



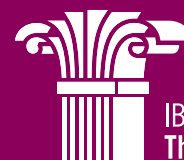
Inter-Agency Collaboration Among Social Services Agencies in Los Angeles County

Social Services Series



Jessica Pearson, Ph.D
Director
Center for Policy Research
Denver, Colorado

Nancy Thoennes, Ph.D
Associate Director
Center for Policy Research
Denver, Colorado



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The Business of Government

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SOCIAL SERVICES SERIES

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Jessica Pearson, Ph.D

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Introduction

The Intersection of Child Support with Child Welfare and TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) Programs

What child support agencies share in common with child welfare* and TANF† agencies are children. Not simply children in the abstract, but often the very same children from the very same families. Typically, poor families.

When child support operates entirely independently of child welfare and TANF, the end result can be poorer outcomes for families. Vital information known to one agency may be missing at another. Families may be given benefits in error and face the prospect of making repayments. Or they may not receive the services they need to be self-sufficient and independent.

Every community faces some of the same problems in handling multiple-agency families, along with

unique challenges and opportunities as well. Los Angeles County, California faces some problems that are fairly typical of large child support, child welfare, and TANF programs.

The steps taken by the Los Angeles County child support, welfare, and TANF agencies have not eliminated all of the complications posed by multi-agency families, but they represent important changes in the agencies’ cultures.

The authors of this report have had an opportunity to work with the Los Angeles Child Support Services Department (CSSD) during the time changes were occurring in the relationship of CSSD to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS). In addition to pursuing other collaborative activities, all three agencies participated in initiatives funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and facilitated by the authors of this report that tried to encourage IV-D (child support) programs to more effectively work with IV-A (TANF) and IV-E (foster care within child welfare) programs.

This report will:

- Examine the many ways in which cases come to be served by child support and child welfare and/or child support and TANF;
- Raise awareness of the many cases shared by these three agencies;
- Highlight some of the problems that can occur when each agency operates without knowledge of the overlap in cases;

Overview of Los Angeles County Agencies Examined in This Report	
Los Angeles County Agency	Responsibilities
Child Support Services Department (CSSD)	Responsible for the IV-D Child Support program
Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)	Responsible for the IV-E Foster Care program
Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS)	Responsible for the IV-A TANF program

- Discuss some of the obstacles that agencies, and specifically the child support, child welfare and TANF agencies in Los Angeles County, face in their efforts to collaborate in serving shared cases.
- Showcase actions taken in Los Angeles County in recent years to improve the handling of cases with multiple agency involvement.

The hope is that this information will help other jurisdictions to better understand the need for inter-agency collaboration, and assist them as they consider what types of agency changes are needed to enhance communication and cooperation.

* Child welfare agencies are responsible for overseeing child abuse and neglect investigations, court cases resulting from the investigations, and out-of-home placements of children, also known as foster care.

† TANF stands for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. It replaced the Aid for Families with Dependent Children Program.

The Need for Collaboration in Social Services

Collaboration Between Child Support and TANF

There is a clear overlap in child support and TANF cases. In fiscal year 2006, 14.5 percent of the nation's 15.8 million open child support cases involved the current receipt of public assistance, while 45.6 percent were former recipients¹. Welfare reform laws acknowledge the connection between child support and TANF by requiring recipients of public assistance to cooperate with child support agencies (IV-D agencies) in establishing paternity and pursuing child support orders.² Under state laws, cooperation by public assistance recipients includes:

- Disclosing the names and other identifying information about the noncustodial parents of their children;
- Appearing at interviews, hearings, and legal proceedings; and
- Submitting themselves and their children to genetic tests when a court or administrative agency so orders.

If the child support agency determines that an individual is not cooperating in good faith in establishing paternity or a child support order, it must notify the public assistance agency, and if noncooperation is determined, the IV-A agency must reduce the family's grant or face a 5 percent reduction in the state's funding for public assistance agencies.

Child Support in Public Assistance Cases

Child support has a role in helping families to avoid public assistance, leave public assistance, and remain off of public assistance. Child support has

also been tied empirically to reductions in poverty and improvements in child well-being.

Avoiding Public Assistance

There is evidence that child support reduces the need for public assistance. Researchers have found that at least one-fourth of the decline in the number of families needing income supplements between 1994 and 1996 were due to the receipt of child support.³

Leaving Public Assistance

A number of studies suggest that receiving child support can help families to leave public assistance. Using the 1979-1996 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Huang *et al*⁴ found that women who received \$1,000 in child support payments in the previous year were 18 percent more likely to exit welfare and go for three consecutive months of non-receipt. Another study reports that between 1980 and 1996, improvements in child support collection helped to reduce welfare caseloads by 12 to 17 percent.⁵

Single parents who receive regular child support payments are likely to find jobs faster and hold them longer than those who do not receive such payments, even after controlling for various factors that might influence employment.⁶

Another study of welfare leavers in four states found that for those with any child support income, child support averaged from \$226 to \$285 per month, which represented 27 percent and 29 percent, respectively, of income for these leavers.⁷

Staying Off Public Assistance

The receipt of child support also reduces welfare re-entry. One study found that the receipt of \$1,000 in

child support payments reduced welfare re-entry by 12 percent by helping working parents make ends meet and weather financial crises without returning to public assistance.⁸

Another study found that any amount of child support decreased the likelihood of welfare recidivism for divorced women in Wisconsin.⁹

Poverty and Child Well-Being

Child support also appears to have the capacity to reduce poverty, especially among children. For example, using the National Survey of America's Families, Sorensen and Zibman¹⁰ estimated that child support reduces poverty among children by about 5 percent.

Meyer and Hu¹¹ found that 21 to 23 percent of poor women who received child support were brought out of poverty by child support alone; however, because less than one-third of the women received child support, the overall antipoverty effect was reduced to 6 to 7 percent of women brought out of poverty.

According to Sorensen and Zibman,¹² when any support was paid in cases that involve former recipients of public assistance, it represented roughly 30 percent of custodial parents' income.

Finally, some research suggests that children in single-parent families who regularly receive child support do better than children who do not receive such support. The studies show that:

- Receipt of child support has a positive effect on children's achievement in school.¹³
- Fathers who pay child support are more involved with their children.¹⁴
- Regular payment of child support may reduce levels of severe parental conflict among TANF families.¹⁵
- Enforcing child support obligations reduces divorce rates and appears to deter non-marital births.¹⁶

Increasing Child Support

The many benefits of child support have led one advocate to call it an "unsung hero" of welfare reform.¹⁷ Yet, despite the obvious benefits, many

poor families that receive public assistance do not receive child support.

A 1998 study by the U.S. General Accounting Office¹⁸ (GAO) found that in Connecticut, Florida, and Virginia the vast majority of the families (71% to 84%) that reached their time limit for receiving TANF had no child support collected for them during the 12 months before their assistance was terminated. More than half of the families reaching the time limit in these states lacked a child support order (47% to 69%). Failure to locate the noncustodial parent was the major reason child support agencies gave for their inability to obtain a child support order.

A report¹⁹ utilizing data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (1996-2000), the Project on Devolution and Urban Change (1998/1999 and 2001), Parents' Fair Share (1996-1997), and the Wisconsin Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (1997-1998), concluded that relatively few current and former public assistance (TANF) recipients who are eligible for child support have an order. Among those custodial parents with orders, the percent receiving payments ranged from 21 percent to 46 percent. The combination of no orders and poor payment meant that the percentage of custodial parents receiving child support payments ranged from a low of 9 percent in one study to a high of 22 percent in another.

Fortunately, there is evidence that child support outcomes are improving for both former and current TANF recipients. For example, a synthesis of 15 welfare-leaver studies found that the percent of welfare leavers who reported income from child support ranged from a low of 11 percent in the District of Columbia to a high of 46 percent in Massachusetts, and in six of the eight states that asked, over 20 percent of leavers reported receiving child support.²⁰ Surveys with individuals whose welfare cases were closed because of time limits in Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, and Virginia found that between one-fourth and one-third of respondents reported that they were receiving at least some child support payments when interviewed.²¹

There is also evidence that the percentage with orders and payments increases over time among

former recipients of public assistance. Follow-up interviews with families that reached their time limits and had their cases closed revealed that while 22 percent received child support at the time of TANF exit, this increased to 30 percent after six months and 34 percent a year and a half post-exit. Over the 18-month time period, the average amount of support received by families rose from \$48 to \$221.²²

Examples of Collaboration between Child Support and TANF

States have undertaken a variety of initiatives to try to improve collaboration between the child support and public assistance agency. They have included co-location,²³ cross-agency training,²⁴ and more stringent TANF eligibility requirements.²⁵

For example, a demonstration project conducted in Bay County, Florida, that required all custodial parents seeking TANF benefits to visit the county's child support offices and provide the information needed to initiate a support order led to a reduction in sanction requests. It was estimated that the state would have saved \$12.4 million in TANF payments if the policy had been implemented on a statewide basis.

Individual states have also pursued a number of initiatives and policies aimed at promoting collaboration between IV-A and IV-D agencies and improving the quality of information obtained from custodial parents at the public assistance agency.

