

Conference Report



Strengthening Families: How Can Child Support Help?

CUNY Graduate Center
October 14, 2010





On October 14, 2010, HRA's Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), in conjunction with the CUNY School of Professional Studies and The Future of Children Project, a collaboration of Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, co-sponsored a conference titled, "**Strengthening Families: How Can Child Support Help?**" HRA Commissioner Robert Doar welcomed participants and emphasized that the goal of the conference was to stimulate discussion and ideas among a diverse group of professionals concerning the child support process and ways to encourage more positive engagement with, and increased compliance from, low-income noncustodial parents (NCPs).

The keynote address was offered by Vicki Turetsky, Federal OCSE Commissioner; and opening remarks were presented by Linda Gibbs, NYC Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. There were three panel discussions including: How child support helps poor families; the challenges and benefits of incorporating child support into social services; and a roundtable covering a range of child support topics led by Frances Pardus-Abbadessa, HRA OCSE; Robert Mulroy, NYS Family Court; and other experts. The panels consisted of representatives from a diverse set of backgrounds, including program administrators, policymakers, academics, and advocates.

The event was attended by over 250 people, and continued a very important dialogue on ways to improve the child support enforcement process to increase compliance with child support orders and to achieve positive outcomes for children and their parents. The following is a synopsis of the event.

In addition, a PowerPoint presentation of information offered by conference speakers, titled "Child Support: An Important Income Source for Families," is available at:
http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/ppt/Strengthening_Families_Presentation_2010.ppt

Keynote Address

Keynote Address

Vicki Turetsky, OCSE Commissioner, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Federal OCSE Commissioner Vicki Turetsky began her remarks by describing the disconnect that exists between the child support program and other social services. Throughout her career, Commissioner Turetsky worked with a range of human services programs—from cash assistance (CA) and Food Stamps to child care and Medicaid—both as a state human services administrator and as a legal services attorney representing both mothers and fathers. She also helped to implement Parent's Fair Share, one of the first national demonstration research projects for low-income men.

In addition, Commissioner Turetsky reflected upon her personal experience as a teen mother, community college dropout, and former recipient of several human services programs, including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, Food Stamps, and the supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). She said that all of these programs were important in helping her raise her children, but she viewed them as support from other people. She explained that her paychecks and the support she received from her children's father were especially important and even more valuable, because it was their money.

Commissioner Turetsky raised the question: "What is it about child support that makes other agencies, advocates, and researchers consistently overlook it as an income support and family strengthening program, even though it is right up there with the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Food Stamps?" Instead of being viewed as an income support program, she said, child support is seen as an enforcement program, and OCSE is viewed as a collection agency. The basic job of the child support program is to transfer private income from the noncustodial parent (NCP) to the child's household.

The program serves one in four children nationwide, and one in two poor children, for a total of 17 million children and their parents. It is also one of the few programs that systematically touches low-income fathers, and is the second largest income social welfare program in the U.S., just after Medicaid, which supports 23 million kids. Child support also ranks near the top in impacting positive outcomes for children.

Eighty percent of children in the child support program live in households with incomes below 300% of poverty, and one-third live in households with incomes below the federal poverty line. Eighty-four percent of all poor single-parent families participate in the child support program at some point while they are raising their kids, and child support comprises 40% of an average poor, mother-headed family's budget when the participating family is receiving it (though less than half of such families do). The mother's wages, and payments made by the father, comprise about an equal percentage of the family's budget when the father does pay the support. TANF and child support are also now approximately equal in terms of the amount of income coming into the household for poor custodial families. For deeply impoverished custodial families (those families with incomes at 50% of the federal poverty level or less), the percentage of income provided by child support has tripled. It now represents the majority of income on which these families are living when they are able to receive it.

In 2008, the child support program lifted one million people out of poverty, which makes it one of the most important programs in planning, intake, and service delivery for poor families and deeply poor families, when they get it. The child support program

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has a greater impact upon children's educational outcomes – both in terms of attainment and achievement – than any other source of income, including the mother's earnings, because it serves as a proxy for parental engagement and suggests that the involvement of both parents is critical to producing positive outcomes for children.

During the last ten years, child support has truly evolved into a family support program. For the custodial parent (CP), child support means that the NCP can be counted on to back her up and that she is not alone in raising them. For the NCP, child support is often about doing the right thing for his kids, as well as being a father and a man. And for a child, payment of child support can mean, "I have a dad who puts me first."

