
SolutionSERIES

ENGAGING FATHERS IN CHILD SUPPORT: FROM A PUNITIVE TO A SUPPORTIVE APPROACH

by Reggie Bicha, Executive Director, Colorado Department of Human Services, and
Roxane White, Morgridge Family Innovator in Residence, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

Most of us cringe when we hear the label “Deadbeat Dad” or other terminology that presumes absent parents are uncaring parents. These labels conjure all kinds of negative ideas and images of a non-custodial father who has no means of providing for his children and cares little for them. That perception is reflected in traditional child support enforcement methods that aim to punish irresponsible parents and take whatever meager resources they might manage to accumulate. But behavioral science teaches us that going a bit deeper may help us better understand parental engagement, finding ways to engage parents with their children while also increasing financial support. Ascend at the Aspen Institute has supported us at the Colorado Department of Human Services in learning about the whole family or two-generational (also known as 2Gen) approach, helping us go deeper with our families to find solutions for parents and children and to take on these negative labels and myths about parents.

Through CO-PEP, the Department focuses on helping non-custodial parents overcome barriers to employment, so they can financially support their children – a quintessential 2Gen approach. Colorado found a preponderance of absentee parents who were “willing but unable” to pay child support and who were willing to engage in work, treatment, and other supports.

Colorado looked and listened and found a very different narrative in many of our child support cases. We saw parents who wanted to provide for their children but did not have the skills or education to obtain employment that allowed them to meet the needs of their families. We heard from parents who said they could not afford to get themselves off the streets, much less pay for their children’s needs. We saw the heartache of parents being ordered to pay child support for a child whom they never saw or with whom they had no relationship. We found that most parents wanted to engage, provide resources, and be involved in caretaking for their families.

Listening to parents, both those with custody and those ordered to pay child support, we realized there must be a better way to do this work. We found that the narratives about absent parents did not actually describe the parents we were meeting.

When the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement announced five years ago that it wanted to see real

 **ASCEND**
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

innovation in child support enforcement, Colorado leaped at the challenge. The Colorado Department of Human Services was awarded \$2.3 million over five years and used this money to dramatically transform practice and the fundamental way we think about child support enforcement by using a 2Gen lens and working with Ascend staff to think about a different future for children.

Colorado called this new approach the **Colorado Parent Employment Program**, or CO-PEP. The state started the redesign with a practice that should be a part of every 2Gen effort – program architects listened carefully to the voices of family members who were experiencing traditional child support enforcement. Ultimately, the state pursued a strategy that would move from a punitive to a supportive approach. It should come as no surprise that the outcomes for families have been truly remarkable.

Through CO-PEP, the Department focuses on helping non-custodial parents overcome barriers to employment, so they can financially support their children – a quintessential 2Gen approach. Colorado found a preponderance of absentee parents who were “willing but unable” to pay child support and who were willing to engage in work, treatment, and other supports.

Of the 1,500 parents who were behind on their support payments, 85 percent were men. In order to rigorously assess the efficacy of the approach, half of this cohort were handled with the traditional, outdated child support enforcement practices. The other half were assigned a case manager whose mission was to figure out why the parents were not making payments and to help them overcome those barriers. In return for parents agreeing to engage in services, the division agreed not to suspend driver’s licenses or seek other sanctions. Within six months, two-thirds of these parents (who were either unemployed or under-employed when they entered CO-PEP) had full-time employment. Within a year, three-quarters were working and increased their payments. Many of the participants report increased engagement with their children and anecdotally we have found there has been a diminished need for other social services by the families. A rigorous assessment of CO-PEP, and the other seven states engaged in child support demonstration projects, is underway and is scheduled to be completed in January 2019. Preliminary findings regarding this work can be found in the report ***Helping Noncustodial Parents Support Their Children***.

The CO-PEP work unfolded in a five-county pilot program. An early CO-PEP enrollee from Jefferson County, a large county just outside Denver, is emblematic of the change this approach can make in the lives of Coloradans. When Andrew Sinker came to CO-PEP, he was an addict who was constantly at odds with his son’s mother. He said his interactions with her would trigger him. Prior to coming to CO-PEP, Andrew could not hold a job. After receiving counseling and services, Andrew has a career as the manager of the detail division of an auto repair shop, and he co-parents easily with his ex. He completed a program in Jefferson County, where he lives, that teaches men to be nurturing fathers. Andrew has recently re-engaged with support groups and has just celebrated his two-year

TOOLS AND RESOURCES:

- [Making Tomorrow Better Together: A Guide to Outcomes for 2Gen Policymakers \(Ascend\)](#)

- [State Human Services Model: Colorado as a Case Study for Policymakers \(Ascend\)](#)

- [Colorado Guide to 2Gen](#)

- [Top 10 for 2Gen: Policy Ideas and Principles to Advance Two-Generation Efforts \(Ascend\)](#)

anniversary of sobriety. Andrew is in regular contact with his case worker and continues to make regular child support payments.

It is stories like these, and there are many of them in Colorado, that underscore why we are so excited about CO-PEP and the impact a 2Gen recalibration

can have on whole families. And we are not the only ones noticing. *The Denver Post* published a lengthy and positive **story** about the program with the headline “Colorado emerges as a national model by helping rather than pursuing parents who miss child care payments.”

If you would like to learn more about how to incorporate 2Gen into your work, please see the materials linked in the resources section. In these days of scarce resources and demands for measurable outcomes, 2Gen approaches offer an array of proven approaches that help whole families move out of poverty.

Listening to parents, both those with custody and those ordered to pay child support, we realized there must be a better way to do this work. We found that the narratives about absent parents did not actually describe the parents we were meeting.