Massachusetts conducted two OCSE-funded projects to improve collaboration between the IV-D and IV-A agencies. In one project, child support liaisons were placed in TANF agencies. The study found an increase in the speed with which information about the noncustodial parent was conveyed to the child support agency and a reduction in case processing times for cases processed by the child support liaison.²⁶

A second demonstration project involved using child support workers to assist with client interviews at the public assistance agency. The evaluation found that; child support and public assistance workers obtained similar information about noncustodial parents when they interviewed custodial parents, most custodial parents wanted child support, and that most provide all the information they

possess. Workers in both agencies felt as though the project had given workers an opportunity to interact, communicate, develop helpful personal relationships, and better understand one another's jobs and needs.²⁷

Collaboration Between Child Support and Child Welfare

Scope of Foster Care

The most recent data available indicate that slightly more than half a million children in the United States are living in foster care at any given point in time.²⁸ In other words, approximately 7.2 children per 1,000 are in foster care.

In California, the figure is 10.6 children per 1,000.²⁹ On the last day of FY2005, a total of 81,174 children were in foster care in California.³⁰ Approximately 26,000 of these children were in Los Angeles County.³¹

Through the Title IV-E Program, the federal government reimburses states for a portion of their annual expenditures on foster care. For many years, the cost of foster care rose at a far greater rate than did total out-of-home placements. For example, between 1986 and 1996, caseloads rose approximately 51 percent,³² while federal reimbursements for foster care rose 450 percent.³³

In FY2005 the average monthly foster care maintenance payment was \$648 per child, or over \$7,000 per year per child.³⁴ This results in federal expenditures of about \$5 billion annually.

The states also contribute to the cost of out-of-home care. The federal government uses a complex system to determine whether a child is eligible for reimbursement. The formula grows out of the historic roots of the IV-E program which was designed to offset the costs of removing children who received welfare payments from homes that were deemed "unfit" by state. The formula requires states to determine if a child would have been eligible for Aid to Families for Dependent Children (AFDC) as it existed in the state on July 16, 1996. Foster care for non-eligible children must be paid through other funds, including state funds.

Child Support in Foster Care Cases

To help reimburse their costs in providing foster care, most states:

- Redirect any child support being collected on behalf of the child to the state during the time the child is in foster care; and
- Establish a child support order against both parents, with payment due to the state during the duration of foster care placement.

However, the need for collaboration and cooperation between the child welfare and child support agencies in a community goes beyond the role of the child support agency in helping to recover costs the state incurs in providing care.

Existing Child Support Cases

Some children who enter foster care already have an active child support case. In these cases it is important for the child support and child welfare agency to communicate for several reasons. Without coordinated efforts, the child support agency may continue to collect and distribute child support dollars to either the parent from whom the child was removed or the IV-A agency (in families receiving TANF).

The incorrect disbursement of child support, if identified, requires repayment to the IV-E agency. If the error is caught after the child returns home, and 62 percent of the children in foster care in California leave the system to return home,³⁵ the custodial parent may be faced with repaying child support just as the child returns home and costs increase.

Without coordination between child welfare and child support, improper child support may continue to be distributed to the IV-E system after the child leaves care. This improper disbursement means that the custodial parent will have less than the proper amount of financial resources to help with the child's transition back home.

Finally, without coordination, cases referred to child support by the IV-E agency may be mistakenly assumed to be new cases in need of an order, rather than an existing case in need of changes in disbursement. This can create a problem when the child support agency opens another case on an existing family. Child support agencies face performance

measures that determine state economic penalties and incentives. Agencies that have multiple open cases for the same noncustodial parent will increase their case load artificially and decrease their efficiency.

New Referrals to Child Support for Orders

Cases without an existing child support order may be sent to have an order established against a parent who was not living with the child at the time of the foster care removal. While this step will help to offset the costs to the IV-E agency for foster care, it will also have potential important consequences after reunification.

Families in the child welfare system are disproportionately poor and female-headed single-parent homes. Data on the home from which children were removed is often missing in the data collected and reported by the states. However, for 23 states with relatively complete data, the percentage of children removed from single-parent homes ranged from 37 percent in Oregon to 88 percent in Maryland.³⁶

In Los Angeles County, over 70 percent of the children in foster have been removed from single female-headed households.³⁷

The most recent National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect³⁸ concluded that children in single-parent homes were significantly more likely to be the victim of abuse or neglect. The study also found that compared to children in families earning at least \$30,000 per year, those from homes earning less than \$15,000 were more than 20 times as likely to suffer some form of child maltreatment.

For poor, single-parent families, child support can be an important income component. Research finds that among custodial mothers who receive child support, it accounts for 16 or 17 percent of their total incomes.³⁹ Having additional economic resources when the child is returned home can only help strengthen the family.

Referrals for Paternity and Locate

Child support can also help in child welfare cases by finding fathers and establishing paternity. As noted above, single-parent homes, and specifically single-mother headed households, are common in the child

welfare caseload. A number of studies looking at fathers in the child welfare system conclude that historically the system has generally overlooked fathers. Focus groups with caseworkers found many felt that involving fathers simply complicated the case.⁴⁰ Other studies found that locating fathers was perceived as time consuming⁴¹ and caseworkers and supervisors often were seen as reluctant to involve fathers against the wishes of mothers.⁴²

Greater emphasis is now being placed on fathers in the child welfare system.

One factor that has contributed to this change is the time limit imposed by legislation for establishing a permanent home for children in foster care. In past generations, children often remained in foster care indefinitely. Judges and caseworkers were often unwilling to commit to returning the child to the home from which she or he was removed, but equally reluctant to terminate parental rights and free the child for adoption. Children often spent most of their lives in care. Beginning in 1980, legislation began mandating timely decision making. Most recently, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires (with some exceptions) permanency decisions within 12 months.

Legal requirements to find permanent homes for children or free them for adoption make it imperative that fathers be located. If a father is a potential permanent placement for a child, the worker needs to begin working with him. If he is not a permanency option, he must be located so his parental rights can be terminated. Ignoring the father can result in his emergence into the case just as the 12-month decision-making deadline draws near.

Recognizing the importance of locating fathers, the ASFA granted permission to access, and encouraged child welfare to use, the primary location tools of the child support agency: the state and federal parent locator services (SPLS and FPLS, respectively).

The SPLS and FPLS allow child support agencies to search for absent parents in a variety of databases including the National Directory of New Hires, which is a repository of data related to employment, unemployment and wages; the Federal Case Registry, which contains information on child support cases; as well as data maintained by the Internal Revenue

Service, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, the Federal Bureau of Information, and the National Security Administration.

While most child welfare agencies cannot directly access the FPLS, child support can search this database for child welfare and report back on data that may allow the caseworker to find a noncustodial parent. A pilot project in South Carolina found that such searches are successful at locating 75 percent of the cases referred by child welfare, and most are located within a month of the referral.⁴³

A second change in casework that has led to increased attention to fathers in child welfare cases is the growth of kinship care. Federal law, and case work best practice, finds that children who are removed from their homes should be placed in the least restrictive—most home-like—setting safely possible.

California policy mandates that:

... the first placement priority is for placement in the home of the non-custodial parent, or in the home of a suitable relative (if a non-custodial parent is unavailable).⁴⁴

Nearly a quarter of all foster care children in Los Angeles are living with relatives.⁴⁵

The emphasis on placement with relatives has increased the need to identify all possible family members who may serve as a placement resource for a child either temporarily or permanently. This means that locating noncustodial parents and their relatives is essential.

A third change in casework, encouraged by the ASFA, which also argues for father involvement, is that of concurrent planning. Best practice calls for child welfare workers to prepare for more than a single outcome in a case simultaneously. Without concurrent planning, the worker assumes that the case goal of reunification will be achieved, and essentially starts over when it is not. The worker doing concurrent planning may simultaneously work towards reunification, while preparing for long-term care with a relative, or termination of parental rights and adoption.

The real-world costs of child support and child welfare failing to work together on location efforts was graphically demonstrated when a Los Angeles teenager sued the County for keeping her in foster care for 10 years without notifying her biological father, who continued to pay child support without realizing his daughter was no longer with her mother.⁴⁶

Child welfare agencies can also benefit greatly from the paternity establishment expertise of child support agencies. It is not enough to locate a father. His legal relationship with the child must be established before further action (whether it be placement, visitation, services, or a termination of rights) is possible. For never-married parents, paternity may be established voluntarily through parental acknowledgment, or it may be done by genetic testing.

Child support agencies have been establishing paternity for fathers for years. In 2004, child support agencies reported 1,606,303 voluntary acknowledgments or paternity establishments in disputed cases. In California, the figure was 213,542.⁴⁷

Obstacles to Collaboration in Social Services

Although there may be compelling reasons to collaborate, public agencies can expect to encounter numerous obstacles as they attempt to join forces.

Barrier One: Agency Size and Complexity

In Los Angeles, one barrier is the size and the diversity of the agencies and their service populations.

Los Angeles County has an estimated population of 10,331,939 spread over 4,752 square miles. As of 2004, this county population was larger than the individual populations of 42 states. It includes 88 incorporated cities, as well as numerous unincorporated areas.

