

Child Support Report

OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT

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Blog

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New OCSE Website

Have you seen the new OCSE website? It's still under construction, so keep watching for more changes from the old to the new.



This issue of the Child Support Report offers a few ideas, tips and trends in the ever-expanding field of e-communications.

Contra Costa County Promotes E-Communications to Engage Parents

By Linda M. Dippel, Director
Department of Child Support Services
Contra Costa, CA

How can child support agencies provide outstanding customer service without out-of-pocket expenses? The answer is by using social media and other modern electronic communications. I encourage every child support agency to add social media networking and electronic methods for broadcasting and client messaging to its public outreach toolbox. These are 21st Century ways of communicating globally.

Facing Concerns

The Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services, located near San Francisco, has enjoyed years of success using social media communication. We know that most people have a cell phone and satellite service of some kind. Many of us have a Facebook account to communicate with friends, or use an online banking service, or receive our bills by email. Just like we do, many of our clients routinely use the web to obtain information and conduct their personal business.

So what's stopping more of us from creating a Facebook page for our organization? Some organizations are concerned that they'll need to add a staff person. In Contra

Costa, three department administrators each spend 1 to 2 hours a week to keep an eye on the page and post information.

Many are not willing to start a Facebook account because they are hesitant to start a dialogue with clients or afraid they'll get angry comments. While we are able, we have never needed to delete angry or derogatory comments, or any that contain personal information. If a comment

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People who ride the Bay Area Rapid Transit can see this ad (and another on page 2) in the stations.

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
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points to an upset client—and we’ve only had a couple—we respond with another comment that’s positive, clarifies any misinformation, and invites the person to call or visit to discuss the situation.

Easy, Fast, Friendly

Contra Costa’s goal is to disperse timely information and give individuals a forum to ask questions and get answers. This is no different than answering a phone call or having someone come into our office. Imagine not having to hold on the line for the next available operator or spend money on gas. In addition, individuals may find an answer to their question when they read a response to another.

Facebook gives clear instructions to start a business page. Through Facebook, your office can engage with your customers via a modern method that makes them feel comfortable. E-communication also is ecologically friendly and lets you save money by not sending correspondence through the Postal



**Linda Dippel, Director,
Contra Costa Department
of Child Support Services**

Service. In Contra Costa, we know e-communication is faster, more secure and cost-effective. When was the last time you saw postage going down in price?

We also post information on our Facebook page to publicize family-centered events in other agencies (parenting classes, kids’ parties, low-income housing, job training); local, low-cost family activities (national park free-entry day, plays, festivals); and office closings and planned computer system outages.

Location Tool

Have you thought about locating individuals through their Facebook page? Here’s an example: When we received a returned child support check in the mail, we checked Facebook and found someone who matched our customer. We left her a Facebook message to contact us. She did, and we forwarded a check for \$10,000. Because we don’t want to miss an opportunity to save a tree, we also talked to her about direct depositing her future child support payments.

And last June, we received money for a custodial parent we couldn’t locate. We finally found her on Facebook and sent her a message. The parent called the next day, and we were thrilled to tell her that we were mailing her a check for just over \$21,000! The money came from probate as the noncustodial parent had passed away.

More E-Ideas

Remember when we spent thousands of dollars and waited months to have outgoing letters translated? We suggest installing Google Translate onto your website page—it’s another no-cost product and lets you select one of 52 languages.

Finally, you may want to place QR (Quick Response) codes on your outreach material. QR codes are barcodes that people can download with a smartphone. Look through any magazine and you will see a QR code on almost every ad. The QR code can display text, take you to a web page, or play a video. QR codes are simple and free to create. You can search the internet for QR code generator to find lots of choices. Enter the URL or text to generate the QR code, and then place your QR code where you want people to see it.

Contra Costa put advertisements in the County’s Bay Area Rapid Transit stations. The ads have a QR code that links to a YouTube video describing the benefits of opening a child support case. The ads should be simple so that onlookers can read them quickly. Just a click of the button captures the QR code, and the video gives additional information. You can see the [QR code video](#) on our Facebook page (in Spanish, too).

Let’s all start broadcasting in ways that keep parents engaged with our child support program.

For further information, contact Linda.Dippel@dcss.cccounty.us. (See previous articles on social media in the child support program in these issues of the Child Support Report: March 2010, March 2011, May 2011, September 2011.)



