrollment), and an additional 2.2% had an order in at least one but less than 6 months prior to enrollment. We treat these values as missing rather than zeros in the pre-period. We conduct sensitivity tests without these cases and find similar results.

Figure 8: Monthly Child Support Order Amounts, Unadjusted Means

Table 11: Impact of ELEVATE on Monthly Child Support Order Amounts

	Pre			Post			Difference-in-Differences Estimate
	Comparison	**ELEVATE**	**Difference**	**Comparison**	**ELEVATE**	**Difference**	
Monthly Order Amount	$295.10 ($32.84)	$305.99 ($33.49)	$10.44 ($11.11)	$298.48 ($32.93)	$306.00 ($33.57)	$7.53 ($11.15)	**-$2.96** ($12.55)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10

The estimates for order amounts are not sensitive to any of the alternative models. Results are robust with the exclusion of cohort fixed effects, individual covariates, and matching weights. They also are not sensitive to the timing of the post-ELEVATE enrollment period (i.e., if we instead begin the post-period at the month of enrollment rather than the month after, our estimates remain similar) nor the inclusion of county fixed effects.

- **ELEVATE had no impact on NCPs' average monthly child support payments.**

As shown in unadjusted estimates in Figure 9 and our difference-in-differences estimates in Table 12, ELEVATE also did not have an impact on monthly child support payments. On average, without any regression adjustments, ELEVATE participants paid approximately $315 each month in current support in the 12 months prior to ELEVATE enrollment, and the comparison group paid a statistically similar amount ($356). Neither group increased their payments by a statistically significant amount in the 12 months after ELEVATE enrollment. These results hold in our difference-in-differences analysis. ELEVATE

participants paid, on average, the regression-adjusted amount of $159 in current support each month across all of their open current support cases in the 12 months before ELEVATE enrollment. This amount that was not statistically different from the comparison group ($156, regression-adjusted). Neither group of obligors increased their average monthly payment by a statistically significantly different amount in the 12 months following ELEVATE enrollment, paying a regression-adjusted average of $159 for ELEVATE enrollees and $162 for the comparison group each month. Therefore, we find no impact of ELEVATE on average monthly current support payments. This result was robust to all of our sensitivity analyses, including county fixed-effects, periodicity, and unweighted estimates.

We note that we also estimated a model with an outcome of the number of months with any payment. We intended this non-confirmatory measure as a proxy for regularity of payments. As with average monthly payment amounts, we did not find any impact on regularity of payments.

Figure 9: Monthly Child Support Payment Amounts, Unadjusted Means

Table 12: Impact of ELEVATE on Monthly Child Support Payment Amounts

	Pre			Post			Difference-in-Differences Estimate
	Comparison	**ELEVATE**	**Difference**	**Comparison**	**ELEVATE**	**Difference**	
Monthly Current Support Payment	$156.26 ($50.16)	$159.25 ($51.07)	$2.99 ($17.66)	$161.70 ($50.21)	$159.39 ($51.39)	-$2.32 ($17.71)	**-$5.30** ($19.14)
Number of Months with Any Payment#	11.63 (0.41)	11.69 (0.33)	0.06 (0.20)	11.65 (0.41)	11.75 (0.32)	0.11 (0.19)	0.05 (0.17)

Notes: # *Number of Months with Any Payment* is not a confirmatory measure for the ELEVATE impact analysis. It is included to be responsive to interest in regularity of payments. Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10

- **ELEVATE had no impact on NCPs' child support compliance.**

ELEVATE had no impact on either orders or payments, the two measures that make up the confirmatory child support compliance measure; thus, ELEVATE also did not have an impact on overall child support compliance (see Figure 10 and Table 13). Across all models and estimates, unadjusted or adjusted, on average, neither ELEVATE participants nor obligors in the comparison group experienced a statistically significant change in child support compliance. Figure 10 displays the unadjusted means for both groups and suggests no change in compliance for either ELEVATE or comparison group participants. Considering our difference-in-differences estimates, ELEVATE participants paid a regression-adjusted average of 73% of their current child support due each month in the 12 months prior to enrollment; the comparison group paid a statistically comparable 77%. In the 12 months following enrollment in ELEVATE, ELEVATE participants had an average regression-adjusted monthly compliance rate of 74%, and the comparison group continued to have a compliance rate of 77%. Therefore, we find no statistically significant impact on the change in monthly child support compliance. Considering total compliance—that is the ratio of the sum of all payments to all orders across the full 12 months of pre- and post-enrollment periods rather than the monthly average—we similarly did not find a change in compliance, nor an impact of ELEVATE on compliance. These estimates were also robust to all specifications.