The county is exceedingly diverse. Nearly half of the population (45%) identifies itself as Hispanic or Latino. African Americans and Asian Americans both make up about 10 percent of the population. Less than half of (46%) the population reported speaking only English at home: over a third (38%) speaks Spanish (as a primary or secondary language). Nearly a quarter (24%) of the population under age 18 is living below poverty.⁴⁸

The Los Angeles County Office of Child Support Enforcement is composed of six regional offices with approximately 1,700 workers. The agency serves nearly 471,000 open cases.⁴⁹

The Department of Public and Social Services operates TANF programs in 23 offices with nearly 2,000 TANF workers. In 2003, there were nearly 132,000 TANF applications in the County and over 126,000 referrals to child support.

The Department of Children and Family Services provides child welfare services in 18 offices

throughout the county. There are over 3,000 workers, 100 managers, and 540 supervisors. The county has close to 50,000 children in foster care, nearly 60 percent of which are served with IV-E dollars.⁵⁰

Barrier Two: Different Performance Measures and Missions Between Programs

Child support, child welfare, and TANF programs have very different missions, and their performance is measured in very different ways.

Child Support: Since 1975, the federal government has paid incentives to state child support enforcement programs to encourage improved child support collections through efficient establishment and enforcement techniques. These incentive payments are a key source of funding for state programs. The method for calculating payments changed with the adoption of the Child Support Performance and Incentive Act (CSPIA) in 1998. This system was developed by an Incentive Funding Workgroup composed of state and federal partners. Key elements of the performance-based incentive system for child support include:

- Linking incentive payments to performance in five measured areas: paternity establishment, order establishment, collections on current support due, cases paying toward arrears, and cost-effectiveness;
- Data must be reliable and complete, as determined by annual data reliability audits;
- Incentives are based on state collections and performance;

- States are paid from a capped incentive pool; and
- Incentives must be reinvested into state child support programs.

TANF: The federally defined goals of the TANF program include:

- Providing assistance to families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- Ending parental dependence on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- Reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and
- Encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

States have great flexibility in determining how to achieve these goals. However, state TANF programs operate under a system of penalties and bonuses for a series of specific performance measures. Financial penalties are imposed for failure to participate in the income and eligibility verification system, meet the work participation rate requirement, maintain a certain level of historic funding effort, or comply with the five-year time limit on assistance.

Bonuses are awarded for a variety of state accomplishments related to success in the workforce based on job retention and earnings gain. They include:

- Improvement in job entry;
- Improvement in job retention and earnings;
- Participation by low-income working families in food stamp program;
- Participation of former TANF recipients in Medicaid and SCHIP;
- Provision of child care subsidies to eligible families; and
- Family formation and stability.

Child Welfare: Child welfare agencies are subject to several federal performance reviews. The federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) focuses on:

- **Child Safety:** Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect. Children are

safely maintained at home whenever possible and appropriate.

- **Permanency:** Children have permanency and stability in their living situation. The continuity of family relationships/connections is preserved for children.
- **Child/Family Well-Being:** Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs. Children receive appropriate services to meet their education needs. Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

The CFSR is a two-stage process comprised of a statewide assessment and an on-site review.

The CFSR reports on whether the state is or is not in substantial conformity with respect to:

- Reoccurrence of maltreatment;
- Incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care;
- Foster care re-entry rate;
- Stability of foster care placements;
- Length of time to achieve reunification; and
- Length of time to achieve adoption.

States whose data do not meet the national standard in a CFSR are required to implement a program improvement plan (PIP) designed to improve performance on the data indicators.

The reviews of the federal Title IV-E foster care program focus on whether a child meets the statutory eligibility requirements for the program. The review team is comprised of federal and state representatives who examine cases of children for information such as:

- A court order stating that the child welfare agency removed the child only when necessary;
- A court order stating that the agency provided reasonable efforts to preserve the family, if appropriate, and to achieve permanency for the child;
- A completed criminal background check on the foster parent; and

- Confirmation that the child met the income test for the program.

States receive a primary review and, when necessary, a secondary review. In the primary reviews, a sample of 80 foster care cases is examined to ensure that children for whom IV-E payments are made meet the federal eligibility requirements.

If five or more cases in the primary review do not meet the federal requirements, the state is determined not to be in substantial compliance.

Regardless of the compliance determination, a disallowance in federal financial participation funds is assessed for all cases that do not meet federal requirements.

States determined to be in substantial compliance based on the primary review are reviewed at three-year intervals. States determined not to be in substantial compliance are required to develop and implement a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to correct the areas of noncompliance. Within a year after the PIP is completed, the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) conducts a secondary review that assesses a sample of 150 cases. If, after the secondary review, the state still is not in compliance, a disallowance is assessed on the basis of the state's total foster care population for the six-month review period. Regardless of the compliance determination, a disallowance in federal financial participation funds is assessed for all cases that do not meet federal requirements.

Barrier Three: Lack of State-wide Automation

Within the last two decades, legislation has been enacted to either mandate or support the development of data information systems in both child support and child welfare.

All states are required by the 1988 Family Support Act to develop a single, statewide automated child support system.

Federal support for statewide automated child welfare information systems (SACWIS) began in 1993 with Public Law 103-66, which provided states with the opportunity to obtain funding through the Title

IV-E program to design and implement a SACWIS. A SACWIS is to be a comprehensive automated case management tool that supports social workers' foster care and adoptions assistance case management practice.

California is currently in the process of designing its SACWIS system. The statewide child support system is operating in 28 California counties, but did not include Los Angeles until late 2008.

The lack of statewide automated systems for either the child support or child welfare programs has necessarily slowed communication and information sharing between the agencies. The sheer volume of cases makes case-by-case and worker-to-worker communication inefficient.

The automated system used by the TANF agency has limited ability to share information with the automated system for child support. In overnight exchanges, information on new TANF cases is conveyed to child support, however, automated information does not flow back from child support to the TANF agency.

Collaborative Initiatives in Los Angeles County

Child Support and TANF

In 2004, the manager of the Los Angeles County Child Support Services and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services agreed to participate in a project to identify and implement ways of improving collaboration across the two agencies. Sponsored by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and implemented by the Center for Policy Research and Policy Studies Inc., the project brought together managers in the two agencies of four extremely large jurisdictions for a series of planning calls, a two-day conference (known as a IV-A/IV-D Academy), and follow-up activity focused on interagency collaboration. In addition to Los Angeles, the participating jurisdictions were Houston/Harris County, Texas; New York City, New York; and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

The process leading up to the two-day Academy involved the identification of common problems and interests. In a series of conference calls, agency managers within each jurisdiction and across the four jurisdictions discussed where they stood with respect to collaboration, what they had done to try to improve collaboration, new directions they were pursuing, and how the Academy might assist them in furthering the goal of improving client cooperation and relations between the two agencies.

A History of Agency Collaboration

The conference calls revealed that, in Los Angeles County, the two agencies were already engaging in an impressive level of activity aimed at promoting communication and collaboration. Approximately 75 percent of child support cases are referred by the IV-A agency. Personnel in both agencies have long recognized that both agencies serve the same clients

and that coordination is essential. The collaborative efforts they pursued included:

- **Management Directives:** Collaboration was the “mantra” of the Chief Administrative Officer of Los Angeles County for child support and TANF. The L.A. County Board of Supervisors also supported collaboration. The effort to overcome “departmental silos” led to the creation of an interagency work group that explored ways to exchange information, co-locate staff, and pursue collaboration.
- **Co-Location:** At least two child support interviewers are housed in each of the 25 public assistance agency offices in Los Angeles County. These staff members are responsible for helping to conduct intake interviews with clients applying for public assistance.
- **Automation:** The automated computer system for the IV-A agency, LEADER, is programmed not to approve a case for public assistance if the field for the identity of the noncustodial parent is left blank and does not contain a name or “Don’t Know.”
- **Information Exchange:** On a nightly basis, the IV-A agency updates child support and keeps the agency apprised of new cases and changes in household composition and addresses for older shared cases.
- **Communication and Relationship Building:** On a quarterly basis, top-level representatives of the IV-A and IV-D agencies meet to discuss their systems and the automatic interface between the two that conveys information on a nightly basis. The agency also has monthly advisory board meetings with department heads and

advocates. In addition, the head of the child support agency was formerly the head of the public assistance agency.

- **Case Prioritization:** Child support participates in workshops that the IV-A agency holds for clients who are about to reach their time limits and exit from public assistance.

Areas Identified for Improvement

Despite these efforts at coordination, Los Angeles County managers of the two agencies identified many obstacles to more effective collaboration, including the following:

- **Limited Information on Cooperation Requirements, Noncooperation, and Compliance:** Many applicants for public assistance come to their child support interview without the documents about the noncustodial parents that would help with location. Those who fail to appear for a child support interview are reported to IV-A and are subject to a sanction for noncooperation. The request for sanction and the notification for compliance are both done by paper. IV-A workers could do a better job of telling applicants what information to bring to the IV-D interview.
- **Limited Access to Information on Automated Systems:** Child support workers have access to computer screens on the IV-A agency's automated computer system, but public assistance workers do not have access to information on the IV-D agency's system.
- **Limited Exchange of Information on Automated Systems:** Although the IV-A agency sends information to the IV-D through a nightly automated exchange process, child support does not routinely send information to IV-A on their shared caseload, with the effect that public assistance workers do not know the child support status of their clients with respect to orders and payments.
- **Limited Training:** Front-line workers in the public assistance agency receive training on the mission of the child support agency and the role that child support can play in self-sufficiency. Front-line workers in the child support agency are not trained on the mission of the public assistance agency and performance requirements that its workers face.

