

Child Support Report

OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT



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Prepared for Disaster

Vermont child support offices flooded with lessons learned, timeless advice

By Tom Killmurray
OCSE Region I

The Winooski River began rising on Sunday, Aug. 28, 2011, one year ago. Tropical Storm Irene's historic rainfall inundated Vermont and spared neither the village of Waterbury, nor the state office complex that housed Vermont's Agency of Human Services and the central office for the Office of Child Support (OCS). All state offices and courts were closed the following Monday. The flood waters made the Waterbury complex uninhabitable, displacing 46 central office employees and the State Disbursement Unit (SDU).

OCS Director Jeff Cohen, who left his office on Friday expecting a bit of bad weather (the forecast showed the path of Hurricane Irene crossing the eastern seaboard and passing over Vermont), wisely carried his laptop, a wallet-sized emergency contact card, and the OCS Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), a process for all state agencies to assure that essential government services continue during a disaster.

Smaller interruptions in the past had helped to make the OCS COOP dynamic and robust, guiding staff on what to do if the worst happened. The federal OCSE's

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Photos of the building complex that houses the Vermont Office of Child Support, after Tropical Storm Irene.

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automated system requirements specifically mandate a disaster recovery plan for statewide system hardware, software, and electronic records. As essential as information technology is, it doesn't modify child support orders or answer customer service questions. The system plan was integrated into the COOP.

The three functions that OCS identified as critical were communications (with staff, customers and partners), cash (receiving and disbursing child support) and courts (covering scheduled court events). The plan then identified needed resources and alternatives if those resources weren't available. For example, if a building was unavailable or a network was down, work would be conducted from a back-up site.

Within two weeks of the storm, all staff was working either from home or district offices. The SDU—having missed just one day of processing—was working in cramped quarters in another state building. Staff working in district offices used imaged case files, allowing them to continue to keep up with court schedules and respond to customer service calls.

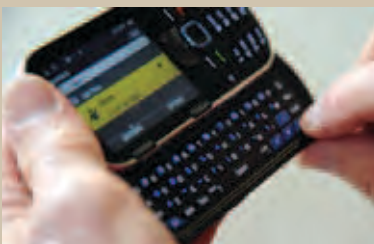
Vermont OCS central office staff settled into interim space in Essex in October 2011. The state plans to rebuild in Waterbury, and OCS hopes to move into a new building during 2015.

WHAT IF...? If a natural disaster disrupts federal operations, OCSE and its regional offices have COOPs (Continuity of Operations Plans) to make sure state and tribal child support offices will continue to get essential services.



September is National Disaster Preparedness Month. See Ready.gov to learn how you can plan for weather emergencies, including extreme heat, and ways to

communicate with family members. DisasterAssistance.gov offers access to disaster help and resources from federal agencies.



(Photos from Ready.gov)

In the event of disaster

Vermont Office of Child Support Director Jeff Cohen highlights these lessons learned from Tropical Storm Irene:

Redundancy: You can never be sure what will or won't be working, so you can't have too many back-up systems. To ensure that you can contact staff, you should know their home address, home and cell number, home email, and how to post contact information on intranet and public websites. Our network was down, so we had to use home Gmail and Yahoo accounts to stay in touch. Our document imaging system provided a substitute for paper files.

Currency: A COOP or a phone tree is useless if it is out of date. We schedule a COOP review on a regular basis and send automated biannual reminders to staff to update personal contact information.

Mobility: Many emergencies require people to work or communicate from remote locations. We found laptops, remote login capability, and smartphones to be critical tools. The smartphone's capability for email, scanning documents, and storing the electronic COOP plan, and yes, phone calls, is extremely useful.

Wallet "In Case of Emergency" Card: Although it may seem trivial, a wallet-sized information card for all staff with key supervisor phone numbers and email addresses was invaluable. The card also included a predetermined conference call number and call-in code.