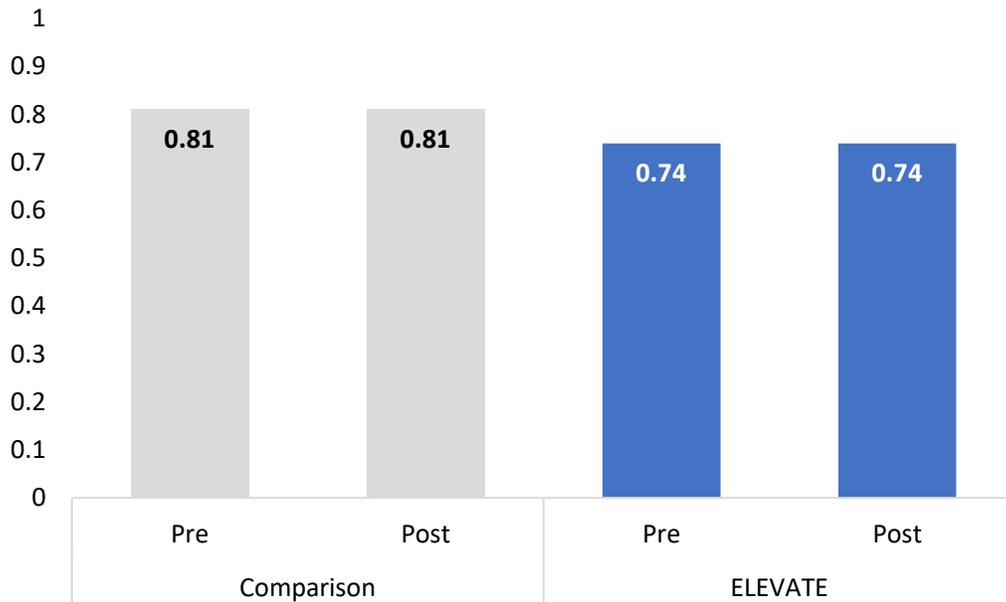**Figure 10: Average Monthly Compliance, Unadjusted Means**

Table 13: Impact of ELEVATE on Child Support Compliance

	Pre			Post			Difference-in-Differences Estimate
	Comparison	ELEVATE	Difference	Comparison	ELEVATE	Difference	
Monthly Compliance	0.77	0.73	-0.04	0.77	0.74	-0.04	**-0.00**
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Annual Compliance#	0.46	0.40	-0.06	0.46	0.41	-0.05	0.01
	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.05)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.05)	(0.05)

Notes: # *Annual Compliance* is not a confirmatory measure for the ELEVATE impact analysis. It is included as a robustness check. Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10

Employment and Earnings Impacts

One of the primary avenues through which ELEVATE aimed to increase child support payments and compliance was through improved employment and earnings outcomes, particularly in the formal labor market. Increased earnings and employment in the formal labor market allows for the withholding of child support directly from an obligor's paycheck. The confirmatory earnings and employment outcomes

for the ELEVATE impact analysis are the obligor's employment status and earnings. We consider different operationalizations of earnings as sensitivity tests.[20]

- **ELEVATE had no impact on employment for participants.**

As illustrated in Figure 11 and Table 14 below, our estimates indicate that while both ELEVATE participants and obligors in the comparison group experienced an increase in the proportion of the four quarters in which they were employed following enrollment (or synthetic enrollment for the comparison group) compared to the four quarters preceding enrollment, this increase was not statistically significant for either group of obligors, nor was it different between the groups. Additionally, as shown in Table 14, the difference-in-differences estimate indicates that the change for the comparison group and the change for the ELEVATE group were not statistically significantly different from one another. Results are robust across all sensitivity tests.

We also estimated the impact on the non-confirmatory outcome of whether the participant had any employment in the four quarters following enrollment. Similarly, we find no impact. ELEVATE enrollees and members of the comparison group had similar regression-adjusted levels of employment in the four quarters preceding enrollment (80% and 79%, respectively), and the pattern of results indicates a slight, though non-statistically significant increase in regression-adjusted level for both groups (84% and 82%, respectively). Again, these estimates were not statistically significant, nor were patterns of change in any employment different between the two groups.

Figure 11: Proportion of Four Quarters Employed, Unadjusted Means

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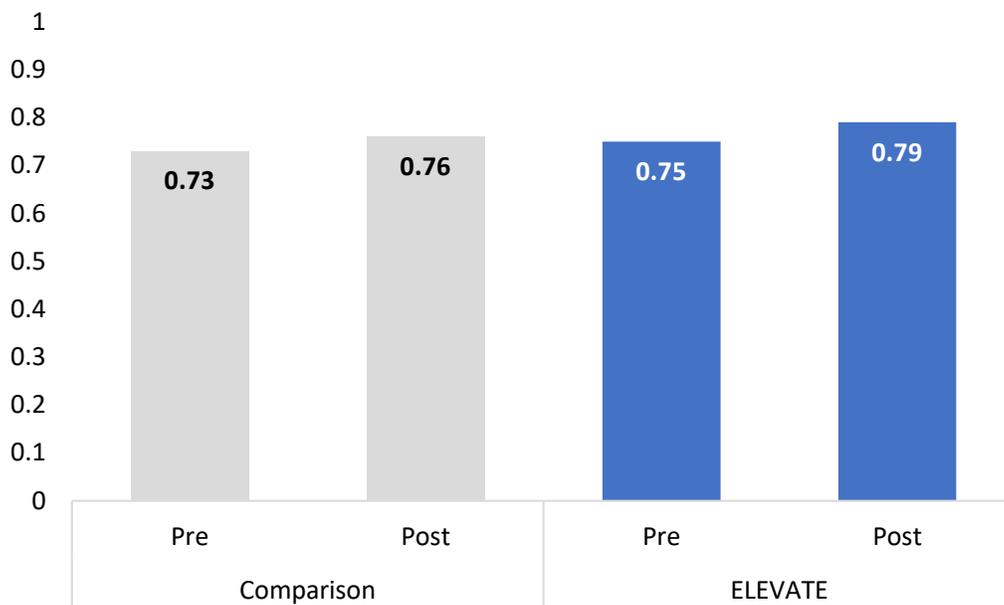
[20] Our primary measure of earnings is a linear measure, although we also tested a logged measure of earnings to account for the non-normal distribution of earnings in our sample.