New Ways to e-Communicate—Are they Right for You?

No matter where we work, we depend on email. And more and more, we depend on newer forms of electronic communication, too. On many government websites, we find buttons that connect us with new media and social media websites. We communicate via blogs, Facebook, twitter, discussion groups, and instant messaging; and we comment on web articles, podcasts and videos.

Writing through new media technology is not really different than writing an email or letter: we need to know how to best present our message—whether it’s to a customer, a colleague, or a group of partners on a project. Who is our audience and what do they want to know, and what do we want them to know? Whether we are writing for a blog or a website or a YouTube script—or even instant messaging via online chats, cell phone texts, or tweets—we need to present our message clearly and concisely. (The latter three, of course, are generally already pithy—lol.) See page 4 for “plain language” tips.

What is different about new media? It’s the possibility of engaging our customers and colleagues by inviting them to join in the conversation. We can promote our services, share expertise, and help them to cut through bureaucracy by simply putting our message where they will see it. This means we are better able to “brand” our program as customer-friendly; we are saying “we want to communicate with you in places and in ways you connect in the modern world.” New media can be an important part of a communication strategy to build relationships with employees, partners and customers through feedback and dialogue.

States, counties, and tribes have led the way in finding innovative tools for communicating with customers, employees and the public. Not all forms of new media will work for every program, but they may offer no-cost or low-cost choices to help you brand your program, as we see from Contra Costa County’s experience in the article on page 1.

OCSE has just launched the first phase of its redesigned [website](#) as part of a broader initiative undertaken by our parent agency, the Administration for Children and Families, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In researching our options, we reviewed many of your websites for good ideas. Check it out—we think you will agree that it presents a more welcoming face to the public. We are just at the “look and feel” stage; in the future you

will have access to the resources you can get from our current website. We plan to expand into more media venues as we

phase-in sections of our new website.

At OCSE, we’ve started small in the realm of new media by posting this Commissioner’s Voice as a blog. It offers a forum for you, the readers in the child support community, to comment on the monthly topic and share ideas.

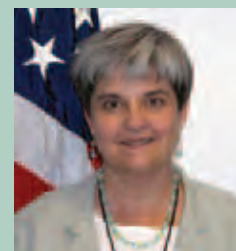
It’s a little scary having a child support blog because child support is an issue that can cut deeply for both parents. The question we asked ourselves is whether we were prepared to hear strong viewpoints and take criticism sometimes. (For customers

with a question or comment that relates to a personal child support case, the blog links to OCSE customer service staff.) Do we have to be cautious when using new media? Of course; we need to consider security and guard against displaying “personal identifying information.” We need to explore secure software packages and share our knowledge.

Some of you use e-communication methods through the QUICK application when you view case information in real time, or through your electronic document exchange system. Others use instant messaging to connect with each other in your organization—to ask who to contact in another location, for example. And others offer a “live chat” with a child support representative during certain hours in the day.

Might instant messaging be useful for the Interstate Case Reconciliation Project or Central Registry workers? Or perhaps among workers who respond to customer inquiries? Would you benefit from making podcasts available for colleagues or customers to listen to at their leisure? Would new media help you reach parents in the military about your services or push out information fast in an emergency?

I’d like to learn about your experience with e-communication. Please comment on this blog, or contact your [state technical support liaison](#) or the OCSE [social media coordinator](#) to discuss possibilities in new media.



Vicki Turetsky



Editor's New Year Resolution: **The Plain Truth**

Which sentence below sounds better to you?

Local Veterans Employment Representatives conduct outreach to employers to engage in advocacy efforts with hiring executives to increase employment opportunities for veterans, encourage the hiring of disabled veterans and generally assist veterans to gain and retain employment.

Local Veterans Employment Representatives contact employers to encourage them to hire veterans, including disabled veterans, and generally assist veterans in finding and keeping jobs.

My resolution for 2012 is to try harder to write the right way—in plain language—and help others, too.

What is Plain Language?

Plain language is a communication philosophy. It's been around for as long as people have needed to understand what they read—the first time they read it—or at least since 1962, when this quote appeared in a federal government *Clear Communication Newsletter*:

“Never fear to use little words. Big, long words name little things. All big things have little names, such as life and death, war and peace, dawn, day, night, hope, love and home. Learn to use little words in a big way; it's hard to do but they say what you mean. When you don't know what you mean, use big words that often fool little people.”