Responsibility: Although most states probably have statewide COOPs and emergency management agencies, you can't assume that their plans are sufficient for all your needs. A COOP specifically for the child support program allows you to control your own planning and preparations. While we know child support is necessary for the well-being of the children and families we serve, it may not necessarily be the state government's highest priority during or immediately after a disaster.

Preparing for an emergency

When an earthquake shook the East Coast a year ago, damage in DC was minimal, although OCSE staff was a bit rattled. However, the experiences of many of our colleagues in child support offices around the country have been far more challenging—many of you have been hit hard, both professionally and personally, yet you have persevered to return to business as usual after floods, fires, earthquakes, hurricanes and tornados. You speak from experience: We must all prepare for disasters.

Since Hurricane Irene flooded the Vermont child support office in Waterbury last August, Office of Child Support Director Jeff Cohen has spoken to groups about scrambling to remove the servers and hardware and get them to an alternate site. All 46 state child support employees, including those at the State Disbursement Unit, became homeless overnight, says Director Cohen. The office had a plan, having responded to floods, flu outbreaks, and even a computer virus that took out their network for weeks; however, they did not expect the enormity of the coming storm. He emphasizes that everyone should have a plan in place. (*See page 1 article.*)

Over the past couple years, colleagues in New York, Pennsylvania, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Texas, Oregon and elsewhere have been forced to recover from large-scale natural disasters in their states and tribal lands that destroyed houses, businesses and sometimes child support offices. In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in August 2005, child support directors in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas rallied their employees to locate families in the program—and one another—as many vacated their flooded homes. For families affected by any disaster, a break in child support operations means a break in getting money to buy children's clothing, school supplies, groceries and medicines. After the hurricanes, child support workers teamed up across the country to help every facet of the

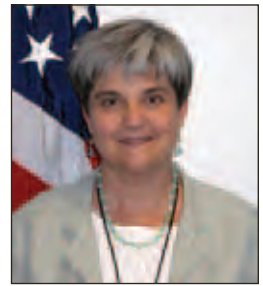
struggling programs and the families they were serving.

OCSE and our 10 regional offices have COOPs (Continuity of Operations Plan) that identify core functions our government wants to make sure continues in an emergency. For ACF programs, this is typically funding of grants. OCSE has some unique operational functions that we must maintain, including the Federal Parent Locator Service and Federal Offset. We must also continue to respond to FPLS inquiries from states and telephone inquiries from the public, parents and Congress on behalf of its constituents. The plan also identifies essential staff and alternate sites.

OCSE also has authority to assist states to replace lost or damaged computer equipment or services, and we can waive our requirements for prior approval of federal funding to assist states to replace equipment and obtain services to install computers. By rapidly restoring states' critical computer systems and services, which our programs depend on to manage our day-to-day operations, we ensure the shortest interruptions possible in our service delivery to families and children.

A federal interagency operational plan is in the works. It is not specific to the child support program; rather it discusses how agencies will work together with state, local and private organizations to respond to disasters.

You can read about federal assistance programs on the website for the [Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) in the Administration for Children and Families. September is National Disaster Preparedness Month. You may want to mark the occasion by looking at material on the Department of Homeland Security's [FEMA website](#). Let us know how OCSE can help you with your plans. Share some of your tips on the [Commissioner's Voice blog](#).



Vicki Turetsky

New apps help you connect

When a hurricane, earthquake, flood or fire happens, many people use Facebook and other social media to check up on family and friends or share information. The HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response offers two new ways to connect with others before



disaster strikes. These "Lifeline" and "bReddi" apps let users create and share personal preparedness plans, track the status of their Facebook friends in disaster-affected areas, and print cards with snapshots of their preparedness plans to carry in their wallets. Learn more on the [HHS Public Health Emergency website](#).



Earlier intervention strategies benefit San Diego families



By Marie Girulat, Chief Deputy Director
San Diego County Department of Child Support Services

The San Diego County, CA, Department of Child Support Services has applied early intervention strategies for five years. Staff focused on intervening in a case at the point of establishing a new order. In 2010, they decided to try to contact the parents even earlier in the process. They began to think about case resolution when first opening a case and have seen some impressive results.