- **Limited Attention to Prioritizing Cases:** IV-A agency workers would like the child support agency to focus extra attention on clients who are about to exit public assistance, but child support does not prioritize cases for expedited treatment in this manner. Many clients exiting from public assistance fail to show up for workshops on self-sufficiency that feature child support presenters.
- **Limited Interagency Relationships:** Front-line workers in the child support and public assistance agencies have little exposure to one another and limited opportunity to develop personal relationships.

Developing a Child Support–TANF Action Plan (June 2004 Conference)

At the June 2004 conference, representatives of child support and public assistance agencies in Los Angeles County developed an Action Plan that itemized specific steps they intended to take following the conference to improve collaboration. The plan that Los Angeles County developed reiterated that both agencies sought to increase child support orders and revenues in their shared cases.

They identified several activities to take in order to achieve this objective:

- **Conduct a Summit for IV-A and IV-D staff.** The Summit was intended to enhance awareness of the importance of collaboration among all staff.
- **Utilize existing IV-A agency staff who make home visits to discuss child support.** Home visitors routinely meet with families entering public assistance to screen for domestic violence and mental health issues. The Action Plan called for training these workers on child support issues so that they could explain to families the benefits of cooperating with child support and obtaining an order.
- **Identify IV-A and IV-D liaisons.** Liaisons are designated workers who facilitate communication across the two agencies. To enhance their utilization and effectiveness, the Action Plan called for the compilation and maintenance of up-to-date contact information for all liaisons and distribution of this information so that it is accessible to staff in all IV-A districts and IV-D divisions.

- **Add a one-page questionnaire on noncustodial parent (NCP) to the paperwork for re-determinations of public assistance benefits.** The redetermination process is required of all recipients on a yearly basis. The Action Plan called for IV-A workers to compare the NCP information contained on the original intake with the information that is provided at the redetermination in order to spot changes and possibly actionable items.
- **Automate the process of alerting child support to TANF cases in special need of attention.** The Action Plan called for programming the IV-A and IV-D computer systems to notify the child support agency about cases where the TANF grant is below \$100 per month or the recipient has received assistance for 36 or 48 months and is nearing the end of time-limited benefits. The child support worker would check on the payment status of the NCP in such cases with the objective of generating or increasing payments.
- **Recognize child support and child welfare offices with strong performance.** TANF workers who do an especially good job of collecting information about noncustodial parents deserve recognition for their work. Similarly, child support offices doing a good job of collecting money for IV-E should be acknowledged.
- **Conduct ongoing training sessions with IV-A and IV-D workers to explain the importance, goals, and responsibility of both agencies.** Cooperation and collaboration are difficult to promote unless workers understand what can be accomplished jointly, and the requirements under which partner agencies operate.

Implementation of the Action Plan

Los Angeles lost no time in implementing its Action Plan. On August 23, 2004, the Child Support Services Department and the Department of Public Social Services held their first Blue Ribbon Summit. Held in Montebello, California, the event brought together high-level managers and 400 staff members of the Child Support and Social Services staff for a day-long session designed to define shared goals, strengthen interdepartmental communication, and improve data sharing.

Sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, the event was totally unprecedented in size and mission. It also served as a kick-off to implementing in day-to-day program operations the Action Plan identified at the Washington, D.C., conference in June.

In the course of emphasizing the benefits of collaboration and working together, the speakers made the following key points:

- A key to collaboration is learning what happens in other departments, meeting new people, and exchanging ideas and comments on how to work more effectively together.
- With 75 percent of its referrals coming from DPSS, and over \$6 billion in child support debt accumulated, it is vital for CSSD staff to build relationships with DPSS.
- Working together, both agencies can help children and families more than they can accomplish alone.
- Despite increases in child support collections of 21 percent over five years, overall performance falls below national averages creating a risk of financial sanctions and outsourcing of services.
- A sanction against the child support agency would affect DPSS since the TANF block grant would be reduced.
- Working together effectively requires DPSS and CSSD staff to understand each other's organization and be aware of the benefits of collaboration.

A breakout session allowed groups of workers to engage in cross-departmental discussions about each of the action items and to identify the steps pertaining to their implementation. These recommendations were subsequently reviewed by work-groups for feasibility.

The following actions were implemented:

- **Improve the amount and quality of child support information collected from applicants and recipients of public assistance.** CSSD would interview TANF participants at redetermination and explain the benefits of child support at that time. CSSD would continue to maintain two to three child support workers at every IV-A

agency office and workers would help to convey the child support message to applicants and recipients of public assistance.

- **Create a Family Services Unit at one building to maximize collaboration and service delivery objectives.** An office would be opened in South Los Angeles that housed the child support, TANF, and child welfare agencies in a single site. It was expected that the comprehensive, one-stop model would ensure that clients were served in a comprehensive and convenient manner. The format was also expected to enhance worker communication and collaboration.
- **Intervene in cases exiting public assistance.** DPSS would continue to send to CSSD for evaluation and possible action a monthly file of families who exit public assistance.
- **Conduct a thorough, one-time cross-agency training on the purpose and process of collecting NCP information.** Train staff on procedures, forms, and other mechanics associated with collecting information about NCPs. Emphasize the importance of NCP information in the child support process and the benefits of child support for self-sufficiency. Use two Training Specialists from each agency to develop a four-hour joint training program that would be delivered to a targeted audience of approximately 3,150 employees.
- **Maintain a continuous training effort for new employees.** Continue to jointly provide training to new incoming workers at the DPSS Training Academy, on a monthly basis, and CSSD as needed.
- **Train IV-A workers to access relevant information on the automated system for child support.** Conduct training on the use of the CSSD computer system by purchasing and installing computers in four DPSS District offices in order to view specified financial screens.
- **Improve the performance of liaisons.** Conduct specialized training with liaisons from each district, division, and department so that they are better able to answer questions. Create new resources and tools that they can fax or email to workers in both agencies, including the development of a small, tabulated, reference,

desktop notebook containing DPSS and CSSD documents and information.

- **Develop joint goals that track with inter-agency collaboration.** Identify overlap between agency goals and underscore the role each agency plays in affecting the performance of a sister agency. Emphasize departmental goals that incorporate the objectives of individual agencies and build a broader sense of accountability and concern.

Child Support and Child Welfare

Collaboration between the Los Angeles County child support and child welfare agencies was also facilitated by the County's participation in a project funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE).

OCSE granted the Center for Policy Research (CPR) funds to improve collaboration between sister agencies in multiple jurisdictions. The project brought together representatives of child welfare and child support agencies in targeted jurisdictions to engage in planning and the development of plans to improve the handling of cases jointly held by both agencies.

Other participating jurisdictions were based in Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

Issues for the Conference

Based on a series of conference calls with representatives of the participating child welfare and child support agencies, CPR developed a conference agenda that incorporated the major concerns of participating jurisdictions. It included the following topics:

Paternity Establishment: Participants were eager to discuss issues pertaining to the establishment of paternity in foster care cases. Ensuring that both child support and child welfare have an identified father with paternity established can be problematic. There may be simultaneous paternity actions in the dependency court and in child support, and paternity establishments are not always conveyed from one setting to another.

In addition, paternity orders established in juvenile court may lack documentation and fail to constitute legal paternity for child support purposes. Since

birth certificates and voluntary paternity acknowledgement information are often filed separately, failure to consult both databases may lead workers to reach erroneous conclusions about paternity.

Location: Location presents a host of challenges for both agencies. Although child support agencies have information about fathers and paternal relatives that would be helpful for placement purposes, it is often legally difficult to share. Both agencies are confused about the information that they can share by law. Allowing child welfare workers direct access to the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) would require congressional action. As a result, the state child support agency must process all requests to FPLS to locate a father for adoption and placement purposes.

Some states cannot process location requests without establishing a child support case. In these states, a request for location assistance by the child welfare agency has workload and performance implications since referrals require opening a child support case even if collections are unlikely.

Staff training: Training was a recognized need by all conference participants. Child welfare workers frequently do not understand the role that child support can play in their cases and the location resources they can access to facilitate the identification of fathers and paternal relatives for placement purposes. Child support workers, on the other hand, have little understanding of the child welfare system and the key goals and pressures that workers face.

Workers in both agencies have little guidance on whom to contact in the opposite agency for assistance. Although several agencies had conducted some limited training activities at some point, none had developed a curriculum or a sustained training program. In addition, both child support and child welfare agencies experience high staff turnover, which necessitates ongoing training.

Staffing arrangements: Conference participants wanted to talk about staffing arrangements that might enhance case coordination. Some states have special child support units that exclusively handle cases that involve state placement. In other jurisdictions, foster care cases are distributed among regular child support workers. The Los Angeles Department of Child Support Services uses regular workers to

handle the bulk of these cases but has a child support worker based at the Department of Children and Family Services to improve case coordination and communication.

Case referral: Child welfare cases are referred to child support using a variety of manual and automated techniques. While some jurisdictions have a fully automated interface whereby all child welfare cases that involve a paid placement are automatically referred to child support in an overnight batch process, others, like jurisdictions in California, rely on a paper referral.