In the late 90s, child support shifted from a focus on re-paying the government (i.e., recovering welfare costs) to providing direct support to families. Today, \$26 billion is collected in child support and less than \$1 billion is retained for cost recovery. Therefore, \$25 billion in child support is going directly to families.

Currently, the child support program is undergoing a second shift: It is partnering with other programs to build low-income parents' overall capacity to support their children through engagement with such programs as pre-natal care, Head Start, and WIC; as well as through fatherhood, workforce development, prisoner re-entry and veterans' programs. In addition, the child support program is shifting to a broader view of linking parents to public and private health care under the Affordable Care Act.

Commissioner Turetsky has been speaking with many fatherhood programs and community-based organizations (CBOs) around the country about how they can partner with the child support program to provide more flexible and holistic services to families and children. "We are making progress," she says, "but we still have a way to go."

Opening Remarks

OPENING REMARKS

Linda Gibbs, NYC Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services

Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs described how New York City has been a national leader in using the child support program proactively and creatively under HRA Deputy Commissioner Frances Pardus-Abbadessa and Commissioner Robert Doar. She explained how Commissioner Doar started in the child support field and that he quickly became known as a national expert, whose work led to many innovations across the country.

Deputy Mayor Gibbs' work with child support began when she arrived at City Hall and lamented with her colleagues that she wished they could get together all of the city's various services, and the understanding of issues that these organizations have, in order to explore the fundamental reasons for these problems and determine if their respective interventions could address those root causes. "In our minds," she said, "it really boiled down to the experiences of families living in poverty, and children growing up in communities that experience generations of poverty over and over again."

Ms. Gibbs' office therefore began to focus on the issue of poverty: What is the size and shape of poverty in New York City? What is the current experience? How is it the same as it has always been and how is it different? Through the conversations that ensued, and by exploring the data, Deputy Mayor Gibbs learned that:

- Of the 110,000 children born each year in New York City, about 63,000 (or more than half) are born into poverty;
- About 260,000 young adults aged 16-24 are currently living in poverty; and
- Approximately 150,000-200,000 young people aged 16-24 are "disconnected youth" (i.e., they are both out of work and out of school).

Despite all of the progress that has been made, daunting problems still exist. The Bloomberg administration is working toward moving programs from "crisis" (i.e., putting a temporary band-aid on the problem), to looking at some of the solutions that might change the trajectory of these young people and families. To accomplish this, the child support program needs to move increasingly toward collaborating with other human services programs in order to leverage the opportunity they have when CPs seek child support orders: Programs can use this time to build a stronger, more long-term relationship between the parents. Such a relationship would not only increase the household's income—it would also contribute to creating the important social benefits that come from having two parents present in a child's life.

Deputy Mayor Gibbs also asked, "Can the child support program really become a community-based program?" For example, she said that city agencies, CBOs, and advocates should partner with the NYC Department of Probation.

In line with this, she said that Vincent Shiraldi, Commissioner of the Department of Probation, is exploring the possibility of closing the downtown probation offices and moving the department's services into smaller settings in the community. These offices would be called "Opportunity Offices," and probation officers would be titled, "Opportunity Advocates." The idea is to move from a bureaucratic relationship with people who are just getting out of prison, to the model of a community-based partnership in which probation officers can plan positively and proactively with these individuals to link them with resources in their community.

Opening Remarks

Deputy Mayor Gibbs also challenged conference participants to think about how they can use the probation term to create incentives for men to achieve positive and productive outcomes – such as getting a job and reconnecting with their families—not just staying out of trouble. Agency staff, service providers, and advocates are all necessary to creating a solution to childhood poverty, to breaking the trajectory of poverty, and to creating more examples of great work, both for the city and the nation. Deputy Mayor Gibbs said that she looks forward to all of the collaboration that she hopes will result from the conference and beyond.

Updates from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Sara McLanahan, Princeton University and Irv Garfinkel, Columbia University

The basic definition of a “fragile family” is one in which a child is born to unmarried parents. For more information on all of the literature regarding fragile families, see *The Future of Children* guide on *Fragile Families* (v. 20, no. 2, Fall 2010), which was included in the conference packets.

Sara McLanahan and Irv Garfinkel have been administering the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study for 10 years. They were motivated to undertake the study because the percentage of births to unmarried parents, as compared to that of all families, has dramatically increased for all ethnic groups since 1960. This trend raised four questions that were examined by the study, including:

- What are the capabilities and circumstances of unmarried parents, especially fathers?
- What is the nature of the unmarried parents’ relationships at birth, and how do these relationships change over time?
- What happens to parents and children in fragile families over time?
- What are the implications for policies and programs?