Did you know that plain language is required by law for all federal agencies? That's not new, either, but plain language is more important than ever because we spend so much time staring at our monitors. Online readers must work harder than print readers because they read more slowly, scan before (or instead of) actually reading, and fatigue easily.

Plain language does not mean write for a child; it means write clearly and concisely. It can improve customer service, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of your agency.

Share your thoughts with elaine.blackman@acf.hhs.gov.



Tip: Hang a WET PAINT sign in your office to remind you that “less is more” to get your message across.

Plain Language Tips

Whether you want to get the word out via social media, print media, websites or emails, plain language will help your audience read, understand and connect with your message.

Here are some plain-writing tips from PlainLanguage.gov and HowTo.gov.

- Write for the average reader within your intended audience.
- Use active voice:

Passive: *The additional documentation to clarify and resolve our concerns identified in regard to procurement activity has been received.*

Active: *Your additional information resolved our concerns about procurement.*

Passive: *An attempt was made by this office to reach you.*

Active: *We tried to reach you.*

- Use “you” and other pronouns.
- Avoid technical jargon and bureaucratese. (In other words, never use a long word when a short one will do!)
- Less is more. Be concise. Eliminate unnecessary and obsolete words.
- Use the simplest verb tense possible.
- Define and use words consistently.
- Limit your use of acronyms.
- Create short, concise sentences, paragraphs and sections. Include useful headings and bulleted lists to guide your reader.
- Hyperlink to text in other documents or resources (rather than repeat text). Never use “click here” as a link—your link should describe what your reader will get when they click the link.

Project Restore: Rhode Island Reaches Out to Noncustodial Parents Who Have Lost a Job

By Sharon Santilli, Director

Courtney Johnson, Project Restore Case Manager
Rhode Island Office of Child Support Services

In recent years, the national child support program has expanded outreach and services to noncustodial parents. But what kind of outreach do parents need, and how should the child support program intervene?

The Rhode Island Office of Child Support Services is working with a specific group of noncustodial parents—those who were paying support, but stopped as a result of job loss—to better understand where the program can assist them to once again comply with their support order and help stabilize families financially and emotionally.

We received one of nine OCSE “1115 demonstration grants” in 2009 for projects to address the sudden and prolonged effect of the economic downturn on child support caseload and operations. We named ours Project Restore.

As part of the grant activities, we designed an outreach program and a case management approach to service delivery that relies on collaboration with multiple-agency partners in both the public (e.g., human services, workforce centers) and private (e.g., community action programs, responsible fatherhood programs) sectors. Our partners, many of whom are represented on our project steering committee, have helped us gain access to their service delivery networks and make the connections we need to deliver effective services to our target population.

Short-Term Lessons

Overall, we have seen good response to Project Restore. Through the first 11 months, we have served more than 165 noncustodial parents and are learning lessons about their needs that will help us design better services in the future. These lessons may seem very basic, but we do not always acknowledge them.

Project Restore steering committee members

- **The resource base of many noncustodial parents is relatively shallow.** Even though we are dealing with parents who were paying child support regularly, once they lose their job, they have few financial resources to continue their payments. They find themselves accumulating arrears and facing enforcement actions (e.g., license suspension) that further reduce their ability to secure new employment. As a result, they need help to adjust their support obligations.
- **Many noncustodial parents have low skills.** The parents we serve generally have low skills that make it difficult to find another job and resume their payments. For example, almost 87 percent of the parents report having no education beyond a high school diploma or GED and have been working in trades that are not likely to recover quickly.
- **Noncustodial parents need guidance to navigate the human services delivery system.** In addition to needing help with adjustment of their support orders, these parents may have a range of other needs as a result of losing their jobs; yet they appear to have only a very limited understanding of how to address those needs and

continued on next page



difficulty accessing services. For example, among the 10 service needs the parents mention most frequently are requests for health and mental health care, housing, food stamps, and assistance with public utilities.

Project Restore, through our partner service network, is assisting the parents to get help with these basic needs. (Interestingly, we designed Project Restore to serve custodial parents as well. However, they have been less interested in services. We believe this reflects a better understanding by custodial parents of how to navigate the social service network.)

- **Job loss creates stressful relationships within the family.** The majority of Project Restore parents report stressful—as opposed to comfortable—relationships with the other parent. Those stressful relationships are reflected in the noncustodial parent’s low level of satisfaction with access and visitation. It is therefore not surprising that services to improve parental relationships and access also are among the top 10 service needs reported by noncustodial parents during our intake assessment interviews.