First strategy – order establishment

In 2007, modeling after the success of many counties and states, San Diego developed a strategy to address new orders immediately rather than wait until the cases became delinquent. The county secured a small meeting space directly outside the courtroom so customers could discuss the outcome of the court order with a case manager.

During this meeting, the case manager informed the case participants of the income withholding order process, how to request a modification in the future, and potential enforcement actions if they missed a payment. They received a wallet card that displayed the monthly court ordered obligations, and information and envelopes for mailing payments. The case manager also attempted to collect the first payment.

A case manager prepared to monitor and track the case for the first 90 days of the order, further educate case participants on the child support enforcement process, and secure consistent payments.

Because of this process, total collections per case increased by 86 percent. Payments received in the first 60 days increased from 8 percent to 43 percent—a 438 percent increase! The cases with no payment in the first 90 days decreased from 76.4 percent to 52.8 percent—a 31 percent decrease. It became clear to San Diego that they should focus intervention earlier in the process.

Next step – case resolution

Based on the success of this process, San Diego implemented “case resolution.” Staff contacted both parties as soon as they opened a case—a great opportunity to obtain and verify income and demographic information for the noncustodial parent, explain the child support process, run guideline calculations based on actual income, and invite the participants to a case resolution meeting.

San Diego also created a video, “[Information for Noncustodial Parents](#),” to explain the child support process,

and required participants to view it upon arrival. A case manager met with the participants to address case specifics, get updated income information, and request genetic testing (if paternity was an issue). The case manager worked with the parties to establish an order via stipulation rather than have them wait for the court process, which could be set to take place up to 60 days in the future.

Once they agreed on the stipulation, the court signed and entered it into the system the same day. The case manager then requested the first payment. If they reached a stipulation, San Diego encouraged the noncustodial parent to file an answer immediately rather than end up in a default.

Success – personal and statistical

In addition to forming an immediate relationship and greater involvement with case participants, San Diego saved on service of process and court costs. The department has seen a 60 percent “show” rate for the case resolution meeting and has stipulated on over 35 percent of those cases. For cases reaching a stipulation, the percent of current support collected exceeds 75 percent.

Due to the success of the case resolution meetings, the department now conducts the meetings one Saturday each month for customers who work during the week or would find a weekend appointment more conducive to both parents. San Diego continues to look for other ways to engage the noncustodial parent at the earliest point in the child support process.

For more information, contact the author at 619-578-6200 or marie.girulat@sdcounty.ca.gov.



A video series on the San Diego County Department of Child Support Services website helps parents learn about the child support process.

Children First Program turns lives around in Bexar County, Texas

By Judge Jim Rausch
Bexar County Child Support Court
San Antonio, Texas

The Children First Program started in October 2004, primarily to serve as an alternative to incarceration for child support offenders who were not yet ready for probation. We soon discovered that the ideal program candidates were those obligors whose arrears were still manageable and who expressed and reflected a desire to pay child support, yet were so burdened by obstacles and problems—ranging from drugs and alcohol, felony convictions, lack of education and training, unemployment, and lack of visitation—that they lacked any direction in their lives.

We took the approach that the Children First Program would be an intensive supervision program (weekly) with a zero tolerance position with regard to current child support. We viewed the program as pure problem-solving at its best, with frequent court resets and a very hands-on approach.

It is not jail, but it is also not probation. Children First is demanding, but it provides the obligor with a dedicated officer who will set goals and expectations and provide resources and programs, which will enable the obligor to become a better parent and person. An obligor who does not cooperate is remanded to jail and removed from the program. If the obligor is resolving the problems, he or she is commended in court and placed on probation.

Since its inception, 938 obligors have been placed in the Children First Program. At any point in time, we have at least 30 active cases in the Children First Program. Only the two child support associate judges can determine who will be placed in the program. Please keep in mind that a successful problem-solving program in child support does not require a lot of money or resources, but simply judges and officers who are committed to taking a “tough love” approach and combining it with existing community resources.