In order to get a nationally representative sample, they studied approximately 5,000 births in 75 hospitals in 20 large U.S. cities (cities with populations over 200,000) between 1998 and 2000. They oversampled births to unmarried parents, which accounted for approximately 75% of the families in the study. Mothers, as well as about 75% of the fathers, were interviewed at the hospital shortly after the birth of the child, which resulted in very high response rates. Follow-up interviews were then conducted with both parents when the child was one, three, five, and nine years old. To date, a sample of Ms. McLanahan’s and Mr. Garfinkel’s findings include the following:

In response to the question, “What are the capabilities and circumstances of unmarried parents, especially fathers?” the researchers found that:

- About 45% of births were to teen mothers;
- Approximately 35% of the mothers already had a child in the household by a different father, and over 50% of the mothers were collecting child support from two different fathers;
- Unmarried parents had much lower levels of education, earnings, and household income than married parents;
- About 50% of the fathers had spent some time in jail or prison.

In response to the question, “What is the nature of the unmarried parents’ relationships at birth and how do these relationships change over time?” the researchers found that:

- About 82% of the parents were romantically involved with each other at the time of their child’s birth (i.e., the births were not the consequence of a one-night stand);
- About 50% of single fathers, and 96% of cohabitating fathers, said that their name was going to be on the birth certificate, and a high percentage of fathers made monetary contributions to the family prior to the child’s birth;
- Five years after the birth, about 20% of married parents, as well as a high percentage of unmarried parents, had ended their relationships with one another. A large percentage of these parents had formed new partnerships and had children with new partners.

In response to the question, “What happens to parents and children in fragile families over time?” the researchers found that:

- There are hardly any completely single mothers: Many unmarried mothers reported dating and having several different partners, resulting in an enormous amount of turnover in the household;
- This instability led to more depression and stress in the mothers, more poverty and material hardship, and a reduction in the mother’s parenting quality (e.g., she spent less time reading to the child or had a harsher parenting style). It also led to less involvement and contribution from the father, as well as a worsening of the child’s health and cognitive development (e.g., increased rates of obesity).

In terms of the question, “What are the implications for policies and programs?” the researchers offered the following recommendations:

- Implementing prevention as the first line of defense, especially in reducing non-marital births and rates of incarceration. Finding a way to delay births even three or four years past age 19 would go a long way toward improving outcomes for children.
- Utilization of three interventions that have been evaluated carefully and seem to work: (1) mass media campaigns that encourage men to use condoms, (2) teen pregnancy prevention programs that discourage sexual activity and educate teens about contraception, and (3) Medicaid programs that subsidize contraception.
- Reduction of mass incarceration by finding alternatives to imprisonment. Rates of incarceration are now five times higher than they have been throughout our history. This results in reduced support to mothers and children by scarring the fathers, which negatively impacts their ability to earn and impedes their ability to live with the family. In turn, this reduces the amount of child support that the NCP will pay. The U.S. Sentencing Commission is proposing revised sentencing guidelines, and other organizations are exploring alternatives to incarceration, but “we need to push on these,” said Mr. Garfinkel.
- Maintenance and potential expansion of tax and transfer programs, which play a huge role in the lives of fragile families.
- Ensuring access to early childhood education and child care programs, which is critical. Aid must also be available for married parents; otherwise, an incentive is created for single parents not to marry. In addition, support services should be targeted to couples right when the child is born.
- Amending the child support enforcement program to be more sensitive to low-income families. Multi-partner fertility complicates child support enforcement and about 50%-60% of both men and women have multi-partner fertility. The father’s willingness to pay is reduced if he has children in multiple households, and the effectiveness of any payment he makes is reduced because the kids are spread over different households. The state incentive for child support cost recovery needs to be completely eliminated, which requires federal legislation. State guidelines also need to call for realistic child support obligations that a poor man can actually meet (e.g., base the order on a percentage of his income), in order to prevent arrears in the first place, since the U.S. currently only collects about eight percent of arrears. Also, obligations should be suspended if the NCP is in prison.

Overview of the Child Support Program

Frances Pardus-Abbadessa, HRA OCSE Deputy Commissioner

Deputy Commissioner Frances Pardus-Abbadessa explained that New York City's Child Support Program is jointly funded by the federal, state, and county governments under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act. In New York State, the child support program is state supervised and locally administered, and New York is considered a judicial state, which means that child support orders are set by the court. The New York State Division of Child Support Enforcement administers program funding, monitors the performance levels of programs, and offers technical assistance and program support. It also operates the statewide child support computer system and the call and processing centers; and issues regulations, policies, and procedures.