Table 14: Impact of ELEVATE on Employment

	Pre			Post			Difference-in-Differences Estimate
	Comparison	ELEVATE	Difference	Comparison	ELEVATE	Difference	
Proportion of Four Quarters Employed	0.83 (0.08)	0.85 (0.08)	0.01 (0.03)	0.86 (0.08)	0.89 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)
Any Employment #	0.79 (0.13)	0.80 (0.13)	0.01 (0.04)	0.82 (0.14)	0.84 (0.13)	0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)

Notes: # *Any Employment* is not a confirmatory measure for the ELEVATE impact analysis. It is included to be responsive to interest in other operationalizations of employment. This estimate also is not statistically significant. Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10

- **ELEVATE participants increased their quarterly earnings at a statistically significantly lower rate than participants in the comparison group.**

As with employment, ELEVATE enrollees and obligors in the comparison group both experienced an overall increase in average quarterly earnings during the evaluation period (see Figure 12 and Table 15). Unlike the employment outcomes, however, these changes were statistically significant. Considering the unadjusted means, ELEVATE participants increased quarterly wages from approximately $2,900 to $3,600, and participants in the comparison group increased quarterly wages from approximately $3,300 to $4,600. The unadjusted means indicated a larger increase in wages for the comparison group, and this difference holds and is statistically significant in our difference-in-differences analysis. Participants in ELEVATE increased their average regression-adjusted quarterly wages by $726, from $3,477 in the four quarters prior to enrollment—equivalent to approximately $13,908 annually—to $4,203, or approximately $16,812 annually, in the four quarters following ELEVATE participation. Obligors in the comparison group increased their earnings at a higher rate. These obligors earned a regression-adjusted average of $3,645 in quarterly wages, or $14,580 annually, in the four quarters prior to their synthetic enrollment date, an amount that was not statistically significantly different from ELEVATE enrollees. In the four quarters after, they increased their quarterly wages by approximately $1,350. The difference-in-differences estimates suggest that the comparison group increased their wages at a marginally statistically significantly higher rate compared to ELEVATE participants. This estimate holds across most specifications, including when we use a logged measure of earnings.

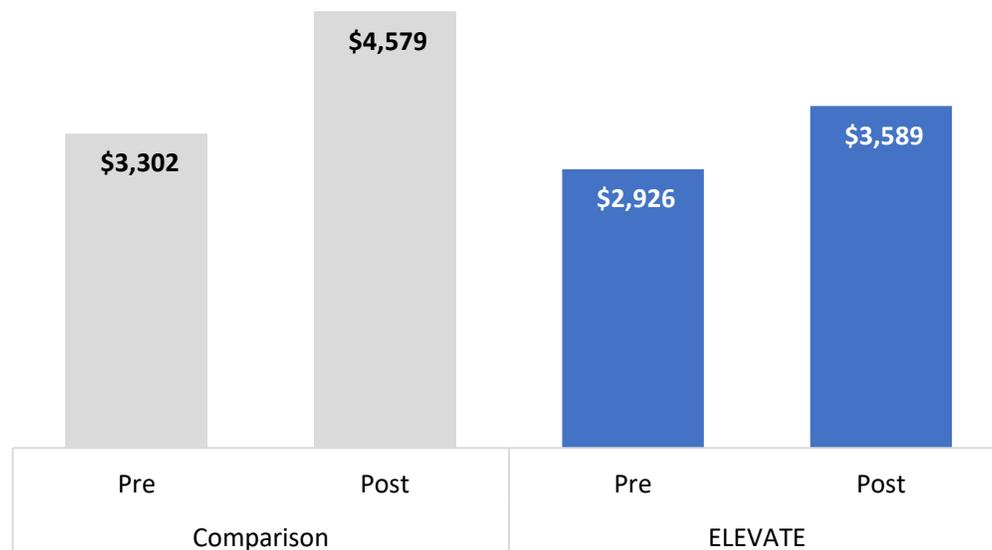**Figure 12: Average Quarterly Earnings, Unadjusted Means**

Table 15: Impact of ELEVATE on Average Quarterly Earnings

	Pre			Post			Difference-in-Differences Estimate
	Comparison	ELEVATE	Difference	Comparison	ELEVATE	Difference	
Quarterly Earnings	$3,645.25 ($853.63)	$3,476.74 ($810.81)	**-$168.50** ($306.52)	$4,996.84 ($863.80)	$4,203.27 ($805.44)	-$793.57 ($352.31)	**-$656.06*** ($357.09)
Quarterly earnings, logged#	7.29 (0.38)	7.28 (0.35)	-0.01 (0.12)	7.82 (0.38)	7.56 (0.35)	-0.26 (0.12)	-0.25* (0.04)
Proportion of Four Quarters Employed	0.83 (0.08)	0.85 (0.08)	**0.01** (0.03)	0.86 (0.08)	0.89 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	**0.01** (0.04)
Any Employment#	0.79 (0.13)	0.80 (0.13)	0.01 (0.04)	0.82 (0.14)	0.84 (0.13)	0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)

