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# PARENT Program

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**P**eople **A**chieving **R**esponsibility  
Through **E**ducation, **N**urturing  
and **T**raining

**Final Report  
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Submitted to:

**Larimer County Child Support Enforcement**  
1501 Blue Spruce Drive, Fort Collins, Colorado 80524

Submitted by:

Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.  
Lanae Davis, M.A.  
**Center for Policy Research**  
1570 Emerson Street, Denver, Colorado 80218  
303-837-1555, FAX: 303-837-1557  
cntrpolres@qwest.net  
www.centerpolicyresearch.org

# The PARENT Program

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# *Executive Summary*

PARENT (People Achieving Responsibility Through Education, Nurturing and Training) was initiated by the Larimer County Department of Human Services in 1996 to help unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents (NCPs) better meet their financial and emotional responsibilities as parents through the provision of parenting classes, employment assistance, case management services, and referral to community agencies. In 1999, with the award of a grant from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), Larimer County added a child support assurance component to the PARENT program that paid monthly child support obligations for compliant, project participants for up to 12 months in order to free them up to improve their earning abilities and strengthen their relationships with their children.

The three-year, qualitative and quantitative evaluation included:

- === Information on the characteristics and participation patterns of 136 parents who enrolled in PARENT;
- === Follow-up telephone interviews with 68 participants on parent-child contact patterns and client reactions to the program;
- === A review of automated child support records for all clients in the two quarters prior to and 12 months following their enrollment; and
- === A review of quarterly wage reports for all clients in the two quarters prior to and following their enrollment, with some clients monitored for up to 24 months following enrollment.

The following are some of the key evaluation findings.

- The child support agency played a critical role in recruiting PARENT project participants; relatively few were generated through word-of-mouth or community organization referrals.

- PARENT served a population that had many problems but was better educated and faced fewer barriers to work than those served in other responsible fatherhood programs, reflecting the commitment of program architects to serve the middle-class as well as the poor.
- PARENT served a population that was older than the population targeted in many responsible fatherhood programs, which underscores the salience of child support and parenting issues for fathers of all ages.
- PARENT involved many interagency relationships and public-private partnerships, with clients referred to community-based employment programs, parenting classes, and agencies providing consumer counseling, mediation, and health.
- Although a stated goal of PARENT was to improve the employment status of participants and increase their earnings, most participants only received assessments and engaged in “monitored, self-directed job search,” activities that did not lead to new jobs or salary increases.
- Child support payments among PARENT clients increased following program participation from 45 to 60 percent of what was owed, but the difference was not statistically significant. The percentage paying nothing dropped from 30 to 15 percent.
- The assurance benefit and the routine reduction in monthly arrears obligations were the exclusive child support interventions that most clients received.
- About half of interviewed clients said that they had experienced no changes in parent-child or parent-parent relationships following program participation, a quarter said that things had improved, and a quarter said that things had gotten worse.
- Six months after enrolling in PARENT, interviewed participants reported more optimism about their lives, improved self-esteem, and high levels of satisfaction with the program.
- While average earnings rose among clients who received job services following program participation, the proportion who were unemployed remained constant over time, suggesting that PARENT provided short-term employment benefits to clients but had few lasting effects

on client employment and earnings. Overall, there were no significant increases in earnings or employment for the client group as a whole.

- Like many other responsible fatherhood programs, attrition was a problem and nearly half of PARENT enrollees disappeared or failed to comply with program rules.
- Clients who successfully completed PARENT were older, better educated, had higher pre-program earnings, and were less likely to have been involved with the criminal justice system than their non-successful counterparts, suggesting that PARENT achieved its best results with clients who were most motivated and faced the fewest barriers.
- Clients who completed the program successfully exhibited stable rates of employment and earnings, lower child support burdens, and better child support payment patterns, with their payment rates rising from 49 percent in the six months prior to enrollment to 71 percent in the 12 months following their exit.
- While interviewed clients appreciated the assurance component and credited it with helping them to feel better about themselves and getting their financial situation under control, the intervention did not appear to lead to improvements in an individual's perceived ability to pay his child support over time.
- Since the child support agency deliberately hid its relationship to the PARENT program to promote client participation, most clients were confused about child support's relationship to PARENT and the agency did not get the credit it deserved among clients.
- The child support payment behaviors that PARENT clients exhibited were better than those observed in several programs for low-income, noncustodial parents but were still far from perfect, suggesting that child support obligations may be unrealistically high for many low-income, noncustodial parents and impossible to fully pay.
- As in other studies, child support payment patterns were best for those whose child support obligations comprised approximately 20 to 25 percent of reported earnings, underscoring the