The child support program has a very strong partnership with the New York State Family Court, which is responsible for establishing child support orders based on the Child Support Standards Act (CSSA). This act mandates set formulas for establishing orders: The court considers the income of both parents and the number of children, and depending upon the number of children, applies 17%-35% to establish an order and the amount of money that an NCP is obligated to pay. The order remains in place until the child turns 21 or is legally emancipated, and child support cases remain open until the order is paid in full. The court also modifies orders – up or down – and hears judicial enforcement actions.

The Deputy Commissioner also described how New York State law provides safeguards for low-income NCPs. These safeguards include establishing minimum orders, from \$0-\$25 per month, for NCPs who are living at or below the federal poverty level (annual incomes of \$10,830 or less); and capping arrears at \$500 in these situations. In addition to protections for those living below poverty level, a Self Support Reserve (SSR) has been established, which is the minimum income level at which a person can be considered self-sufficient. Currently, the SSR is \$14,620 annually. If an NCP's earnings are at or below the SSR, a minimum order of \$50 per month will be established for that person. In addition, New York State recently passed a law that allows incarcerated NCPs to petition the court for a modification of their orders while they are in prison.

The child support program has considerable enforcement authority and mechanisms of enforcement, which are based on either the dollar amount of child support that has not been paid, or the time period during which the NCP did not pay support. These mechanisms fall under two categories: administrative and judicial.

Administrative enforcement includes such measures as driver's license suspension, passport denial, and interception of tax refunds. Prior to the implementation of an administrative action, a notice is sent to the NCP explaining the process and notifying him/her of their right to due process. NCPs in receipt of government assistance are exempt from some of these actions. When administrative enforcement tools have been exhausted, OCSE turns to judicial enforcement. Judicial enforcement measures are implemented when a CP or the Department of Social Services (DSS) files a petition in court. These actions include suspension of a New York State professional license; NCP referral to a mandatory work program; conversion of arrears into a judgment that imposes an interest of nine percent; or incarceration if "willfulness" is proven.

New York City's Child Support Program serves 400,000 families. Approximately 71% of those families have orders established; for the remaining 29%, OCSE has been unable to locate the NCP in order to bring the case to court. About two-thirds of the families that OCSE serves are poor and are either currently in receipt of assistance or have received assistance in the past. In calendar year 2009, OCSE collected \$677 million, and it is anticipated that this amount will increase by two percent at the end of 2010.

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Ninety percent of the amount OCSE collects goes directly to families, and 10% is returned to the government for benefits that were issued. Families on CA receive the first \$100 of child support collected if the mother has one child—or \$200 if she has two children or more. This amount is in addition to the CA benefit the family receives.

For families who received child support in 2009, collections represented 15%-38% of the 2009 poverty level (\$18,310 for a family of three). Approximately 72%-75% of collections come from employer wage withholdings. (Employers are required by federal law to garnish child support from the wages of their employees.)

Of the 440,000 children in New York City who are living in single parent families with incomes of 150% of the federal poverty level, 25% have a child support order in place; 40% are known to OCSE but do not have an order in place, and 35% are not connected to the formal child support system at all. There are approximately 180,000 NCPs in New York City with a current child support order in place. Of these NCPs, 75% earn approximately \$25,000 a year or less; 44% are currently or formerly in receipt of CA; 53% have orders of over \$300 per month; 62% paid the majority of their child support in 2009; and their arrears average \$12,685, with the majority of the money owed to the CP.

OCSE also has approximately 110,000 cases that are “arrears-only,” which means that the NCP is only paying off their child support debt. Of these NCPs, 70% are currently or formerly in receipt of CA; 27% made payments in 2009; and their arrears average \$11,960, with the majority of the money owed to the CP. In approximately 40% of these cases, the money is owed to families where the child is under age 21.

Many of OCSE’s programs are designed to educate low-income NCPs and ensure that their orders are consistent with their income, as well as help them prevent the accumulation of arrears, or reduce their arrears if these have become large and are owed to the government. OCSE’s Customer Service Unit offers programs to help NCPs meet their child support obligation, including the Modified DSS Order (MDO) program and the DSS Arrears Cap program. Under the DSS Arrears Cap program, 413 NCPs have had their DSS arrears reduced by over \$4.1 million, which resulted in an increased number of NCPs paying child support, from 38% to 64%. Finally, under the Arrears Credit Program, NCPs with arrears owed to the government may have them reduced by \$15,000 over three years in exchange for paying their monthly child support obligation.