Notes: # Our confirmatory measure of earnings did not specify use of logged or non-logged earnings; we include the logged measure as a sensitivity analysis. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Earnings are winsorized at the 90% percentile. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10

Summary

Although ELEVATE participants demonstrated some positive changes in earnings during their time in the program, they experienced smaller increases in earnings than those experienced by similar obligors in non-ELEVATE counties. In other words, the program itself does not seem to have caused significant changes in earnings. Participation in ELEVATE also was not associated with any statistically significant changes in employment or child support outcomes (e.g., orders, payments, or compliance). We turn, now, to our discussion of these results.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

ELEVATE was a child support-led intervention designed for parents behind in their child support payments, to increase child support payment via improved employment and a set of additional services. ELEVATE was an effort to build on the previous SPSK program in Wisconsin and to try the intervention in new settings. Core program elements remained consistent (i.e., case management, enhanced child support services, employment services, and parenting services); however, implementation analysis, service data, and participant interviews suggest, by design, a good deal of discretion and variation in which services were provided to participants. In addition, counties developed new community partnerships and case-working strategies, partially based on learnings from SPSK.

This report shares findings from implementation analysis, service data analysis, and participant interviews, and uses administrative data and a quasi-experimental evaluation design to measure program impacts on employment and child support outcomes. Taken together, the findings suggest that child support agencies built strong partnerships across organizations, and engaged in creative, thoughtful case management work and relationship building with program participants. However, the findings also suggest that like SPSK, ELEVATE did not improve earnings, employment, child support payments, or child support compliance. Thus, two questions remain: Why don't we observe impacts on these outcomes? and What can we learn from the current evaluation as the state considers innovations in programming to support families with NCPs behind in their child support payments?

One possibility is that ELEVATE, like SPSK, might not have provided the intensity of services—or the right set of services—to lead to changes in outcomes on average across program participants. For example, findings from the CSPED evaluation suggested that ultimately, SPSK operated as more of a "light touch" program that might not have provided intensive enough services to address systemic issues and the multiple, complex barriers to employment and child support payment experienced by many enrollees. Limitations of the service data collected during the ELEVATE evaluation make it difficult to precisely measure dosage of the program; however, findings from the ELEVATE implementation analysis, participant interviews, and the service data we have suggest that child support agencies worked to individualize service provision for parents, but this did not necessarily result in *more* services or, in some cases, the services that parents desired or felt they needed.[21] Interviews with ELEVATE participants indicate that some participants felt that ELEVATE did not offer services that aligned with their needs, and some found that services they believed to be available through the program prior to enrollment were not ultimately available for them. This mismatch between expectations and offerings led to disillusionment and disengagement for some participants. Future programs could consider opportunities to clarify programmatic goals, expectations, and offerings prior to enrollment to increase alignment between programs and participants as one strategy for improving engagement.

Moving the needle on child support and employment outcomes may also require longer engagement with the program. For example, taken together, data suggest that at least some participants mostly received services for a brief time, primarily during and shortly after enrollment the program. The ELEVATE program manual also outlined "dis-enrollment" criteria and processes. DCF gave counties latitude to determine the criteria under which disenrollment should occur and, given this flexibility, counties varied in their use of this practice. It is possible that this design element may have discouraged

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[21]We look forward to further exploring additional information about service receipt using the ELEVATE survey, which asks parents a series of pre- and post-enrollment questions about service receipt. Findings from this analysis will be included in a future published report.

long-term follow-up after parents initially became employed or made an on-time, full child support payment. Many parents faced barriers that made it difficult to retain jobs long-term, and maintaining or increasing child support payments may have required growth in income over time. Additionally, although many staff and participants gave examples of effective ongoing communication and assistance, staff also often noted challenges in keeping parents engaged with services long-term. Ultimately, it may be the case that the expected timeline for change in employment outcomes and thus, impact on child support payments, is longer than measured here (12 months post-enrollment). Future programming might consider a clearer operational definition of expected service provision, and future evaluation might consider a longer follow-up period for outcome measurement.

Other data suggest the potential need for different or more intensive employment services that provide direct pathways to full-time, adequately paying employment. For example, information about employment services suggests that counties usually provided job search/pre-employment activities and work supports such as gas cards. While such services may have been helpful to individual participants, they may not have differentiated ELEVATE from other employment programs and services available to all parents in the community. Additionally, anecdotally, staff sometimes relayed instances of ELEVATE participants gaining employment shortly after enrollment (i.e., before receiving much in the way of services), pointing to a favorable post-COVID labor market. These factors may help explain the lack of significant differences in employment outcomes between the treatment and comparison groups.

