

The Effectiveness of Non-Custodial Parent Referrals to Workforce Services in Bexar and Harris Counties: An Initial Assessment

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas-Austin prepared this report under contract with the Texas Workforce Commission and the Office of the Attorney General. These state agencies, along with the Office of Court Administration, were required by the 76th Texas Legislature (1999) to report to the next legislative session regarding the effectiveness of referring obligors to an employment assistance program as a means of increasing child support collections.

This report assesses the effect on child support collections of referring non-custodial parents from the Office of the Attorney General's Child Support Division and IV-D Family Law Courts to workforce and other services designed to increase their income-producing and parenting capacities in Bexar County (San Antonio) and Harris County (Houston).

Child Support Division administrators and staff worked with local workforce and domestic court collaborators to establish procedures for service referrals from the IV-D courts as part of child support adjudication. Referrals are frequently a condition of probation for non-payment of child support or contempt of court. In addition to mandatory, court-based referrals, Child Support Division staff in Harris County initiated voluntary referrals from the child support offices.

Results

During the implementation phase of the Bexar and Harris County non-custodial parent referral initiatives:

- Child Support Division staff and the IV-D court masters, in cooperation with the local Boards, workforce service providers and local fatherhood initiatives, have laid a foundation for building effective non-custodial parent service delivery structures and practices. Both the Bexar County and Harris County efforts adapted non-custodial parent referral procedures to accommodate ongoing service delivery practices.
- In Bexar County, the non-custodial parent referrals were associated with statistically significant impacts on child support collections. Average monthly child support

collections increased by \$116, and the percent of months that support was collected increased by 21.5 percent compared to a statistically matched comparison group.

- In Harris County, workforce referrals had no statistically significant impact on child support collections or the frequency of payments.
- The operational costs of non-custodial parent referrals on behalf of Child Support Division and IV-D courts are negligible; non-custodial parent referral procedures are subsumed as part of ongoing staff duties. The primary costs entailed by the initiatives are in the form of net workforce service costs.
- The enrollment of non-custodial parent referrals in workforce services was limited during most of the study period in both sites due in large part to constraints caused by restrictive federal eligibility criteria, as well as underdeveloped workforce linkages in Bexar County. The Welfare-to-Work Amendments of November 1999 broadened eligibility, leading to increased enrollments in WtW services in Harris County after January 2000.
- Workforce participation clustered about job search, job readiness and job placement services. Few individuals participated in Education or Job Skills Training services.
- Inter-site differences regarding voluntary and mandatory referrals and the presence of the Bexar County Child Support Probation Office confound the analysis. Marshall Center researchers are unable to discern with certainty whether referring non-custodial parents to workforce services is an effective means to increase child support collections. Additional time and information would be required to make a definitive judgement.
- Because of the uncertain effectiveness of workforce referrals regarding child support collections and the limited number of workforce enrollments, a detailed cost-effective analysis was deferred.

Operational Implications

The report offers several observations regarding operational implications of non-custodial parent referrals to workforce and other services as Texas prepares to expand initiatives similar to the Bexar and Harris projects statewide.

Institutional Context. Policymakers and program administrators are facing the challenges of aligning subsystems (e.g., child support collections, workforce services, and fatherhood programs) with different operational outlooks, missions, service mix and outcome expectations. Effective collaboration requires new modes for external linkages, as well as transformation of internal policies and procedures.

Thinking “Systemically.” Texas workforce and welfare reforms of the past decade have been improving systemic approaches for service delivery that can be extended to the needs of non-custodial parents. A more systemic service array might

include access to job training and education, peer and professional counseling, legal and financial services, access and visitation services, and supportive services.

Non-Custodial Parent Workforce Services. Workforce services rendered to non-custodial parents in this study were largely confined to job readiness and job search activities. The service mix could be expanded to include more access to pre-employment vocational education and job skills training to enhance employment prospects for non-custodial parents.

Targeting Resources. The non-custodial parent referral partnerships emerging in Texas should act to target resources based on more standardized referral and enrollment criteria across the workforce, fatherhood and IV-D child support systems in order to provide appropriate services and expand based on its own success.

Monitoring Compliance/Information-Sharing. The initial efforts in Bexar County and Harris County point to the importance of compliance monitoring and performance information-sharing regarding non-custodial parent referrals.

Voluntary and Mandatory Referrals. The distinction between voluntary, office-based referrals and mandatory, IV-D court-based referrals very likely influences compliance rates, participation patterns and outcomes in terms of child support collections. The nature of the referral should be visible to collaborators; it should also be clearly indicated on any database that might be used for future evaluations.

Policy Implications

The report also has several broader implications that policymakers and providers might consider.

Work-First and Human Capital Strategies. The non-custodial parent referral effort once again brings tensions between the Work-First and Human Capital workforce strategies to the forefront of policy discussions. Texas must decide which paths it will offer to increase the earnings and child support contributions of non-custodial parents.

Child Support Collections and Referrals. Non-custodial parents face a “signaling crisis” regarding referrals to workforce and other services and their child support obligations. Inherent conflicts between current obligations and prospective capacity-increases should be resolved for both “deadbeat” and “dead broke” dads.

Incentives. Stronger participation in workforce services could be encouraged through incentives. Several alternative approaches are under-consideration in the nation, including alternative minimum support orders, individual development accounts (IDAs), cash incentives and reductions in arrearages linked to satisfactory participation in training programs and/or employment retention.

Formal and Informal Child Support. Policymakers and administrators would do well to strengthen recognition of the relationship between and value of formal and informal child support in order to more fully address parent-child well-being.

Texas should continue building upon the progress in the delivery of workforce and other services to non-custodial parents found in the early implementation phase of the Harris County and Bexar County referral projects.