Plans to Transition

Project Restore is a short-term demonstration; we have been delivering services only since January 2011. In that time, however, we have successfully branded the program

name through our brochures, posters, bus advertising and presentations to our partner agencies.

Since we believe the program helps stabilize families in our challenging economic climate, we also have looked for opportunities to sustain the program beyond the end of the demonstration this month. In January 2012, we began the transition to self-sufficiency and continue our service delivery under Project Restore using students from the Rhode Island College School of Social Work. We are revising our project materials (e.g., case management plan, training data collection instruments) for a successful transition.

For more information about Project Restore, contact Courtney Johnson at cjohnson@dhs.ri.gov.



Sharon Santilli (right), child support director, and Courtney Johnson, Project Restore manager, in front of the Project Restore display board.

EITC Reminder

It's tax season again and another opportunity to promote the **IRS Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** program to our child support customers who are low- and middle-income workers. Custodial parents can particularly benefit from EITC.

New information on the **OCSE website** may help child support agencies increase participation in EITC. Learn about the IRS Voluntary Income Tax Assistance Centers located across the country that can help people prepare their tax returns free of charge.

EITC is one of the largest antipoverty programs. Last year, more than 26 million people received nearly \$59 billion in EITC. Four of five people eligible for the credit claim it.



Making the Transition: Georgia Parents Grateful for Employment Help

By Gary Driggers

Georgia Division of Child Support Services



ACF Region IV Administrator Carlis Williams (left) and Acting Assistant Secretary George Sheldon listen to parents at the Goodwill Career Services Center in Decatur.

Acting Assistant Secretary George Sheldon (Administration for Children and Families) heard candid personal stories of new opportunities and second chances when he met with participants in a grant demonstration project in Georgia. The project, called Good Transitions, is helping low-income noncustodial parents and ex-offenders find jobs.

Mr. Sheldon and participants assembled on Dec. 14 at the Goodwill Career Services Center in Decatur. Goodwill of North Georgia and the Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) are the project's lead partners. All participants are referred by the DCSS Fatherhood Program.

"I am so thankful for a job," said one participant who was recently released from prison. "It is so difficult to find a job when you have a criminal record. This program has been a God-send."

"Why aren't there more programs like this one?" another participant asked Mr. Sheldon, adding, "There needs to be more services to help people with substance abuse issues and those coming out of prison."

The Good Transitions team received \$5.7 million to study the impact of transitional jobs on noncustodial parents and ex-offenders. The grant provides 500 transitional jobs with the goal of leading to permanent employment. Good Transitions is one of seven in the nation to receive a portion of the \$40 million from the U.S. Department of Labor's Enhanced Transitional Jobs grants.

Mr. Sheldon, along with DC and regional officials, also visited a classroom where he was pleasantly surprised by the candid responses from participants.

"I was unemployed for so long," said one noncustodial mother. "I am so thankful for the program. You don't know

Robert Nibbs (right) is the Georgia DCSS outreach coordinator and a key leader in the transitional jobs demonstration project. Below, participants share their stories and answer questions from Mr. Sheldon and other leaders.



how exciting it was for me to have enough money to go to the drug store the other day and buy toothpaste and deodorant for myself."

Goodwill and DCSS will lead a host of partners in developing training and programs to help the low-income noncustodial parents and ex-offenders find jobs. Other partners include the Center for Working Families, United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, State Board of Pardons and Paroles, Georgia Department of Corrections, Urban League of Greater Atlanta and Morehouse College.

Good Transitions will focus this collaboration in DeKalb, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, Clayton and Cobb counties. The program is dedicated to helping individuals complete paid transitional job experience leading to unsubsidized employment, the opportunity to earn competitive wages and the potential for career advancement.

Project manager Robert Nibbs says, "Good Transitions addresses the needs and challenges of fathers who are in the child support system and trying to make a better life for themselves and their children."

For more information about the Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration Grant, contact Robert Nibbs, DCSS Community Outreach Coordinator, 404-463-1731 or rnibbs@dhr.state.ga.us.

Cuyahoga County: Speakers Bureau Brings Parental Realities to Life

By Mark Chimo

Cuyahoga County Support Enforcement Agency

Cutting-edge outreach and customer service rank high in Ohio's Cuyahoga County Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA). So does its success with the Speakers Bureau, a group of employees dedicated to educating both youth and parents on child support rules, regulations and processes.