Indeed, most ELEVATE parents had worked in the prior year, and most were working 12-months post-enrollment. The fact that earnings and child support payments did not appear to increase as a result of the program suggest that job quality could be an issue. Demographic data suggest low levels of training and education in the ELEVATE population, but service data suggest low levels of engagement with job training and education programs that might lead to higher-quality jobs. Both staff and parents noted challenges for participation in such programs (e.g., lack of program funding for such services; parents not being able to meet financial obligations for unpaid experiences). Data also suggest low levels of direct job placement and employment follow-up services. Considerations for future programming might include delegated funding to support additional partnerships with high road employers, apprenticeship programs, scaffolding services that support employment and job retention, and policy changes that could support program participation such as adjusting child support orders or providing stipends to parents.

The most reliable service data available—those measuring enhanced child support services—also suggest a small potential for program impact. For example, less than a third of parents (30%) received order modifications in the year after enrolling in ELEVATE. In addition, few parents received license suspension reversals or arrears forgiveness. It is unclear how many ELEVATE participants upon enrollment were eligible for such services (e.g., whether they already had minimum order, did not have driver's license suspensions, did not have arrears). Also, importantly, ELEVATE appears to have been happening in the context of broader shifts toward more service-based (and less punitive) approaches in the child support system (Vogel & Hossein, 2022), which may explain the small number of parents receiving such services via ELEVATE. This means that the "difference" in what ELEVATE parents received compared to the full population of parents in the changed counterfactual was smaller, and, thus, the unique impact of the program may be weaker. Given these results, the state might also consider adjusting the target audience for future programming—i.e., focusing on those cases that are uniquely eligible for enhanced child support services.

At a broader level, both staff and parents indicated the need to address systemic issues impacting NCPs' well-being and parenting, in addition to their abilities to find and maintain quality employment and pay child support. Evidence suggests there may have been some "mismatch" in what services parents received and what services might be needed to address such issues, such as legal services (to address both prior engagement with the justice system, as well as current child support and visitation issues), help with housing stability, and AODA treatment. Counties' abilities to partner with outside agencies that provided such services varied widely, and program dollars do not appear to have flowed directly to service provision in these areas. In addition, while service data suggest an abundance of related "referrals," it remains unclear whether parents were able to truly access or benefit from the services to which they were referred. For example, some parent interviews participants described receiving only a resource list without a facilitated connection. The previous CSPED evaluation suggested the importance of warm handoffs and follow-through for facilitating effective interagency connections (Noyes et al., 2018). In addition, previous studies suggest that some of the services in highest demand (e.g., legal, housing, AODA, mental health) may be least available in communities (Vogel & Hossein, 2022).

Certainly, the fact that ELEVATE was implemented during the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic may also have impacted program participation and parent outcomes. Child support agencies were forced to pivot quickly and learn to provide services virtually. Parents were forced to navigate a tenuous job market and unprecedented co-parenting challenges. Everyone's health was at great risk. Despite significant disruption, counties worked hard and fast to adjust and innovate their programming. The advent of virtual services (many of which continue) may have improved service utilization (e.g., by improving convenience and reducing the need for transportation, child care, etc. to attend meetings); however, it also may have made service engagement more difficult for those with less access to or skills for using technology. In addition, it is unclear whether virtual service provision may have dampened the impact of caseworker interactions or peer learning. Furthermore, unique ELEVATE-related impacts may have been stunted by the abundance of other types of financial relief (e.g., eviction moratoriums, increased SNAP benefits, expanded child tax credit, adjustments to Medicaid and UI eligibility, etc.) available during the pandemic.

Finally, it is important to note a few other factors when considering the study results shared in this report. First, the outcomes in question are notoriously difficult to impact, leading to potentially small effect sizes that are difficult to detect via evaluation. Although IRP conducted a power analysis while designing the evaluation to ensure an adequate sample size, it may be that the sample was too small to detect effects of the program. Second, we have yet to test the program's impact on outcomes such as parenting and attitudes toward the child support system. If the program had impacts on these outcomes, that could also have long-term implications for child support payment that are out of scope of the current evaluation. Third, this study also does not address or measure the potential impact of systemic racism (e.g., within the criminal justice system, labor market, and human services provision) on employment and child support outcomes, which may be affecting outcomes for parents of color.

Despite these limitations, the current study points to some helpful implications for future programming aimed at supporting families with NCPs behind in their child support payments.

- Parents appreciated the individualized and trusting relationships built with ELEVATE staff, and staff's dedication to their work and parents' success in the program. Both parents and staff acknowledged the importance of, but challenges with, maintaining engagement in the program.

- Many NCPs are experiencing multiple, complex barriers to employment and child support payment that may be beyond the scope of services a child support agency can provide. While agencies were successful in building many partnerships with community service providers and employers to implement ELEVATE, additional partnerships—particularly regarding legal services, housing, mental health, and AODA services—may be helpful. In addition, challenges remain in terms of ensuring that the benefits of referrals to outside services can be realized by NCPs.

- Both staff and parents shared that although parenting classes may have been helpful for some participants, different kinds of parenting supports—in particular, resources that could assist with custody, placement, and supervised visitation—might also be helpful. Broader leveraging of federal Access and Visitation funds to help parents access mediation services and supervised visitation, and enhanced focus on ensuring such services are systematically available for parents who are interested in and appropriate for such services, may also be avenues to providing these supports highly valued by some parents.