One advantage of the automated process is that cases are referred on a nightly basis and automatically matched with active cases in the child support system. To maximize the utility of child support information and the possibility of identifying fathers for placement and termination purposes, child welfare workers have limited access to the child support system.

Jurisdictions with less automated procedures struggle to process the paper referrals they receive from child welfare and to match them with existing cases in the child support system. They also struggle to identify the type of foster care cases that should be referred to child support. They want to avoid referring cases that open briefly and quickly close. They also want to avoid making referrals where reunification is a case goal and where the collection of child support might impede reunification.

Indeed, to address these concerns and reduce the huge volume of foster care referrals that child support agencies in California were receiving, the state implemented a policy that requires child welfare workers to assess whether the child support referral would present a barrier to reunification and if establishment and enforcement of support are in the best interests of the child. It also required that workers document their determination before making a referral.

Interagency communication: A final concern expressed by personnel in both agencies dealt with communication at later stages of case processing. Child support agencies need to learn about changes in custodial arrangements so that they distribute child support correctly. Child welfare agencies need to know when child support locates noncustodial parents, establishes an order, and collects support.

Development of a Child Support–Child Welfare Action Plan (July 2006 Conference)

Representatives of the Los Angeles County child support and child welfare agency grappled with these issues at a two-day conference held in July 2006. They also developed a locally oriented Action Plan that itemized the specific steps they intended to take following the conference to improve collaboration.

Although there had been meetings between executive-level personnel at the two agencies, there was no organized training program or method of interaction between and among front-line workers. Nor had the new referral criteria adopted in February 2006 requiring that referrals to child support be in the best interests of the child stemmed the flow of foster care cases referred to the child support agency. Indeed, it appeared that child welfare workers were continuing to routinely refer all cases 30 days after a placement had been made, and a retrospective review suggested that one-half of such referrals may have been inappropriate.

The plan that Los Angeles developed focused on implementing California’s policy regarding social workers doing best-interest determinations before making child support referrals. It included the following features:

- Identify and create a list of liaisons for child support and child welfare so that workers have a point person in each geographical area whom they may contact.
- Identify a planning team drawn from representatives of targeted child support and child welfare offices to lead the implementation of the new referral criteria and the development of training for child welfare workers on child support and the new referral criteria.
- Clarify the referral criteria, develop a relevant training program, and conduct it.
- Incorporate cross-agency training in the regular, ongoing training activities for the child support and child welfare agency at the state level and roll out relevant training throughout the state on a routine basis.

Implementation of the Action Plan

As with the earlier project on child support and the public assistance agency, the Department of Child

Support Services and the Department of Children and Family Services lost no time implementing the action items developed at the July 2006 conference.

To equip social workers to reasonably assess whether a referral to child support was in the best interests of a child while the child was in foster care, administrators of the two agencies decided to launch a major drive to educate them about the implications of a referral to CSSD.

It was decided that social workers needed to know that a referral to CSSD results in formal, legal efforts to establish and enforce orders for child support and for medical coverage.

Workers also needed to know that a referral might lead to separate orders against both the mother and the father and that CSSD was required to enforce orders using a variety of techniques including wage withholding, suspensions of driver’s and professional licenses, placing liens against real property, intercepting federal and state tax refunds, and filing charges for contempt of court or criminal prosecution.

This information was expected to help social workers gauge whether a referral would create a barrier to reunification. Workers were expected to take into account the family situation, the employment status of the parents, efforts to reunify, and status of other children in the household.

The policy called for workers to make an individual determination of whether requiring parents to pay child support while the child was in foster care would compromise a parent’s ability to meet the requirements of a reunification plan, the child’s current or future financial needs, and/or the needs of other children in the household.

Per new regulations, workers were required to document their decision on the child support referral in the case file in a timely manner. They were also required to re-do their assessment each year. If workers failed to complete a best-interest document in a timely manner, the case was referred to child support.

As previously noted, prior to the conference, there had been no change in the level of referrals to child support, suggesting that social workers were neglecting

to conduct a best-interest assessment and completing the required form. As a result, nearly all cases were being automatically referred to child support. This translated into approximately 1,300 new cases referred to child support on a monthly basis.

CSSD and DCSF took several steps to boost compliance with the new policy.

2006 Annual Child Support Training Conference:

A special track of workshops was introduced at the 2006 Annual Child Support Training Conference dealing with collaboration. One session featured the importance of a connection between child support and child welfare at interpersonal and organizational levels. The session was designed to explain to child support audiences the important role that child welfare plays in ensuring the safety of vulnerable children and how the child support program might support that effort.

Creation of Interagency Work Group and

Identification of Target Offices: A work group was created to implement the action plans developed at the July 2006 conference. It consisted of state and local level administrators. Three child welfare offices were targeted for early implementation efforts: North Hollywood, Metro North, and Torrance.

Collection of Baseline and Followup Data: It was decided to collect preliminary information on child support referral activity at the three target offices prior to and following the conduct of special training on the new referral policy. It was decided to monitor the incidence of referrals to child support due to the failure to submit a best-interest determination form.

Operationalize the New Policy: It was acknowledged that workers might be confused by the new best-interest policy and that DCSF policy staff needed to make it more concrete and understandable.

Develop Training Modules: CSSD and DCFS personnel collaborated to develop the slides that would comprise the training module on the new policy and the implications of a referral to child support.

Present the Plan to the Executive Team: The Work Group presented the action plan and the relevant

implementation steps it implied to senior level personnel of the two agencies.

Update List of Agency Liaisons and Define Role:

CSSD and DCSF personnel worked on identifying a worker selected by the administrator in each agency at the office level who would serve as a liaison.

The role of the liaison was defined as a troubleshooter to answer specific questions on district cases. Another duty of the liaison was to do random quality reviews and see if the new referral policy was being implemented. On May 30, 2007, the liaison list was updated. To stimulate the use of liaisons, it was decided to establish criteria for their use.

Provide Limited Access to Child Support

Information: A limited number of child welfare workers in the three pilot offices were given access to the computerized child support system in order to obtain locate information about fathers in child welfare cases in a timely manner. The workers given access have direct responsibility for conducting appropriate searches for termination and placement actions.

Expand Training Efforts to Other County Offices:

By the end of June 2007, all current employees in DCFS had been trained on the new policy and child support enforcement remedies.

Conduct Blue Ribbon Summit: On September 13, 2007, a Blue Ribbon Summit was held for 174 child support, 175 family services, and 50 child welfare workers. The small group sessions provided workers in the three agencies an opportunity to discuss issues of mutual interest, such as the program to compromise state-owed arrears (COAP).

Hold Office Level Training: On December 5, 2006, two two-hour training sessions on the new policy were held for social workers and managers in the Torrance Office. Approximately 50 workers attended each of the mandatory sessions, comprising about 95 percent of those targeted to attend. Attendees were surprised about the best-interest policy, and many expressed frustration over the requirement to conduct an assessment.

They recommended that trainers include more real-life scenarios and examples of actual cases to

illustrate how to make best-interest determinations. With respect to child support, they suggested less information on the process of establishing an order but found the information on child support enforcement to be an eye opener and effective in persuading workers why they should think twice before making a referral.

Did the training program affect the rate of referrals to child support? In May 2007, CSSD personnel reported receiving 374 referrals to child support. Prior to the conduct of the training program, there had been approximately 900 referrals a month. Agency administrators concluded that the training had reduced referrals by nearly two-thirds.

As agency administrators concluded that the training was beginning to show the desired outcome with new cases, the problem of conducting individual best-interest determinations for 35,000 existing foster care cases came to the fore.

Individual case determinations are supposed to be conducted in connection with the annual placement redetermination. At that time, workers are required to assess whether child support enforcement should be abated and/or arrears should be reduced. If their determination is that child support enforcement should be suspended, the child support agency would be required to file a formal modification procedure.

In response, child support began to explore the feasibility of establishing an expedited calendar to modify orders in existing foster care cases to zero in order to stop enforcement and modify existing arrears balances. Alternatively, the agency was interested in its ability to close such cases without a legal hearing.

In September 2007, the Los Angeles Board of County Supervisors agreed that child support orders established prior to the new referral criteria could be set to \$0 without a formal modification. Instead, the child support agency would file a notice to the court contending that continued child support enforcement was not in the child's best interests. This decision was expected to affect approximately 6,000 cases with current support accruing.

Collaboration in Los Angeles County: Findings and Lessons Learned

Findings

During March and April 2008, CPR researchers contacted key representatives of the child support, child welfare, and TANF agencies to discuss interagency collaboration and the perceived impacts and benefits of these efforts.

CPR designed and administered a brief online questionnaire to 273 child support workers who had participated in various training and conferences designed to promote collaboration. It elicited their reactions to interagency collaboration and its perceived benefits. A total of 98 workers took the survey, for a response rate of 36 percent.

Finding One: Collaboration Has to Be Embraced at the Top Levels of Agency Management

Administrators in the child support, TANF, and child welfare agencies agree that the impetus for collaboration came from the top levels of management. They acknowledge the leadership role of the chief administrative officer and the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors who recognized that all three departments were frequently serving the same clients and that “departmental silos” were contrary to the delivery of services in an effective and efficient manner. These views are shared by the heads of all three agencies. As one department head put it:

All three department heads are committed to collaboration. We know that we serve the same population and that service delivery is not effective when we just focus on our own mission. We are interconnected.