To assist NCPs who are unemployed, OCSE administers the Support Through Employment Program (STEP), a court-mandated or voluntary program that helps NCPs with job skills development and job placement. OCSE has a strong relationship with HRA’s job placement programs. STEP also offers parenting classes and has full-time Child Support Specialists on staff to help NCPs prevent arrears and learn about public benefits that are available to them. Approximately 390 NCPs are referred to STEP each month, and approximately \$20 million is collected each year from all STEP participants who have been referred since the program began in 2002.

In addition, OCSE is implementing a number of other programs targeted toward NCPs, including:

- The Low Income Dads (LIDs) program. This is being piloted in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn, where there are high rates of noncompliance with child support. LIDs connects NCPs to employment, the formal child support program, and their children.
- A program on Rikers Island where staff is on site one day a week to meet with inmates to discuss their child support case and conduct workshops on child support; employment programs are also on site at Rikers Island.

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- OCSE Mediation Programs, which offer parents access to free or low-cost mediation for issues such as custody and visitation.
 - The No Kidding program (offered in partnership with the NYC Department of Education), in which peer educators who are themselves teen parents go into the classrooms of nine high schools, as well as After-School Programs and at Rikers Island, to discuss with other teens the challenges and financial responsibilities of raising a child as a teen parent.
 - A pilot program, to be launched by OCSE in January 2011, that would *quasi*-administratively establish child support orders outside of Family Court in Manhattan for families who receive CA. The agreement would then be forwarded to the court for final approval. OCSE is also exploring an enhanced partnership with the Mediation Program to address issues of high arrears and family engagement.

Panel Discussions

Panel Discussions

Panelists who attended the conference included: Marilyn Ray Smith, Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Child Support Division; Glenn Martin, The Fortune Society; Elaine Sorensen, The Urban Institute; Michael Hayes, Texas Office of the Attorney General, Child Support Division; Lisa Landau, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Nurse-Family Partnership Program; Kofi Asante, National Comprehensive Center for Fathers; Frances Pardus-Abbadessa, HRA Office of Child Support Enforcement; and Robert Mulroy, NYS Family Court.

Panel I: How Child Support Helps Poor Families

(Panel: Marilyn Ray Smith, Glenn Martin, and Elaine Sorensen; Moderator: Andrea Batista Schlesinger, NYC Mayor's Office)

The child support program helps poor families in a multitude of ways. When child support is paid, it lifts about one million people out of poverty each year, and the last 10 years have seen a shift from low-income CPs primarily receiving CA as an income support, to CPs receiving child support as a greater percentage of their income. The child support program also aims to bring families together by providing services that support both the father and the mother. In addition, the program focuses on helping NCPs gain the skills and jobs necessary to pay their child support orders.

Visits, outreach, and paternity establishment during an NCP's prison stay help to forge better relationships between incarcerated NCPs and the child support program. In Massachusetts, the State Department of Revenue asked prisoners if they wanted a better life for their children than they themselves had, and this question motivated many NCPs to seek paternity establishment. Also, it is critical to educate the NCP during prisoner intake about getting his/her child support order reduced immediately (e.g., via New York's new law), so that arrears do not accumulate during their incarceration: Large arrears present a huge barrier and keep NCPs from participating in the formal economy. It is also important to consider ways to better educate prisoners about their right to a child support order modification, and to make it easier for them to modify their orders while they are in prison. For example, Massachusetts prisons have legal services representatives on site to assist NCPs in modifying their orders, and New York State prisons have access to the Internet, which can assist inmates in modifying their orders.

The child support program also plays a large role in connecting NCPs to employment and enrolling them in public benefits for which they are eligible. New York is the only state in the country with an NCP Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which enables low-income NCPs who are paying their child support to claim a small tax credit. However, because many NCPs do not know how to claim the credit, there is a low take-up rate: only about 5,000 NCPs claimed the credit in 2009. New York City works to inform NCPs about the NCP EITC each year by mailing them information about it and letting them know where they can go to obtain free tax preparation assistance.

In order to maximize the child support program's ability to assist poor families, more outreach and education about the program is needed, as are more partnerships with community-based organizations in locations where NCPs reside. Subway and bus-stop ad campaigns in low-income communities are spreading an effective message that the child support program is not just about collecting money, but is also about family reunification.