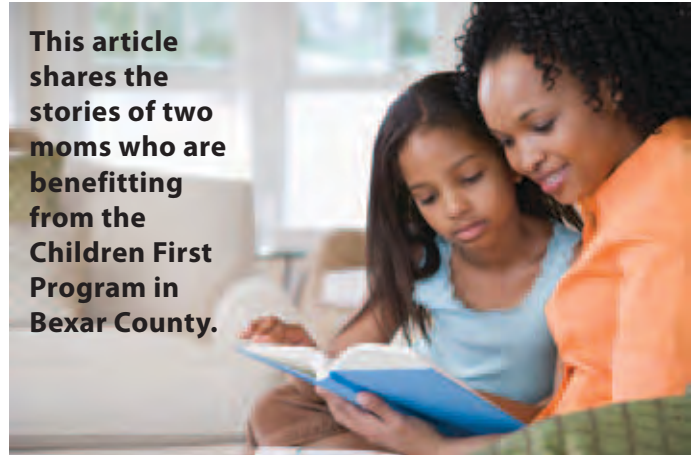
It is a tremendous feeling to lean over the bench and shake an obligor’s hand and congratulate him or her for having turned their life around, many of these individuals having never before been recognized for any positive achievement in their life.

These recent success stories focus on two mothers.

Dorothy

This February, Dorothy, age 43 and the mother of 7 children, was found to be in contempt for failure to pay

This article shares the stories of two moms who are benefitting from the Children First Program in Bexar County.



support and was sentenced to a period of time in jail. Prior to beginning the jail sentence, she entered the Children First Program.

Dorothy faced many obstacles—methamphetamines, felony conviction, unemployment, lack of transportation, medical and dental issues, and limited visitation with her children. After pledging to the judge and the Children First officer to seek drug treatment, Dorothy was recommended to outpatient care and conducted an active job search. She has been employed in a fast-food position for the past 13 weeks, is attending her treatment and counseling sessions, is making bi-weekly payments on both child support obligations, and is visiting her children. Dorothy reports weekly to Children First and has appeared for at least three court appearances to monitor her progress.

Andrea

Andrea, 23, was found in contempt in October 2011 and sentenced to jail; however, prior to going to jail, the court ordered her to participate in the Children First Program. Her obstacles included anxiety, depression, a recent suicide attempt, little education, limited job skills, and no transportation.

The Children First officer used a triage approach to gain stabilization with Andrea, assisting her in securing temporary housing as well as mental and medical health assistance. She was provided employment support, job readiness referrals, resume and GED assistance, as well as help with bus passes.

Andrea was on the Children First Program for five months before being placed on supervised probation for five years. Today, she is working full time and paying her child support regularly with a future goal of obtaining her GED.

Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania: Prison Outreach Committee improves families from the inside out

By Judge Chester Harhut
*Lackawanna County Domestic Relations Department
Family Center*

In Pennsylvania, where the courts oversee the operations and functions of the child support agency, we have seen an alarming increase in the number of cases coming into our system. We've also seen a disproportionate increase in the number of incarcerated parents, often creating desperate situations for the custodial parent and child(ren). To help improve the situation of incarceration, we asked the child support agency to visit the county prison to help incarcerated parents become more responsible.

In November 2009, the Lackawanna County Domestic Relations Section formed the Prison Outreach Committee. Its purpose is to visit the prison and assist noncustodial parents who are incarcerated, either due to nonpayment of child support or on other charges.

The committee consists of one member of management, director or assistant director, an enforcement officer, a conference officer and support staff. The Outreach Committee answers all questions pertaining to the incarcerated parent's rights and distributes a packet that contains: Child Support Information for Incarcerated Parents, the Pennsylvania Child Support Handbook, Establishing Paternity, Support Order Modification with an example of a Petition for Modification, a list of Pennsylvania Domestic Relations Sections, a Petition to Stop or Reduce Child Support During Incarceration, and a sheet that explains how the incarcerated parent can review his or her rap sheet for accuracy when released from jail.