- Attention to job quality (vs. any employment) may be needed to truly impact earnings and child support outcomes. This may point to the need for direct partnerships with high road employers as well as employment follow-up and scaffolding services. Additional funding, supports, and policy changes, and expertise may be required for parents to benefit from occupational training and education programs.

- Changing attitudes about child support service provision and other contextual factors may impact the "counterfactual" experienced by NCPs throughout the state; thus, it is important to consider whether the target audience for interventions like ELEVATE might also change. For example, might the interventions be targeted to families receiving the least child support? To parents with the most complex sets of barriers to employment? To those uniquely eligible for enhanced child support services?

- In addition to providing services focused on supporting individual parents, it may be important to consider more systemic interventions—e.g., policy changes; addressing bias/racism within social systems; addressing upstream issues impacting well-being, parenting, and financial stability; or providing direct financial support to families.

- Future evaluations may benefit from additional investment in consistent and reliable service data collection to help clarify the impacts of particular service configurations, dosage, model fidelity, and what happens with service referrals outside the child support agency. In addition, more information about the flow of program dollars may be helpful in understanding the "true cost" of implementing an effective program, levels of funding needed to support effective organizational partnerships, and the impact of funding provided directly to parents.

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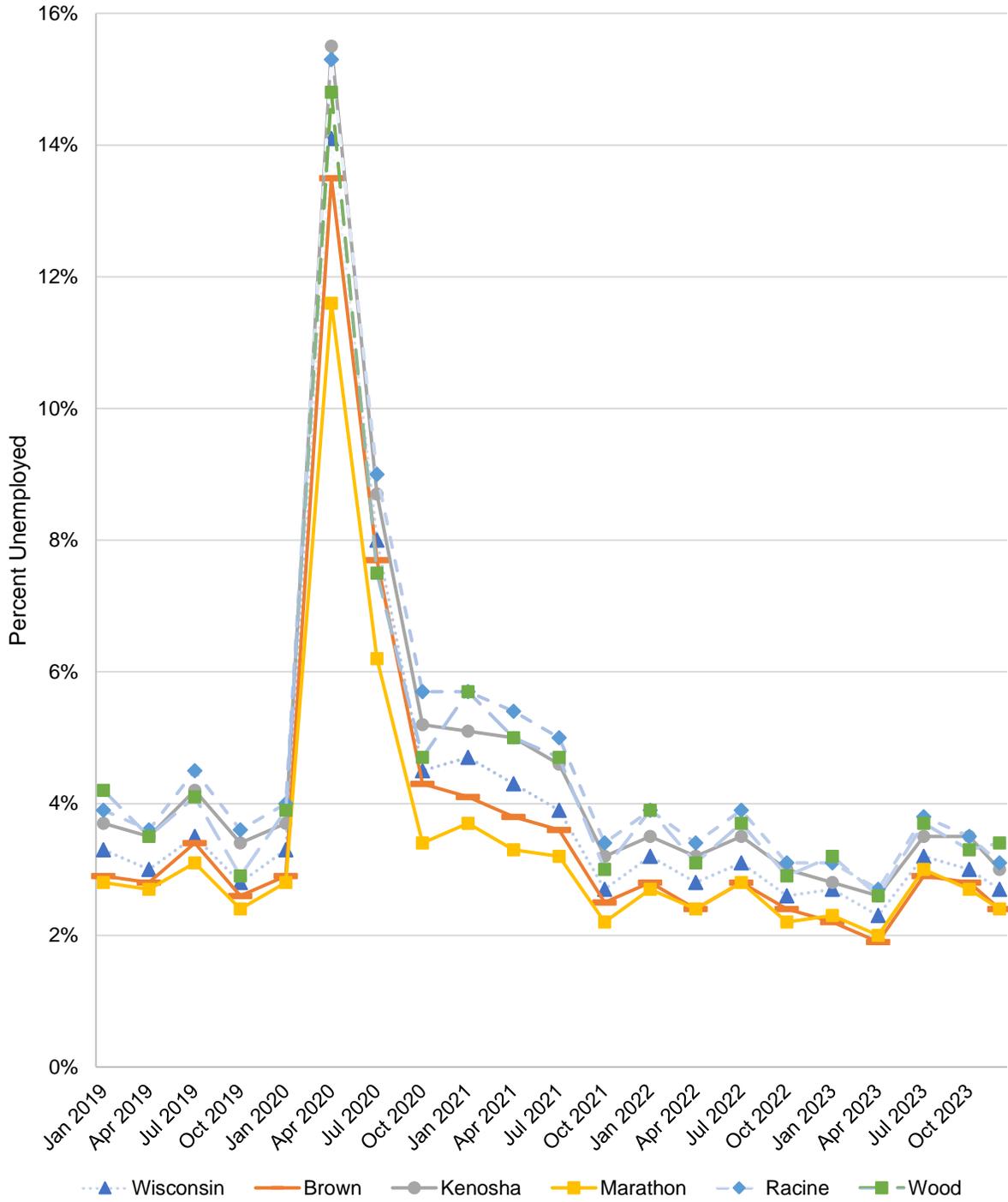
APPENDIX A: CHARACTERISTICS OF ELEVATE COUNTIES