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Since the messenger is as important as the message, it is important to keep in mind how the message about child support is being delivered, as well as how CBOs can be leveraged to deliver it. For example, CBOs could better integrate child support enforcement into their programs by encouraging city agency staff to come into their communities and work on site at the CBOs. Because child support program staff must often play the role of “enforcer,” they may possess poor customer relations skills or an inability to assist the NCP with their other barriers and needs. The child support system needs to move toward more of an administrative system and less of a court-based one. This would enable NCPs to speak directly with someone at a CBO or over the phone about their particular situation, as opposed to interacting solely with the court.

Courts, however, do continue to play an important role in the child support system by mandating NCPs to comply with certain procedures that they might not undertake on their own. Also, more information about visitation rights needs to be communicated to NCPs via CBOs and public outreach campaigns.

NCPs are often connected to jobs with small- and mid-size employers. More outreach is needed to help employers understand how to comply with the law regarding the garnishment of an NCP’s wages, and how not to discriminate in hiring NCPs with child support obligations. It was noted that these employers often do not want to deal with the paperwork involved in garnishing wages, particularly in the current economic environment. Therefore, New York State recently created a website to assist small employers in completing the forms required for garnishing wages for NCPs; more information about this service is available through OCSE.

The face of CPs is undergoing changes as grandparents increasingly raise their grandchildren. Consequently, there is a growing need to assist grandparents in becoming aware of their eligibility for child-only public assistance to help them support the child, as well as a need to educate them about the child support obligations that are attached to doing so. The NYC Department of the Aging offers “Grandparent Sensitivity Training” to CBOs on this and other issues related to grandparents raising grandchildren.

Finally, the importance of leveraging technology to help NCPs comply with child support obligations was discussed. New York already offers a website where NCPs can check their child support balances, payments, and other information without having to speak to an agency representative. A suggestion was made to explore integrating social media (e.g., Facebook) into the process, since many individuals in the target population are familiar with these tools even if they are not as familiar with Microsoft Office and other computer programs.

Panel II: Presentations on the Challenges and Benefits of Incorporating Child Support into Social Services

(Panel: Michael Hayes, Lisa Landau, and Kofi Asante; Moderator: Elisabeth Donahue, Princeton University)

How do we move from a system that serves moms and children on one side, and fathers on the other side, into a system that treats families as families, whether the family is still together as a romantic couple or not? The panelists explored this question and described program models that serve families more holistically—including the incorporation of child support services—to better support families and achieve positive outcomes:

NFP: The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)

NFP: The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) is a national program being implemented by 385 counties across the country. It is an intensive home visiting program for first-time low-income moms, and is staffed by nurses with bachelor’s

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degrees who carry a caseload of 25 families. The nurses start during the 28th week of the mother's pregnancy and continue until the child's second birthday. Guidelines are set by the national NFP program in Colorado, and New York City is implementing a model that was tested through three randomized control studies. The City piloted the program through the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and there are now 114 nurses across the city at nine high-need sites, who serve a total of 2,400 families. Twenty-one percent of the clients are married at intake, and 85% report having weekly contact with the biological father.

The goals of the program are to improve economic, health, and development outcomes for children, as well as improve the parents' economic self-sufficiency. Outcomes from the randomized studies include: better pre-natal health, fewer childhood injuries, increased maternal employment, increased school readiness, increased father involvement, deep decreases in convictions among moms, substantial reductions in child abuse and neglect, and reductions in arrests among children. Mayor Bloomberg's Commission on Economic Opportunity named the Nurse-Family Partnership the most effective program for children under age five. The program focuses on the parent's behavior, including the ability to draw upon their strengths and build self-confidence, over time, to take on life challenges. NFP not only works with the mom and dad, but also the grandmother and other adults present in the child's life, and changes intergenerational habits and intergenerational poverty.

Because of their gravitas and credibility, nurses are able to create a bond with the mothers and fathers, and become life coaches for them. They give both parents materials and ask them questions about how they want to raise their child.

In addition, the program is initiating more outreach to fatherhood programs in order to bring them into NFP. They have seen a 46% increase in the number of fathers living with the mother and child after participating in the program, as compared to non-participants. In addition, the program has seen an increase in marriage among participating mothers. Nurses link fathers to services in the same way that they link mothers: NFP capitalizes on the magic and motivating moment when the child is born to help the mothers and fathers work on their relationship moving forward. When NFP observers looked at the level of father involvement at intake, and then again at 12 months, they noted that father involvement had increased during that time span as a result of the program. NFP also produced a substantial increase in income over time. Currently, NFP nurses are being trained by HRA to assist mothers and fathers with issues related to child support enforcement.