Mandates for collaboration by top-level administrators help to get lower-level staff “on board.” As one manager explained, “Everyone has their own workload issues, so if you get the mandate high up, it is better.”

Another factor that spurred administrators and the Board of Supervisors to push for collaboration was the lawsuit brought by a Los Angeles teenager who sued the County for keeping her in foster care for 10 years without notifying her biological father, who continued to pay child support without realizing his daughter was no longer with her mother. In response, the Board of Supervisors passed a motion to require collaboration between and among agencies. Administrators acknowledge that this litigation was “a great impetus for child support to collaborate with child welfare.”

In recognition of these interconnections, departments have begun to develop performance outcome expectations that are consistent with more holistic service delivery models. To reinforce this approach, agencies are now being required to develop joint goals and agencies are assessed on the contributions they make to the goal of another agency. It works like this:

We came up with goals for our individual departments and then the administrators looked at the overlap and told us where we needed to work with another agency to be successful.

The development and measurement of performance outcomes that reflect joint agency objectives is critical to the adoption of holistic service approaches. Administrators have long complained that they are

asked to consider sister agencies in their service delivery but measured only on narrow agency-specific outcomes. The identification of overlapping goals makes interdependence more explicit and reinforces collaborative behaviors.

Finding Two: Collaboration Requires that One Agency Take a Lead Role

Line staff and administrators agree that the child support agency has played a key role in pursuing themes of collaboration and implementing the action plans developed at the various conferences. As one administrator put it:

When we came back from our meetings in Washington D.C., I thought we should follow up, so I made phone calls to the other agencies. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn't?

Line staff perceive an imbalance in the buy-in by the three agencies, too. The root of the imbalance is functional. While the objectives of all three agencies are enhanced by the performance of partner agencies, the connection is most palpable for child support. According to child support liaisons:

Child support is so dependent on information the other agencies provide, but it isn't mutual. We aren't top priority for them and they don't really need our information. We are much more dependent on the other departments than they are on us.

Administrators of the three agencies see the investment in collaboration as more balanced than do line staff. As one administrator explained:

We have built relationships so when we want to accomplish something we have folks who can use it.

Finding Three: Collaboration Has Had Tangible Benefits for Agency Performance

The chief benefit of collaboration between child support and the child welfare agency was a dramatic reduction in inappropriate cases that were referred to child support. As previously noted, workers in the Department of Children and Family Services had routinely referred all cases resulting in out-of-home care to the child support agency.

Since payment is rarely achieved in such cases, a large number of referrals from child welfare agencies can depress performance measures for the child support agency. The existence of the best-interest policy, which directed social workers to make determinations of the appropriateness of a referral to child support on a case-by-case basis, provided a vehicle for child support to achieve the reductions in referrals that it wanted. The key was to make the policy operational and to implement it. As an administrator recalled:

The best-interest policy had been on the books. Through this initiative, we wrote procedure and policy and made it happen. So it was a perfect vehicle at the right time.

The perceived impact of the collaboration at the administrative level is extremely positive. Child support managers term it "a huge success." They say that well over 90 percent of referrals are now appropriate and that the rate of referrals has dropped by approximately 30 percent.

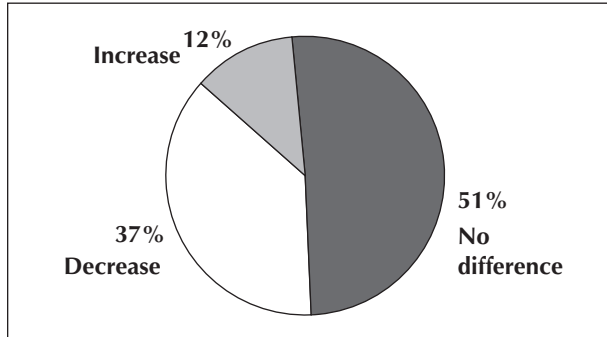
Line workers were less positive about the impact of the best-interest policy on child support referrals. Although 74 percent of surveyed workers were aware of the new policy regarding referral of placement cases to child support, half (51%) saw no difference in the new policy on referral volume. On the other hand, 37 percent indicated that referrals had dropped as a result of the new policy and only 12 percent indicated that it had led to an increase in referrals.

Finding Four: Collaboration Requires the Institutionalization of a Structural Mechanism to Promote Communication

A key outcome of the collaboration efforts child support initiated with both child welfare and the TANF agency was the designation of special workers to serve as liaisons with the other agencies. The goal is to facilitate communication between agencies by identifying workers to field calls from both agencies, answer questions, and troubleshoot specific case problems. Liaison duties are added to the regular duties handled by workers. One liaison explained her job this way:

I see what I do as a handshake out to the other agencies.

Figure 1: Impact of New Policy on Referral Volume (n=43)



Child support liaisons support the effort and believe that it leads to improved relationships and exchanges of information.

It is a valid, good activity. It makes sense to build relationships with sister agencies.

They observe differences in the historic relationship between child support and the two agencies in question. While child support and TANF have long been involved with one another, the relationship between child support and child welfare is much newer and less defined.

Our department has a better, symbiotic relationship with DPSS. DCFS is more foreign to us. What we can do for them and what they can do for us has to be explained. It is a newer communication.

They also concede that there is room for improvement. Most workers still rely on their informal ties with people in other agencies and only use liaisons “if they can’t get what they want through normal channels and contacts.” They also are frustrated by the lack of responsiveness of liaisons in other agencies and recommend the initiation of regular, face-to-face meetings with their counterparts in other agencies. Among the problems they identify are rosters of liaisons that are not always kept up-to-date and a lack of timely response.

Although the various Summits and meetings that have been conducted to promote collaboration and communication are viewed as “a step in the right direction,” they are not seen as sufficient. Most interviewed liaisons reported that periodic, informal meetings of liaisons across the affected agencies are

required to build the relationships needed to ensure optimal coordination across agencies.

The summit was a step in the right direction but it wasn’t a great networking forum. There were too many speeches and structured activities. We are moving in the right direction, but we don’t meet with our counterparts in partner agencies yet. It is hard to get everyone together on the same day. The next step is to meet with our counterparts in other departments.

Personal relationships are viewed as critical to information exchange and interagency collaboration. Liaisons are perceived to be more responsive to their counterparts in other agencies if they have established a personal connection. They are also less bound by rules and more flexible about confidentiality issues.

One thing I’ve noticed over the years is that once you get to know a person, they are more likely to share information. And they are less rigid about confidentiality.

One suggestion that liaisons made was to hold separate, quarterly meetings of liaisons for the agencies that deal with child support and TANF and child support and child welfare. Once relationships between these workers were developed, meetings could be conducted on an annual or semi-annual basis.

In their questionnaires, child support line workers responded to questions about their experiences with liaisons in a manner that was consistent with those expressed by liaisons themselves. Approximately half of the responding child support workers estimated that they “never” have contacted a liaison at the TANF agency (51%) and almost half (45%) reported no contact with a liaison at the child welfare agency. Approximately one-quarter of respondents indicated that they had contacted a liaison at each agency once or twice (23% to 27%). A fifth (21% and 19%) reported five or more contacts.

Workers contacted liaisons in both agencies for virtually identical reasons. Almost two-thirds of the contacts (64% and 61%) were to obtain or clarify

information pertaining to a specific case. About a fifth of the contacts (19% and 25%) dealt with general policies. An identical 23% of the contacts with liaisons in both agencies concerned the resolution of a case problem, and approximately one-fifth (19% to 25%) dealt with troubleshooting complex cases.

The 50 workers in the child support agency who reported contacting liaisons in the TANF and child welfare agencies rated their usefulness in similar ways. About one-third judged them to be “very helpful,” one half rated them as “somewhat helpful,” and the remaining fraction gave more equivocal assessments of their utility in both the TANF (13%) and child welfare (18%) agency setting.

Finding Five: Collaboration is Supported by Good Training Initiatives

Training is a key feature of every agency; new workers are routinely exposed to extensive training regimens covering departmental policies and procedures, computer systems, and job applications. It is far less common for agencies to try to expose new and existing workers to material that pertains to sister agencies.

The responses of administrators and workers in Los Angeles County, however, make it clear that inter-agency training is critical to effective collaboration. Indeed, the major perceived benefit of the summit and training efforts conducted with workers to date was learning about the role of partner agencies and the duties of workers in other departments. Child support workers reported “astonishment” when they learned what their counterparts in other agencies do on their jobs. According to child support workers,

“getting educated about what our counterparts do facilitates collaborative relationships.”

Administrators feel that the training on the best-interest policy for child welfare workers was extremely effective. When social workers became aware of the enforcement process and the aggressive measures child support agencies take to obtain payments, they were more mindful about whether a referral was appropriate. Workers learned that “without intervention by the social worker, child support enforcement would start.” As a result, they began to refrain from making referrals in cases where family reunification was a goal and the pursuit of child support might present a barrier.

As a result of the training, social workers saw child support as a hardship and realized that they could get families out of the burden. The response was very positive.