importance of setting realistic child support obligations, particularly for low-income parents. On average, clients who completed the program had child support obligations that consumed 23 percent of their monthly incomes and they paid 77 percent of what they owed. In contrast, those who dropped out or were terminated from the program had child support obligations that comprised 36 percent of what they earned and they paid 30 percent of what they owed.



PARENT offers the following lessons to architects of future programs aimed at promoting employment, child support payment, and parent-child contact.

- ▶ If the assurance benefit is offered, it should be modified to avoid “cliff effects.” Future programs should taper child support assurance benefits so that clients do not experience complete subsidies at the front end or steep cut-offs at the end of the program.
- ▶ To be successful, clients need more opportunities for wage growth. Most employment programs offer assessments and monitored job-search activities, which have limited impact on client earnings.
- ▶ Programs might consider recruiting non-paying and partial paying noncustodial parents who have the potential to become better payers rather than focusing exclusively on extremely disadvantaged parents who face many barriers to employment and earnings. While short-term programs are rarely able to help individuals with severe barriers to employment and earnings, they may produce improvements for those who present less severe dysfunctions and needs.
- ▶ Future programs should incorporate child support actions with participants that may have more lasting effects on obligations, such as modifying child support orders to more realistic levels and exploring arrearage forgiveness in exchange for the regular payment of monthly support. Many studies of low-income, noncustodial parents show that child support order



levels are disproportionately high and payments are correspondingly low. Order levels that better reflect an individual's true ability to pay appear to translate into improved payment patterns.

## **Introduction**

This report presents an evaluation of the PARENT (People Achieving Responsibility Through Education, Nurturing and Training) program, a federally funded demonstration project initiated by the Larimer County Department of Human Services to help unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents (NCPs) better meet their financial and emotional responsibilities as parents. Larimer County's outreach to NCPs began in 1996, when it began offering a series of classes aimed at strengthening parental capacity. In 1999, with the award of a grant from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), Larimer County added a child support assurance component to the PARENT program. The assurance feature relieved eligible NCPs of their child support obligations for up to 12 months during project participation by paying their monthly child support orders in order to free them up to improve their earning abilities and strengthen their relationships with their children.

The following three-year assessment relies on a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. We describe the program's origins and inception; the characteristics of the 136 parents who enrolled; the format and content of PARENT classes to which they were exposed; other services that PARENT participants received; and outcomes for participants following their exit from the program. For the earliest enrollees, we provide longer-term outcome patterns extending up to 24 months following program enrollment.

## **Background on Fatherhood Programs**

One way to combat child poverty is to ensure that single-parent households receive consistent and sufficient child support monies (Roberts, 1999; Venohr, Price, and Griffith, 2001; Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Robins, 1992). Mothers comprise about 85 percent of the single-parent households in the U.S., and 33 percent of these families are below poverty level. When such families receive child support, their poverty rate drops by 11 percent (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1991). Researchers have also found that when women who receive public assistance get their child support payments, they are more motivated to move from assistance and into the labor force (Garfinkel, McLanahan and Robins, 1992).

Besides reducing child poverty, child support payments benefit children in other ways. Many studies point to a positive correlation between paid support and increased rates of visitation with children (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Robins, 1992; Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). While no one claims that this correlation is causal since other factors such as relationships between the parents and the responsibility level of the father may explain both support payments and visitation (Edin, et al., 2000), the non-financial benefits of child support are compelling. A recent meta-analysis of the literature on how child support payments affect children asserts that the children in families who do not receive sufficient child support exhibit more behavioral problems, while children who do receive more consistent and full payments of support tend to be more successful in school (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999).