Table A1: County Characteristics

	Wisconsin	Brown	Kenosha	Marathon	Racine	Wood
IV-D Caseload Size (September 2019)	357,178	14,397	11,888	5,419	16,822	3,841
Demographics (2020)						
Population Size	5,893,718	268,729	169,151	138,013	197,727	74,207
Educational Attainment of Population 25 years+ (%)						
High School Graduate or Higher	93.1%	92.9%	91.3%	92.7%	91.2%	93.3%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	32.0%	31.7%	29.4%	27.0%	28.0%	21.3%
Race (%)						
White Alone	86.6%	86.9%	86.5%	90.1%	82.8%	94.6%
Black or African American Alone	6.6%	3.2%	7.6%	1.0%	11.8%	1.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native Alone	1.2%	3.5%	0.8%	0.6%	0.7%	0.9%
Asian Alone	3.2%	3.7%	2.0%	6.3%	1.4%	2.0%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Alone	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0%
Some Other Race Alone	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Two or More Races	2.2%	2.6%	3.0%	1.9%	3.2%	1.4%
Hispanic or Latino (of Any Race)	7.6%	9.9%	14.6%	3.2%	15.1%	3.6%
Income and Poverty						
Population Below Poverty Level in Past 12 Months (%) (2020)	10.7%	9.7%	11.1%	8.3%	11.3%	10.5%
Children Below Poverty Level in Past 12 Months (%) (2020)	13.3%	12.3%	14.6%	9.8%	15.9%	11.8%
Median Annual Household Income (2022 $)	$72,458	$74,066	$76,583	$73,248	$72,658	$63,273
Median Hourly Wage						
2019	$18.79	$18.60	$20.43	$18.83	$17.98	$17.56
2020	$19.79	$19.62	$21.84	$19.62	$18.88	$18.08
2021	$21.63	$21.62	$22.74	$21.92	$18.51	$18.18
2022	$21.95	$21.84	$23.24	$21.74	$20.25	$19.88

Notes & Sources: IV-D Caseload Size Source: Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, Division of Family and Economic Security (DFES) Administrator's Memo 20-05. Median Hourly Wage measures drawn from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm. Accessed: 2/9/2024. Median hourly wages reflect each county's Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as designated by BLS. Wages are not seasonally adjusted. Race proportions source: 2020 Census via US Census Bureau QuickFacts. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/WI/PST045222. All other measures taken from 2022 ACS 5-year-estimates via US Census Bureau Quick Facts. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/WI/PST045222.

Figure A1: County Unemployment Rates over the ELEVATE Implementation Period

APPENDIX B: FULL DEFINITIONS FOR ELEVATE SERVICE CATEGORIES AND SUBTYPES

Case Management: Activities related to case management for an enrolled participant

Initial Intake/Needs Assessment: *An evaluation of a participant's needs conducted after study enrollment*

Ongoing Case Monitoring: *Monitoring a participant's progress in the ELEVATE program, such as monitoring participation in program activities or monitoring progress towards meeting participant goals.*

Staffing/Collaborative Work with Other Providers: *Exchanging information or engaging in case planning with other ELEVATE or non-ELEVATE service providers in order to help an ELEVATE participant overcome barriers to meeting ELEVATE program goals.*

Family/Domestic Violence Screening/Assessment: *An evaluation regarding the participant's risk of being involved in domestic violence*

Legal Activity: *Any activity performed by a case manager with or on behalf of a participant related to legal services such as: seeking legal assistance or financial help for legal assistance, assistance related to court-related fines or fees, preparation of court testimony or information on behalf of an ELEVATE participant.*

Housing Activity: *Any activity performed by at a case manager to help a participant attain or retain housing.*

Public Benefits/Eligibility: *Assistance given to a participant to determine whether he/she is eligible for public benefits (such as FoodShare, BadgerCare, etc.)*

Financial Literacy: *Assistance to the participant related to money management and budgeting skills*

Other (Please fill in "Other" column): *Other case management-related services provided to participants (please describe in additional detail column)*

Employment Services: Activities related to direct employment services funded under ELEVATE or through an ELEVATE employment partner

Employment Plan: *A written plan for a participant that documents specific action steps for how the participant is going to get a job, and find a better paying/preferred job if appropriate*

Employment Needs Assessment: *An evaluation regarding a participant's ability to obtain and keep a job and the supports needed by the participant to support engaging in employment*

Job Readiness Training: *One-on-one assistance or group-based classes that help a participant prepare to enter the workforce and keep a job.*

Resume Assistance: *Assistance given to a participant to write or prepare a resume*

Job Search: *Assistance for a participant to help them identify and respond to job leads*

Job Placement/Job Development: *Activities related to finding and creating employment opportunities for ELEVATE participants or finding a suitable job for an ELEVATE participant.*

Job Follow-up/Retention: *Any service to help a participant keep a job, such as dealing with conflicts with other workers and supervisors and checking in with participants and employers on progress.*

On-the-Job Training (OJT): *Assistance to a participant to obtain training at the workplace while performing the actual job that provides knowledge or skills essential to the full and adequate performance of the job.*