NCCF: The Philadelphia-based National Comprehensive Center for Fathers (NCCF)

NCCF: The Philadelphia-based National Comprehensive Center for Fathers (NCCF) serves a total of 485 fathers per year who are aged 18 and over, including 150 ex-offenders. The Center provides these men with educational advancement, and with parenting and life skills development. Launched in 1999, the Center now has a staff of 43 individuals, 11 of whom were hired directly from the program itself. NCCF places 80% of participants in jobs each year, and the average man obtains a job making over \$10/hour plus benefits. Every man coming into the program is given the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) in order to determine his educational skill level.

NCCF also partners with the Department of Human Services to reach out to over 4,500 men each year, which includes about 1,500 men being reached through the distribution of cards on buses. In addition, the program outfits 3,000 men per year with suits for job interviews and court appointments. Due to behavioral health issues (e.g., drug and alcohol

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abuse, domestic violence, etc.), approximately 40% of the men in the program do not retain their jobs; but NCCF increased their participants' job retention rate 11% last year by opening a behavioral health clinic.

Participants take a class on listening skills and must then ask their children's mother a set of questions—called the “baby mama drama” questions—in order to develop an understanding and relationship with her. With the Delta Alpha Delta Sigma (DADS) component of the program, NCCF uses the fraternity concept to develop a collegiate-like sense of pride in men by enabling them to belong to something positive and something they can always come home to, rather than something negative, like a gang. Similar to a college fraternity, NCCF puts men through their paces by taking them out into the woods to chop logs, climb fences, and participate in other activities where they learn to solve problems together.

NCCF also partners with an organization called “Mothers in Charge.” They will jointly host a conference this spring to discuss keeping the focus of relationships on the child. In addition, NCCF's partnership with an organization called “RISE” provides services to the children of the fathers NCCF serves. NCCF emphasizes with its men the positive aspects of paying child support, and NCCF programs are being replicated in Newark, Camden, Delaware, and five counties in Pennsylvania. NCCF's motto is: “Who better to serve you than the one that knows you?” and the organization preaches this message across all staff levels, from the receptionist to the executive director. In addition, NCCF's executive director asks participants to abide by the “three Gs”: “Either you got it, get it, or get out!”

TEXAS AG: The Child Support Division of the Texas Office of the Attorney General

TEXAS AG: The Child Support Division of the Texas Office of the Attorney General provides its social service programs with a number of tools that help link families to child support. The Attorney General's Office has worked with a statewide Nurse-Family Partnership program to train nurses in helping families to establish child support orders, and has also provided this information to WIC and family planning staff.

Father support is one of the biggest indicators in determining whether or not a mother chooses to breastfeed, and whether or not a mother relapses in smoking cessation during the prenatal period. And the single biggest missed opportunity is working to connect mothers and fathers during the prenatal period. One of the foremost challenges to integrating child support information into other social service programs is staff time, because other program staff (e.g., WIC staff) is already overloaded with other responsibilities. It is therefore important to incorporate the information as easily and seamlessly as possible. In addition, the legal information often seems frightening, and staff feels that is outside the realm of their knowledge and responsibilities.

Half of all military families are divorced, and one of the Texas AG's major areas of focus is partnering with veterans' and military services programs. They also partner with Army JAG and National Guard divisions to educate families about child support issues, such as what happens to an NCP's child support order when a serviceman is deployed. Another key focus of the AG is to provide training to Veteran's Court officials to help military men avoid incarceration due to failure to pay their child support.

In addition, the Texas Attorney General's Office partners with pregnancy prevention programs such as the Parenting and Paternity Awareness (PAPA) program. This is a required class in high school, and nearly 500,000 Texas students have participated in the last few years. The program explores not only the challenges of being a parent—it also addresses

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the positive aspects of parenting, such as the dreams parents have for their children. As a result of this and the complementary No Kidding program, there has been a 23% reduction, statewide, in the number of teens who say they are likely to have a child before they are married.

Developing partnerships with domestic violence programs is another key area of focus for the state's child support programs, since 90% of battered women say that they would like to establish a child support order if they could do so safely. One of the biggest challenges in developing these partnerships, however, is helping the domestic violence and child support staffs overcome the fears they have of each others' systems.

