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Quick Facts: Paternity Establishment & Parentage

This Quick Facts guide provides information about the role of the Child Support Program in establishing paternity for children.

The Child Support Program¹ is a successful federal-state-tribal partnership whose mission is to promote economic stability for children whose parents live apart. Establishing legal paternity for children born outside marriage is a primary goal of the program and the first necessary step to obtaining child support.

A total of 1.5 million paternities were established or acknowledged in the child support program in federal fiscal year 2016 (FFY16).² Because paternity establishment is of such critical importance to families and the success of the program, federal law sets minimum performance measure expectations and states are continually striving to improve their success in this area. States that meet or exceed the federal performance measures are eligible for financial incentives; states that do not are subject to fiscal penalties.

In FFY16, the child support program caseload included more than 10 million children born to unmarried women. Most children had paternity established through a simple, voluntary acknowledgment process at the hospital right after birth or later in a local child support office. States also can use judicial or administrative methods to establish paternity when the parents decide not to acknowledge paternity, and genetic testing by state-contracted laboratories is available to parents at low or no cost.

Through the use of federal demonstration grants, states have been experimenting with new approaches to improve paternity establishment rates. These projects include collaboration with hospitals, various local community resource centers, and outreach to high schools. Other efforts include reaching out to alleged fathers in a non-adversarial manner to explain the process and the benefits of establishing paternity. These projects show that early outreach to fathers yields higher rates of compliance with future court orders and more involvement in the lives of their children.

The Child Support Program requires states to provide effective and valuable services to parents that promote paternity establishment for children, and as a convenient mechanism for both parents to acknowledge the father's paternity. These paternity establishment services are critical to children and families, as well as society overall because they encourage healthy families with involvement from both parents.

¹ Created by Title IV-D of the Social Security Act

² Office of Child Support Enforcement FFY16 Annual Report





In many jurisdictions, paternity establishment laws are changing following the U.S. Supreme Court's holding in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 135 S.Ct. 2584 (2015), that same-sex couples have a fundamental right to marry, which includes establishing a home and bringing up children. State law changes have included making this area of law gender-neutral, recognizing de facto or intended parents who might not be genetically related to the child, and extending to same-sex couples the marital presumption of parentage and the process for voluntarily acknowledging paternity.