Training initiatives with the TANF agency focused on the role and function of the child support agency and how actions by the TANF worker affect child support outcomes. Once again, administrators and trainers reported that the sessions were eye opening.

People were shocked to hear that we helped families the way we do. That child support is a piece of self sufficiency. That the information we ask them to collect really affects us.

As a result of the initiative, information on child support is now incorporated in the training for new workers provided by the Department of Public and Social Services. Information on the best-interest policy is a standard feature of training offered by the Department

Figure 2: Respondent Contact with TANF Liaison (n=92)

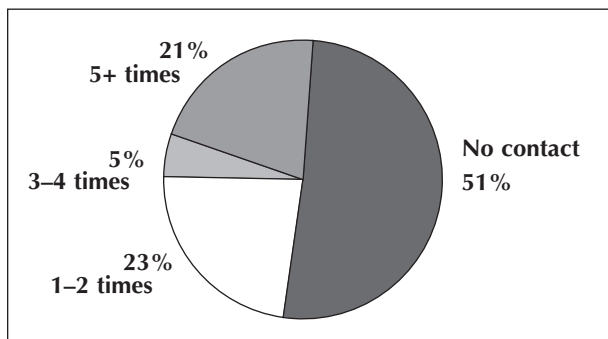
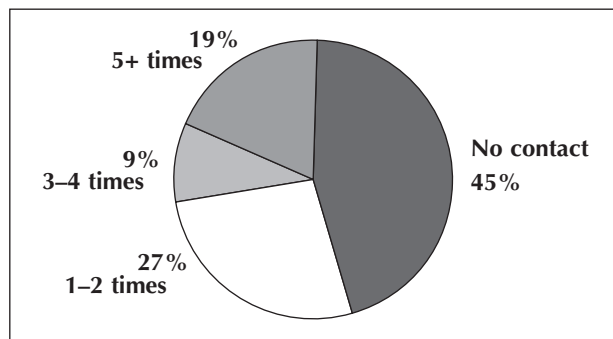


Figure 3: Respondent Contact with Child Welfare Liaison (n=93)



of Children and Family Services. Both agencies use their own staff to deliver the training, now that it has been developed, piloted, tested, and delivered to trainers at the sister agencies. Child support hopes to extend its training efforts with sister agencies and anticipates conducting training on COAP, a program to help reduce accumulated arrears. Another training objective is to get workers in other agencies familiar with the child support system so that they can access selected screens and obtain relevant information.

Finding Six: Agency Size Makes Collaboration Challenging

Agency size features in every aspect of the collaborative efforts pursued by child support, TANF, and the child welfare agency. Trainers report that it took a full year to get all DPSS workers in Los Angeles County exposed to the child support training because of the scale of the agency and the number of offices that needed to be covered. The training on the best-interest policy was piloted in three DCFS offices before it was refined and turned over to DCFS trainers for full implementation.

Agency size also inhibits the relationship building process. There are 14 designated liaisons for child support and TANF across both agencies and 28 designated liaisons for child support and the child welfare agency. Although everyone acknowledges that joint meetings between the liaisons in both agencies on a periodic basis would improve collaboration, the logistical barriers are severe. As one worker put it, “It is hard to get everyone together on the same day.”

Finding Seven: Collaboration Requires System Interaction and Overcoming Confidentiality Challenges

Child support has developed automated interfaces with both DPSS and DCFS. Information is exchanged on a nightly basis with DPSS. Information is exchanged on a monthly basis with DCFS. Both automated interfaces are temporary ones that will be radically altered in several months when child support converts to a statewide, automated system. At that point, the interfaces between child support and its sister agencies will occur at the state level.

Systems personnel at all three agencies report that confidentiality is the biggest challenge they face in the effort to maximize communication and coordination

across agencies. Confidentiality concerns exist at the federal, state, and local levels. Policies have become stricter in recent years; data exchanges have become more difficult rather than easier. For example, countywide security policies require that all file transfers be encrypted. There must be a “good business reason” to accomplish any data exchange across agencies, and they must be approved by county attorneys. All workers privy to information in sister agency systems must sign updated confidentiality statements on an annual basis.

Another challenge is the need to develop and use common identifiers to facilitate case linkages across agencies. Contrary to popular view, the barriers to data exchanges are policy driven rather than technological.

Security and confidentiality are huge issues surrounding data exchanges. There are no technological barriers—they can be worked out. It is all about policy and law and common identifiers.

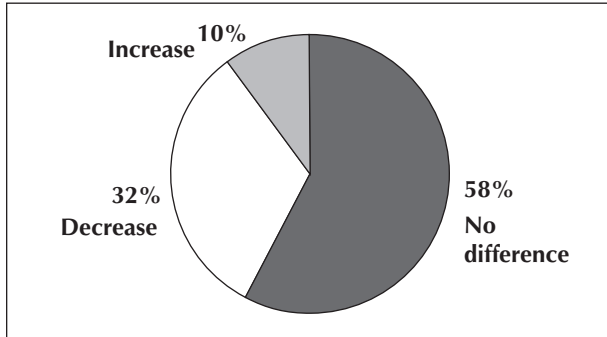
As with other aspects of effective collaboration, personal relationships between and among actors in sister agencies are critical and perhaps the only way to overcome the considerable and growing barriers to information transfers. Information technology personnel for all three agencies report that regular communication and good working relationships are necessary ingredients.

We got to know each other through these collaboration projects. We are in constant contact with one another. We coordinate. We take it upon ourselves to be part of a decision making group to make collaboration happen.

Finding Eight: Collaboration Can Reduce Workload Burdens and Improve Agency Performance

Collaboration activities impose new burdens on staff. It also demands a “psychological change.” As administrators observe, “They need to see themselves as serving a family and not working in a particular department.” All three department heads report initial staff opposition to collaborative initiatives and the need to invest some time and energy in presenting it to staff. As one administrator put it:

Figure 4: Impact of Collaboration with Child Welfare on Child Support Workload (n=88)



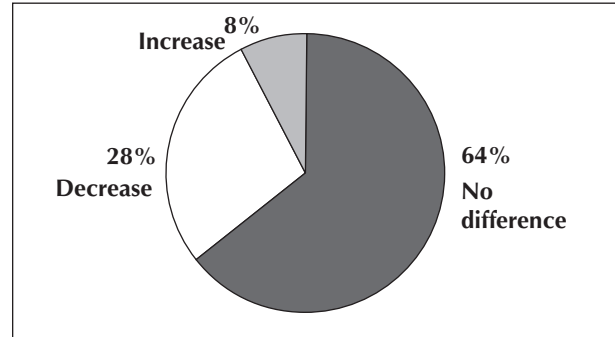
At the upper level, relationships are excellent. But down in the trenches, it is harder.

Staff barriers, however, are far from immutable. Although there is initial resistance to collaborative interventions, they are perceived to be embraced over time. The summits and training sessions are believed to help. Once staff “sees what we each do,” they are more inclined to be sympathetic and take a broader view of their job. Another factor that helps collaboration is relative equality of salaries across agencies. In the absence of big salary disparities, workers are able to adopt a common “county mission,” and are less divided by parochial, department-specific concerns.

The responses of 100 child support workers to a questionnaire about interagency collaboration and its impact on their personal work situation tends to support these views. While most child support workers indicated that collaboration with the TANF agency and the child welfare agency had no impact on the child support workload (64% and 58%), nearly a third reported that it led to workload decreases. For example, 28 percent of respondents reported that the child support workload declined as a result of collaborations with the TANF agency and 32 percent reported workload declines due to collaboration with the child welfare agency. Only a fraction (8% to 10%) reported workload increases due to these collaborative efforts.

With few exceptions, interviewed child support workers report that the agencies are “very” or “somewhat” cooperative. Approximately one-fifth of respondents rated levels of cooperation at the highest levels, while two-thirds to three-quarters rated cooperation at moderate levels. Only a small

Figure 5: Impact of Collaboration with TANF on Child Support Workload (n=88)



fraction (8% to 14%) characterized the level of cooperation negatively.

Perhaps most importantly, a majority of responding workers viewed the child support agency as doing a better job in virtually every aspect of behavior we inquired about. This included exchanging information with child welfare (61%), collecting child support in foster care cases (66%), helping child welfare locate parents (75%), and sharing information with TANF (61%).

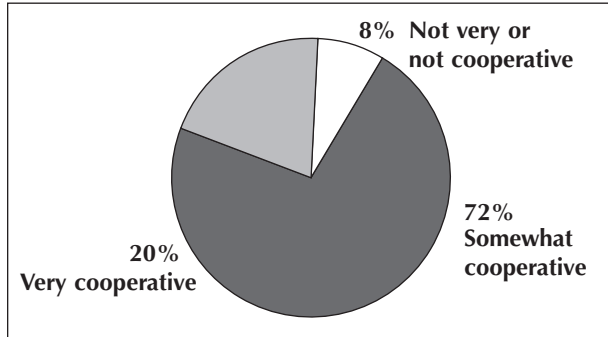
Finding Nine: Collaboration Can Result in Exciting New Service Delivery Formats

In January 2008, child support was the last of four departments to move into a new facility that houses four public agencies. It offers residents of south Los Angeles access to services dealing with public assistance, mental health, child welfare, and child support. The service delivery model reflects a desire to enhance customer service and coordinate service delivery among a population that is frequently being served by two or more of the participating agencies.

