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Quick Facts: Child Support and Domestic Violence

This Quick Facts guide provides information about the impact of domestic violence on child support establishment and enforcement.

The Child Support Program¹ is a successful federal-state partnership that seeks to promote economic stability for children whose parents live apart. The program collects \$5.51 for every \$1 in public funds invested. In FY 2020, \$3.7 billion was collected in 13.2 million cases for 13.8 million children.² For a parent who is a victim of domestic violence, child support establishment and enforcement present both the opportunity for financial independence and the challenge of ensuring safety.

Domestic violence affects every social and economic group in the country. Recent research on parents in the IVD program found that more than 1 in 3 custodial parents experienced domestic violence with the other parent on their case. That same study found that almost half of mothers who don't have a child support order and aren't receiving any informal support experienced domestic violence with the other parent.³

Economic instability is a primary reason a victim stays with or returns to their abuser.⁴ The core purpose of the Program, consistent financial support to families, is directly aligned with the ability of victims to leave abusive relationships and establish homes free from violence for them and their children. When child support agencies do not provide adequate protections for victims, or victims aren't aware of protections within the child support process, they go without critical financial support that could mean the difference between safety and ongoing violence. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges has published a guide to assist when a parent may be afraid of the other parent but wants to pursue child support.⁵

Best practices from around the country can be found in state child support programs:⁶

- Collaborating with state domestic violence coalitions and other nationally recognized domestic violence organizations to develop safe policies and procedures to better serve victims of domestic violence. Arizona and Texas both have ongoing contracts with their

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

² [Office of Child Support Enforcement \(OCSE\) FY2020 Preliminary Report](#)

³ From the Federal OCSE IM-19-06, citing Osborne, Cynthia et al. (2013). In-Hospital Acknowledgment of Paternity (AOP): A Portrait of Father Involvement and Support in the First Three Years after a Nonmarital Birth. Child and Family Research Partnership

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ NCJFC- Child Support: When You're Afraid of the Other Parent. [Child Support - When You are Afraid of the Other Parent \(hhs.gov\)](#)

⁶ Information on state activities gathered by NCSEA board members in coordination with OCSE. For information on OCSE resources, contact Michael Hayes, Senior Programs Manager, Division of Program Innovation, OCSE, at michael.hayes@acf.hhs.gov.





state Domestic Violence (DV) coalitions for training and technical assistance. Other states like Vermont, New Mexico, Washington, and Wyoming have established ongoing collaborations with their state coalitions.

- Reviewing, refreshing, and developing policy and procedures using the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement’s (OCSE) Program Inventory.⁷ Arizona developed new training for all staff, updated policy and procedures, and system enhancements to promote safe access to child support. Agency leadership disseminated this information through multiple releases over the course of one month using a “Here’s what’s new, Here’s what you need to know, Here’s what you need to do” approach to avoid overwhelming staff with new information.
- Providing training on domestic violence dynamics and their common impact on parents going through the child support process and developing skills to respond to domestic violence disclosures to all staff with customer contact. New York and tribal programs in Wisconsin, Arizona, and Mississippi have used OCSE’s training curriculum, in partnership with state and local domestic violence experts, to train child support case workers, attorneys, call center staff, and management.
- Providing universal education about safety resources and measures available to families in the child support program. Several states have recently updated their application for services, information on their websites, notices for paternity testing and hearings, and review and modification notices that go to all parents (both custodial and noncustodial), custodial and noncustodial, to include a “think safety first” message. Texas hosts a website in cooperation with the state domestic violence coalition to educate parents about safe access to child support - <http://getchildsupportsafely.org/>
- Building multiple, ongoing opportunities for victims to disclose past or current domestic violence and formulating screening questions that provide a context for why disclosure might help increase safety for a survivor and how the child support agency will use disclosed information. Mississippi previously reviewed 18 system generated notices to parents and incorporated safety focused messages into those notices.
- Simplifying processes for victims to receive the protections of the family violence indicator, educating victims about what the indicator does and doesn’t do, reviewing system processes to ensure the indicator only applies to the victim parent (and children when appropriate), and developing system capacity to bring all information about domestic violence into a single repository. Multiple states now take a verbal disclosure of safety concerns as adequate reason to flag cases with the FVI. Arizona expanded the number of system screens that include a family violence notice and, like Mississippi, built requirements for DV review into the system.

⁷ *Enhancing Safe Access to Child Support: IV-D Program Inventory and Planning Resource*, available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/safe-access-to-child-support-services-scope-of-the-issue>





- Recognizing many victims will use public assistance programs (TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, Child Care) and that they will frequently not understand the need for disclosure nor be given adequate opportunity to disclose safety concerns prior to a referral for child support cooperation. New Mexico, Michigan, and Texas all work with their public assistance agencies to increase education to parents during the eligibility process and provide multiple opportunities for good cause reviews after a referral is made to child support.
- Creating procedures that permit victims to delay or modify enforcement actions or stop support services if they feel threatened or fearful of domestic violence. Vermont uses a “yellow light” case management tool for staff to use when offering victims a menu of safety modifications available – these include address non-disclosure, separate waiting and negotiation areas, telephonic hearings, accompaniment by DV advocates, and case closure
- Supporting the use of telephonic hearings where available and working with domestic violence advocates in court and in local child support offices. In several Texas IVD courts, DV legal advocates are either in court or “on call” and parents are offered their services prior to hearings.
- Providing training to staff in domestic violence programs about child support services and how DV advocates can help victims navigate and have a safety plan for participation in child support services. Arizona, Texas, and Wyoming all provide “Child Support 101 for DV Advocates” to staff in state and local DV programs. San Bernardino County child support staff regularly conduct Q and A sessions with survivor groups in their jurisdiction.

Developing a “DV smart” child support program requires the ongoing attention and support of program leadership and engagement of domestic violence experts to guide integration of model practices into each jurisdiction’s (state, county, tribal) unique setting. Because domestic violence intersects with the Program’s core operations, it’s not an issue that can be addressed with one-time actions or projects, but rather must be part of the Program’s continued commitment to ensure children are able to receive the financial and emotional support needed to thrive without sacrificing safety.

Lastly, states should be mindful of the increased risk involved for domestic violence and victims during the public health crisis caused by COVID. The crisis may increase the following risks: isolation from friends, family, and coworkers; travel restrictions and limited public transportation may impact safety planning and available options; lack of income may make the survivor more dependent on their abuser; economic impacts and necessity to address childcare due to school closures may increase the need for formal child support orders; and, an abuser may prevent, control or frighten by providing misinformation concerning access to medical care or threaten to cancel medical coverage.⁸

⁸ Texas [Get Child Support Safely](#) website.