The Attorney General's Office has also had a lot of success in working with employment and skill-building programs. In addition, the state is working to educate all government staff involved in human services about the child support program and strategies for engaging fathers, so that they can be integrated into the work of multiple agencies.

Some of the overarching themes that were raised during the panel discussion included:

- Treating families like families, rather than single units, both in terms of the language used and the services provided;
- Collaborating and partnering with other programs and CBOs as integral to the success of child support programs;
- Establishing trust between social services staff and parents as crucial;
- Meeting potential clients where they are, and on their terms, as key elements in the enhancing the ability of child support programs to achieve positive outcomes.

Panel III: Roundtable with the Above Presenters and Frances Pardus-Abbadessa, NYC HRA OCSE, and Robert Mulroy, NYS Family Court

(Moderator: Elisabeth Donahue)

The closing session provided an opportunity for panelists to answer additional questions from the audience on a range of child support topics. The following captures the questions that were asked and the answers that were offered:

Q: There has been a lot of talk about creating a “cultural” change among fathers. What is being done or can be done to instill a cultural change among mothers that will reinforce the importance of dads?

A: *Reach out to organizations that work with mothers and encourage young mothers to listen to more mature, life-witnessing women who can give them advice about relationships. For example, NFP provides women with information and suggestions about how to connect more with their children's father. NFP also works with the mothers on their “gate-keeping” roles and the importance of allowing the father to see the children. And in Texas, the courts address visitation rights at the same time that the child support order is established.*

Q: What are some of the challenges and opportunities for scaling up the programs that were mentioned today, in order for them to have a larger impact?

A: *In NFP's experience, some of the challenges to scaling up include recruiting more professionals to participate in the program, given the current nursing shortage; achieving a buy-in from the community so that clients are referred; and*

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searching for sustainable funding opportunities. It is also important to continue using forums such as this one, partnering with CBOs, and launching public outreach campaigns (via TV, radio, Internet) to educate staff about these programs and benefits, so that there is greater client uptake of these services. Finding compassionate staff members that are really dedicated to their work is also a challenge for scaling up programs.

Q: What can an NCP do when he encounters a hostile magistrate?

A: *Magistrate Mulroy noted that in New York State, NCPs can file an “objection” within 30 days of receiving the decision. This objection states disagreement with the results, or the belief that one was treated unfairly (e.g., trial court didn’t give the litigant enough time to present evidence, call witnesses, or to testify). Beyond that, if a litigant feels that (s)he was treated rudely or with disrespect, (s)he can file a complaint with the supervising judge of the county. Mr. Asante remarked that it is also a two-way street: Clients must be taught to conduct themselves appropriately in a courtroom by using such phrases as, “Yes, sir” and “I understand, your Honor.”*

Q: Should we be promoting marriage as a solution?

A: *The data does not show that co-habiting families are very stable; for the most part, they are fragile situations. Therefore, marriage might be a solution. However, on the flip side, it appears that a sub-culture exists within African American and Latino communities in which a conscious decision is made not to abide by the cultural norms of the larger America (e.g., marriage), because larger America doesn’t look that promising. Also, divisions among populations still exists when it comes to educational and employment opportunities.*

Q: What parenting curriculum resources would panelists recommend that they have found useful?

A: *Parents as Teachers has shown effective evaluation results. Also, NFP teaches parents how to “read” their infant, as well as to recognize the encouragement and affirmation they receive from their babies that indicate they are good parents. The Future of Children has an online resource related to preventing child mistreatment, in which parenting programs are discussed. In particular, Triple P is a program that has been evaluated and shows a lot of success.*

Q: How does reducing the arrears owed to DSS reimburse the mother for the debt that she has incurred in raising the child?

A: *The short answer is that it doesn’t. New York calculates the child support order based on a percentage of the adjusted gross income. The only exception is if this income information is not available. In that instance, New York can do a needs-based order and calculate the child support order based on the needs of the child and the actual expenses of the CP’s home. However, studies have shown that a reduction in arrears can lead to increased child support payments to the CP.*

Q: How successful is the National Comprehensive Center for Fathers in sustaining the mother-father relationship, including marriage?

A: *NCCF has seen a lot of success in building the relationship between the mother and the father. An increasing number of mothers and their children attend the activities that it conducts, including the physical challenges, to see if the men will make it through. This becomes an opportunity to build the relationship and have men go back into their families. NCCF’s executive director receives an average of three wedding invitations a year. Once the mother has an inkling that the father is taking on more responsibility, and has a paycheck as well as manners, the relationship also tends to grow in a positive direction.*

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