The co-location facility is viewed as a model for service delivery and an opportunity for the development of more focused collaborative efforts. Indeed, without additional training and planning, co-location in and of itself does not guaranteed coordination or collaboration. The managers of the four resident agencies are making concerted efforts to ensure that proximity translates into service coordination and more holistic treatments for clients.

The first step of the process has involved training the managers of the four co-located agencies on the mission and services that their sister agencies offer.

Figure 6: How Cooperative Are Child Support and TANF (n=76)



The training process was vital. As one manager explained, “Each department didn’t know what the others did.” This is being extended to supervisors, and, over time, the overview will be presented to the worker level.

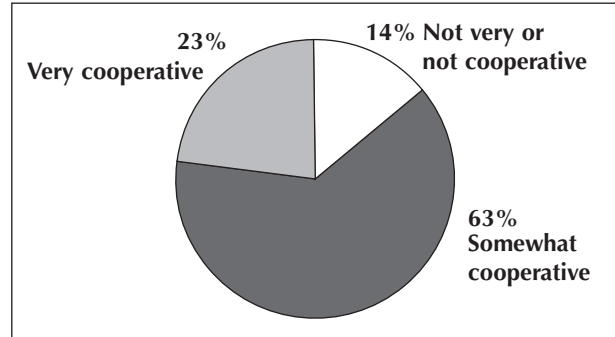
Managers and staff are also embarking on some joint projects. For example, the four agencies are participating in a Lobby Project aimed at directing individuals to the appropriate agency. Each agency will donate staff on a rotating basis to serve as a greeter at each building entry. Greeters will direct customers to the appropriate agency intake area and hopefully avoid having people wait on the wrong line for service.

Another joint venture being planned involves the creation of interagency assessment teams to handle walk-ins and others who come to the building seeking help. The goal of the project is to use personnel donated by each agency to screen individuals who come to the building without an appointment and direct them to either a building-based agency or some other entity in the county that might provide assistance. The on-duty worker would be able to determine whether the individual who appeared with a problem had an open case in the building.

Still a third venture being planned is a document imaging project that will allow all four departments to image case files held by sister agencies. The goal is to become paperless and make agency-specific case files accessible to one another by using a common server.

Although the agencies are only a few months into their co-location experience, managers are enthusiastic and public response has been satisfactory.

Figure 7: How Cooperative Are Child Support and Child Welfare (n=76)

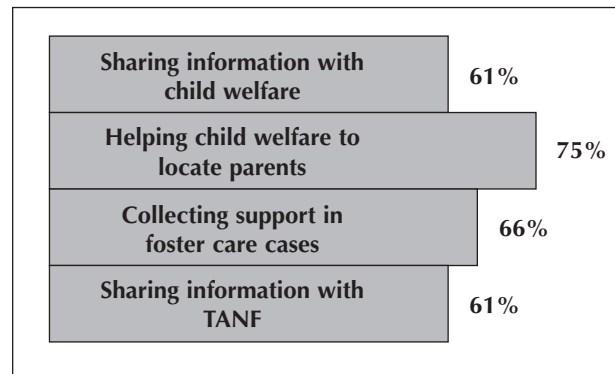


Staff are able to get faster service from their sister agencies; clients are being seen and their problems are being addressed the first time they come to the building.

Being in the same building means faster service at all staff levels. If we need something like a birth certificate, we just go upstairs. Sharing information is so much easier. And for clients it is much better. We make appointments, but we also see walk-ins on the same day. Our goal is to handle everyone when they come in the first time. I ask customers on the way out what they think. They are happier. They are definitely experiencing less wait time.

The benefits of co-location and greater coordination are expected to be long term. Department heads hope that the arrangement will mean that agencies will be able to see the “clients we need to see, that they will be in a better frame of mind when we see them, and that we will be able to resolve other ancillary issues.”

Figure 8: Child Support Worker Report that the Agency IS Doing Better in Recent Years in ... (n=91)



Lessons Learned to Foster Effective Collaboration

During the past few years, the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department (CSSD) has made an aggressive effort to improve coordination with two agencies with which it shares many clients and cases:

- Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS)
- Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)

These efforts were abetted by the agencies' participation in two initiatives funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and facilitated by the authors of this report to encourage child support programs (IV-D) to more effectively work with agencies that deal with TANF (IV-A) and foster care within child welfare (IV-E).

The experiences of the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department in promoting collaboration with two major social services agencies with which it shares many families and cases leads to the generation of a number of lessons on how to further interagency coordination and collaboration.

Lesson One: Effective Collaboration Requires a Push from the Top. Collaboration efforts take extra time and energy. In the short term, they may appear to detract from the performance objectives of individual agencies. Making collaboration a priority requires a "push from the top." Child support managers credit top legislators and administrators in Los Angeles County for providing the impetus for the collaboration effort and the momentum to sustain it. Resolve at the top was fueled by a lawsuit brought by a long-separated father and daughter against the child welfare agency, which illustrated the dangers of failing to collaborate.

Lesson Two: To achieve effective collaboration, tenacity is required. Directives from the top do not immediately translate into reality without a lot of persistence and follow through. One agency tends to assume a lead role, and the manager of that entity needs to "stay on top" of the effort. It requires "constant reinforcement." As one administrator put it, "We sent reminder, after reminder about meetings

or things we had agreed to do. It involves a lot of cajoling and constant follow up."

Lesson Three: To achieve effective collaboration, realistic expectations must be set. Collaboration is not everyone's top priority. Successful efforts require that participants have perspective and realistic expectations about what partner agencies will do and their time frames for performance. Partner agencies have other important goals and deadlines. Managers say that it is important to acknowledge these diffuse and conflicting pressures and "cut other participants some slack."

Lesson Four: To achieve effective collaboration, leaders much focus on a few key objectives: The planning meetings resulted in the generation of a long list of proposed interventions that were subsequently pared back to a manageable list. In its collaboration efforts with both the TANF and child welfare agency, the child support agency wound up focusing on developing and improving performance of interagency liaisons, and in developing and conducting cross-agency training programs. Other more elaborate plans that involved new staffing or technological innovations were dropped or postponed pending implementation of top-ranked interventions that could be accomplished more quickly.

Lesson Five: To achieve effective collaboration, relationships must be built and maintained. Ultimately, cooperation across agencies requires building relationships with individuals in sister agencies. Managers emphasize the importance of connecting with their responsive counterparts in sister agencies, cultivating these ties, and reinforcing them over time. These individuals are then equipped to "sell" ideas to others in their agencies. While technology and geography definitely feature in promoting or hindering collaboration, the consensus is that positive collaborative efforts across agencies are still rooted in human relationships and that attention should be paid to their cultivation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jessica Pearson is the Director of the Center for Policy Research (CPR), a private nonprofit research agency founded in 1981 to work with public and private sector service providers to conduct research to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of human service agencies and the justice system.

During the past 25 years, Dr. Pearson has conducted numerous studies related to improving the performance of social service agencies, courts, and the criminal justice system. Among her recent studies are work related to early intervention in child support cases to improve payment and performance, programs to compromise on child support arrears, and programs to enhance father involvement in child support cases. Dr. Pearson has also conducted assessments of the federal Access and Visitation Grant Programs, policies for low-income NCPs, and methods of improving the delivery of child support services in the largest states. Dr. Pearson has also led demonstration projects on child support and incarcerated and paroled parents and has completed projects dealing with efforts to educate inmates about child support and modify their orders and incorporate child support in reentry services in numerous states.

Dr. Pearson has published in numerous social science and practitioner journals including: *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, *Justice System Journal*, *Policy and Practice*, and the *Journal of Social Issues*.

Nancy Thoennes is the Associate Director of the Center for Policy Research. She has conducted research involving juvenile and family courts in approximately 30 states. Her research has considered models of legal representation for children in child abuse and neglect cases; a national evaluation of the Court Improvement Projects (with Pal-Tech, Inc.); integrated approaches to managing multi-case families in the criminal justice system; and an evaluation of Family Group Decision-Making in Child Protection Cases in Colorado. Dr. Thoennes has also conducted research on dependency mediation in over 13 jurisdictions.

In the broader field of family violence, Dr. Thoennes helped to conduct the study *Violence and Threats of Violence in America*. Funded by the National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this study involved telephone interviews with a national probability sample of 8,000 adult women and 8,000 adult men to gather data on the extent, nature and consequences of various forms of violence and threats of violence over the lifespan.



KEY CONTACT INFORMATION

To contact the authors:

Jessica Pearson

Director

Center for Policy Research

1570 Emerson Street

Denver Colorado 80218

(303) 837-1555

e-mail: jspearson@centerforpolicyresearch.org

Nancy Thoennes

Associate Director

Center for Policy Research

1570 Emerson Street

Denver Colorado 80218

(303) 837-1555

e-mail: nthoennes@centerforpolicyresearch.org



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For additional information, contact:

Jonathan D. Breul

Executive Director

IBM Center for The Business of Government

1301 K Street, NW

Fourth Floor, West Tower

Washington, DC 20005

(202) 515-4504, fax: (202) 515-4375

e-mail: businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com

website: www.businessofgovernment.org