If the inmate has questions pertaining to their support order or how it is enforced, the enforcement and conference officers will answer them. Many times, the inmate will indicate that while they do not have enough money to pay the full purge amount, they have family or friends who can make a substantial payment to their account. The director, assistant director, or the enforcement officer takes that offer back to the court for acceptance or rejection.

Typically, 10 to 20 inmates attend the workshops, with about 60 percent making settlements. The visits

assist noncustodial parents to get out of jail, return to the workforce, and pay the custodial parent and his or her children as much as possible.

Many of the inmates who have records have trouble getting jobs after paying a purge amount and being released. The court and the agency also have close relationships with Career Link and the Employment Opportunity Training Center (EOTC). Career Link has a list of employers who consider clients with prison records, and the EOTC has the Responsible Fathers Program with a goal to assist the noncustodial parent to get and keep a job, pay bills, and become a responsible parent. They also help get bus passes, tools, clothing and a food order for the participants when necessary.

The Prison Outreach Committee visits the county jail every two months and has assisted at least 120 workshop participants to settle their purge, modify their order, obtain gainful employment and provide other services.

Although this program does not cure all of the ills, it is cost effective and provides an opportunity for family improvement.

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Training DVD helps person in charge of 'supervised visitation'



By Judge Jeannine Turgeon
Dauphin County, Pennsylvania

As a trial judge handling child support and child custody matters, I frequently encourage noncustodial parents to become more involved in their children's lives. Many times, however, because the noncustodial parent has not been involved with the children, and for other reasons, the parties can only agree to begin the process with "supervised visitation" by the noncustodial parent.

Most of us involved in family law matters are familiar with court orders, custody agreements or parenting plans, which provide that a family member or friend supervise the custodial interaction between a child and a parent. Unfortunately, many times no one explains to the parents or the person named as supervisor what "supervised visitation" means (see sidebar on this page), and the court order or agreement does not specify the rules for the supervised visits. Therefore, families turn to a nonprofessional friend or family member. "Aunt Matilda" or "Grandpa" may face a difficult situation, ripe with emotional stress, without any guidance or suggested strategies on how to handle this difficult and extremely important assignment.

Some communities are fortunate to have one or more supervised visitation centers nearby, providing a professional visitation setting. However, some parties may not be able to afford transportation to the site.

To address this void, several family law lawyers, a fellow judge, a doctoral psychology student, Children and Youth Office staff, a local Supervised Visitation Center director and others joined me to form a task force to produce an educational DVD for parents and nonprofessional visitation/supervised physical custody supervisors.

The former producer of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," Margy Whitmer, agreed to produce the DVD, and we enlisted lawyers and friends to serve as actors in the various vignettes demonstrating typical issues that may arise during these supervised visitation settings. Pa Bar Institute filmed the vignettes, and TV newscaster Valerie Pritchett (ABC) served as moderator.

Through donations from the Dauphin County Bar Foundation and the Dauphin County Bar Association's Family Law Section, Capitol Copy Service, and many volunteers, we completed the DVD and accompanying booklet and website on a shoestring budget.

The 16 minute "Supervised Visitation" DVD presents five vignettes of typical scenarios. In each, the first scene results in problems and the second demonstrates how the

supervisor could have handled the situation better.

These scenarios provide strategies for the supervisor to be a positive influence in difficult situations, alleviating unnecessary stress for the child and promoting the safety and well-being and the best interests of the child. It is important supervisors understand they must assume an active role. At the end of the vignettes and in the booklet we share internet sites for more information about supervised visitation.

The DVD concludes by recapping the important points.

For supervisors

- Comply with all directives from the court order
- Provide a safe, positive experience for the child
- Be physically present, within ear shot and eye-sight throughout the visit
- Be actively aware of what's happening

For primary custodial parents

- Create a positive and relaxed environment
- Avoid arguments and conflicts in front of the child—"no conflict zone"

For noncustodial parents

- Interact with your child during the visit
- Be on your best behavior
- Make each visit a good, positive experience with your child

If a nonprofessional supervisor faces a situation they cannot handle, the parents are referred to a professional supervised visitation center. View the DVD and download the booklet on the [website](#).