The Speakers Bureau educates Cuyahoga residents on paternity establishment, child/medical support orders and the numerous enforcement techniques. In addition, the group opens up greater access to the agency by going out into the community to conduct workshops and Q&A sessions. Since 2007, the Speakers Bureau has presented seminars for the county's fatherhood initiative, a bar association, business groups, churches and other community organizations.

Because CSEA also emphasizes outreach to youth, the Speakers Bureau visits numerous high schools throughout the county where CSEA employees perform a skit that brings to life the reality of having a child. They select a student from the audience to be the "alleged father" of a child and walk him through the processes of genetic testing and an administrative hearing to establish a child/medical support order. This hands-on approach to involve the audience resonates with the students. Speakers Bureau members receive a variety of

Akilah Rasheed-Tinsley (right) presents during a training in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. In the photo below, Ken Robinson (front center) presents with (from left) Rasheed-Tinsley, Brandy Godfrey, Diane Tubbs and Laquita Taylor.

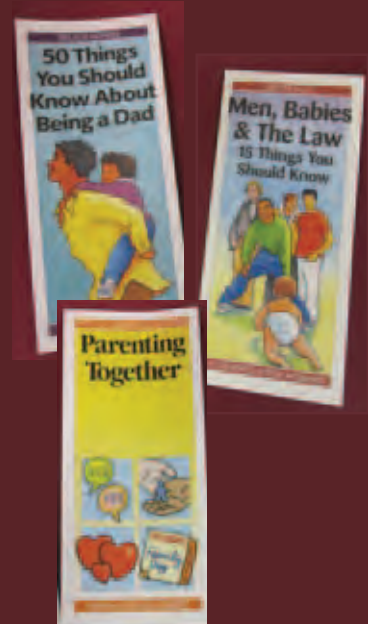


thoughtful and insightful questions on child support issues from both a child's and parent's perspective.

"Due to the increase in teenage pregnancies, we wanted to be able to educate our youth as to who is responsible and what happens when a child is born," says Outreach/Establishment Manager Michael Falatach, the Speakers Bureau adviser.

"Our ultimate goal is to prepare these young students for their legal and financial responsibilities as a parent."

For more information, contact Mark Chimo at 216-698-2275.



Passport Denial Program's Valentine Stories

For many, February means showing those special people how much you care. Here are a few loving gestures from the OCSE passport denial program.

- ♥ **First comes love ...** In California, a noncustodial parent paid \$1,300 to visit her boyfriend in the military overseas; another paid \$500 to be with his fiancée in Belgium.
- ♥ **Then comes marriage ...** In California, a noncustodial parent paid \$2,900 to travel to his son's wedding in the Bahamas; another paid \$17,000 to attend his brother's wedding. A noncustodial parent from Oklahoma paid \$13,400 for his wedding anniversary in the Caribbean; another paid \$300 to attend a family wedding in Mexico.

♥ **And a honeymoon for some ...**

Puerto Rico collected \$1,500 from a noncustodial parent to honeymoon (in France); Ohio, \$6,000 (Philippines); and Maine, \$11,700.

- ♥ **Happily-ever-after in Minnesota ...** A noncustodial parent paid his full arrears—\$5,500—so that he and the custodial parent could get married and honeymoon in Italy.

- ♥ **Valentine surprise in Arizona ...** A family received \$99,000, the largest single collection for the passport denial program in 2012 so far.

States have reported more than \$243 million in collections since the passport denial program began in 1998. Please submit your agency's heartwarming stories to Lesa Free at scollections@acf.hhs.gov.

LA County:

Largest Lottery Intercept

In December, the Los Angeles Child Support Services Department touted its largest lottery intercept of \$90,668 for a non-welfare custodial parent. The noncustodial parent won more than \$400,000 in the California lottery.

When contacted about this collection, the custodial mother was awestruck. She stated she has been praying for assistance with child support. She is going to put the money into a 529 College Fund. She also planned to give her son a party on his 10th birthday in December, something she had not been able to do in the past.

In 1985 the California Legislature empowered the California State Franchise Tax Board to intercept lottery winnings for various obligations including delinquent child support.

"The mechanisms in place to identify these winnings truly pay off for us—and for our customers," says Director Steven Golightly.



Child Support Report

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