Subsidized Employment: *Assistance to a participant to obtain a temporary employment position where the employer receives a subsidy from the ELEVATE grant to offset some or all of the wages paid to the participant.*

Other (Please fill in "Other" column): *Other employment-related services provided to participants (please describe in additional detail column)*

Work Supports: Work supports funded through ELEVATE provided to an enrolled participant

Gas Cards: *Gas cards using ELEVATE funds to the noncustodial parent to help them gain or keep employment*

Driver's License Reinstatement Fees: *Driver's license reinstatement fees paid for by ELEVATE funds to help the participant gain or keep employment*

License Fines: *Fines (separate from any reinstatement fees) paid for by ELEVATE funds for the purpose of regaining a driver's license*

OWI Assessments: *Costs associated with an Intoxicated Driver Program (IDP) assessment, for the purpose of helping an ELEVATE participant regain a driver's license*

AODA Assessments: *Costs associated with a participant meeting with an alcohol and drug specialist to evaluate any problems ELEVATE participant problems with alcohol or other drugs*

Bus Passes: *Bus passes provided with ELEVATE funds to the noncustodial parent to help them gain or keep employment*

Ride-Share Gift Cards (e.g., Uber, Lyft): *Vouchers or other payments for ride-share services provided with ELEVATE funds to help a participant gain or keep employment*

Work Clothes/Equipment: *Any work-related equipment, tools, or clothing provided with ELEVATE funds to the noncustodial parent to help them gain or keep employment*

Vocational/Job Skills Training Costs Fees: *Vocational or skill training paid for by ELEVATE funds to help the participant gain or keep employment (e.g., tuition or fees associated for obtaining a welding certificate or participation in a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program)*

General Education Costs/Fees: *Education-related fees paid for by ELEVATE funds to help the participant gain or keep employment including registration fees, class fees, or credentialing fees*

Other (Please fill in "Other" column): *any* *other work supports provided to participants (please describe in additional detail column)*

Parenting Services: Activities related to parenting services funded under ELEVATE or through an ELEVATE parenting partner provided to an enrolled participant

Parenting Needs Assessment: *An evaluation regarding participant's interests, needs, and abilities related to ELEVATE parenting activities*

Parenting Class/Support Group: *A series of classes or set of planned meetings providing one or more topics or curricula offered by the program or a single meeting of a group of participants at a specific date, time, and location to discuss parenting topics or curricula*

Individual Parenting Counseling: *Discussions with a participant in matters related to parent/child relationships, co-parenting, or other parent-related matters*

Mediation/Parenting Time/Access & Visitation: *Services for a neutral third party to help participants and associated custodial parents resolve issues related to children and/or child support, or assistance provided to an ELEVATE participant to establish or modify a visitation or parenting time agreement between the participant and the custodial party about child support payments and child access*

Other (Please fill in "Other" column): *any other parenting-related services provided to participants (please describe in additional detail column)*

Referrals: documented when a caseworker refers a client to an agency that is not receiving ELEVATE grant funds

Employment: Vocational Training: *Referral to a program for instructional programs or courses that focus on the skills required for a particular job function, occupation, or trade*

Employment: Short-Term Job Skills Training: *Referral to services given to a participant to obtain short-term training (less than a month) and intended to build skills in a specific occupation so that the individual is better able to obtain employment in that occupation. May take place in a classroom or on the job or lead to a certification or not.*

Employment: GED/HSED: *Referral to services given to a participant to enroll in and attend General Equivalency Diploma or High School Equivalency Diploma classes, which involve class instruction to prepare for diploma testing.*

Employment: Post-Secondary Education: *Referral to services given to a participant to enroll in post-secondary education classes or credentialing*

Employment: Subsidized/Supported/Transitional Employment: *Referral to services given to a participant to obtain a temporary employment position where the employer receives a subsidy from the public funds to offset some or all of the wages paid to the participant*

Alcohol/Substance Use: *Referral to alcohol and substance use treatment services*

Anger Management: *Referral to services for anger management*

Child Care: *Referral to services given to participant related to childcare*

Custody & Visitation: *Referral to services given to participant related to custody and visitation*

Expungement: *Referral to services given to a participant to remove criminal information from his/her criminal record*

ESL/English Language Classes: *Referral to services given to the participant that assisted him/her with English language learning (either as a new language or supplemental literacy for English-first speakers)*

Financial Literacy: Referral to *services given to the participant to improve his/her money management and budgeting skills*

Family/Domestic Violence Services: *Referral to services to assist participant with family or domestic violence*

Housing Assistance: *Referral to services to help a participant attain housing*

LIHEAP: *Referral to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)*

Legal: *Referral to legal services or assistance with court, civil legal, or criminal legal services*

Mental Health: *Referral to mental health services or treatment*

Other Wellness: *Referral to services for wellness and well-being other than mental or physical health*

Physical Health: *Referral to services related to physical (including dental) health*

SNAP: *Referral to SNAP*

SSI/SSDI: *Referral to SSI/SSDI*

WIOA: *Referral to WIOA*

Other Public Benefit Programs: *Referral to assistance related to any other public benefits programs*

Other (Please fill in "Other" column): *any other referral/referral assistance provided to participants*