Resources

Supervised visitation in Pennsylvania refers to "supervised physical custody," defined as: "Custodial time during which an agency or an adult designated by the court or agreed upon by the parties monitors the interaction between the child and the individual with those rights." Most centers and websites continue to use the term supervised visitation. These publications may help the nonprofessional provider of supervised custodial visits:

[Standards For Supervised Visitation Practice](#)
[A Guide for the Non-Professional Provider of Supervised Visitation](#)
[Making Supervised Visitation Work](#)

California observes Child Support Awareness Month

During its observance of Child Support Awareness Month in August, the California Department of Child Support Services and 51 local child support agencies are conducting outreach activities to raise public awareness of the importance of child support. The department sent posters (*right*) in English and Spanish to the local agencies and other partners, including DMVs, “First 5” agencies, Family Law Facilitator offices, Veterans Services offices, Departments of Rehabilitation, and Los Angeles Community Health Clinics. Entrances of the State Capitol also display the posters.

Staff are encouraging parents who have fallen behind in making their child support payments to drop by their local agency to make a payment, seek a modification, obtain a repayment plan, or see whether they qualify for a compromise on their overdue balance.

Many states and tribes proclaimed August as Child Support Awareness Month. See more photos in the next issue of *Child Support Report*.

WICSEC to hold conference

WICSEC—the Western Interstate Child Support Enforcement Council—will welcome OCSE Commissioner Vicki Turetsky to speak at its annual conference, Sept. 30 to Oct. 4, in Jackson Hole, WY. The conference invites attendees to “Embrace the Future” with workshops on the Affordable Care Act, lessons learned from the *Turner v. Rogers* U.S. Supreme Court decision, social media in child support agencies, and the evolving legal landscape of determining parentage.

The Interjurisdictional Fair, where state and tribal program “ambassadors” network with colleagues, will make its seventh appearance at the annual conference. Attendees can take “The Pledge” of communication, cooperation and collaboration with peers in other jurisdictions to enhance the well-being of children—and receive continuous updates with contact information for co-pledges now 800 strong.

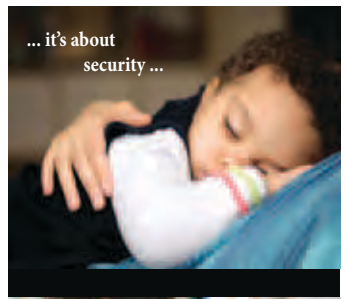
“We rotate our venue among states of all sizes to provide child support workers a high quality national conference either in or close to their home state,” explains WICSEC president Lori Bengston. “The WICSEC vision is to unite child support professionals and inspire excellence within the IV-D community. Wyoming child support director Brenda Lyttle and her staff are working with us to ensure an outstanding conference.”



**WICSEC President
Lori Bengston**

CHILD SUPPORT AWARENESS MONTH

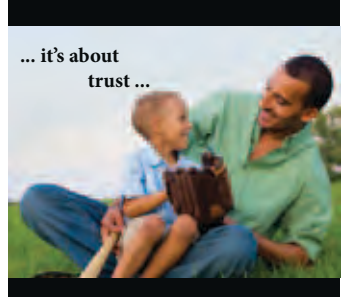
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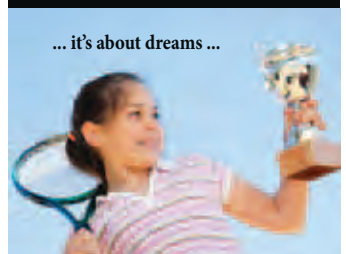
... it's about
confidence ...



... it's about
trust ...



... it's about dreams ...



AUGUST IS CHILD SUPPORT AWARENESS MONTH
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES
www.childsup.ca.gov

Child Support Report



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