Fatherhood programs offering employment and parenting services have emerged to help fathers meet their emotional and financial responsibilities. The largest and best known set of programs, Parents' Fair Share (PFS), was implemented between 1992 and 1996. Although the evaluation of PFS showed mixed results with no overall improvements in earnings and employment for most participants, several of the seven sites in the program demonstrated positive outcomes. At three sites, child support payments among participants increased between 15 and 50 percent. In two other program sites, participants increased their payment amounts by 20 to 55 percent and their rates of employment increased by 17 to 19 percent (Martinson, 1998). Finally, the most disadvantaged fathers experienced moderate improvement in employment and earnings (Martinez and Miller, 2000).

PFS and other studies on low-income NCPs have raised serious questions about the capacity of many low-income fathers to pay child support. According to the 1990 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), men who fall below poverty thresholds are usually minorities with poor education and work experience. Only 10 percent of them worked full time year round, and a third of them were parents. Their average annual income in 1990 was only \$4,000, and more than three-quarters of them worked in service, sales, clerical, or labor jobs. On average, they had only 11 years of schooling. In 1990, almost 20 percent of these men paid regular child support, amounting to an average of \$1,850 per year, or nearly 50 percent of their yearly income (Martinson, 1998).

## **Background on Child Support Assurance Programs**

Child Support Assurance (CSA) is a concept that was developed by staff at the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin in the 1970s. Aimed at reducing child poverty, CSA programs guarantee the payment of a minimum child support benefit to custodial parents who have child support orders. Under CSA, the state pays the gap between a minimum guaranteed amount (typically tied to the consumption needs of children or the median child support order) and any child support order set below that benefit amount (Venohr, Price, and Griffith, 2001). Assurance is not meant to be a permanent benefit but merely supplemental or transitional assistance for children in financially unstable families (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Robins, 1992). According to its architects, in addition to reducing child poverty, CSA is believed to increase the work effort of custodial parents receiving public assistance, increase the number of child support orders established, and encourage NCPs to voluntarily pay their child support (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Robins, 1992).

To date, there have been only a few CSA demonstration projects. The most substantial evaluation was New York's Child Assistance Program (CAP), which required participants to have a child support order, but offered participants a lower welfare grant and more liberal earning disregards to entice them to rely more heavily on earnings and child support income than public assistance. Although not a theoretically pure CSA project, the five-year evaluation of New York's CAP confirmed some of the expectations posited for CSA by its developers. Public assistance families who were randomly assigned to the CAP treatment group experienced reduced levels of public assistance, increased work effort among custodial parents, and an increased number of child support orders. Over the five-year CAP demonstration, the government invested \$237 per household and realized a savings of \$2,603 in avoided payments of public assistance and other government benefits and additional tax revenues (DeMarco and Mills, 2000).

Studies estimating the costs of implementing a national CSA program show that it would be costly (Sorensen and Clark, 1994), especially if child support enforcement is not perfect. Simulations of CSA conducted in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Wisconsin reveal that CSA programs can cost

between \$14 and \$267 million dollars per state (Venohr, Price, and Griffith, 2001). The newly completed Larimer County project is the only recent program in the U.S. with a CSA component.<sup>1</sup>

### **===== *Origins of the Larimer County Program***

Unlike New York's CAP, which aimed to promote employment among custodial parents who received public assistance, Larimer County's assurance project focused on assisting unemployed and underemployed NCPs of all income levels to become more financially and emotionally involved with their children. According to the Manager of the Child Support Enforcement Division in Larimer County, the problem of financial incapacity among NCPs in the county was officially recognized in 1996, when a local magistrate called on the Department of Human Services (DHS) to develop a program that "... would provide intervention and assistance to fathers who are unable to meet their child support obligation." As a result, PARENT was instituted. A case manager with the Larimer County Department of Human Services was hired with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds to research, plan, coordinate, and implement PARENT.

During the program's development stage, the manager with the child support agency and the case manager studied fatherhood programs across the nation, including two in Colorado: the El Paso County Parent Opportunity Project (POP), a responsible fatherhood program funded by OCSE; and the Young Father Program in Denver, which was subsequently selected by the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership to be one of the ten national demonstration sites for Partners for Fragile Families (PFF). Based on their studies, the program architects decided that the core elements of PARENT would be a series of six classes on parenting for fathers; a group session in which a lawyer provides an overview of the child support process; and individualized case management, including assessment, goal development, referrals to community programs, mediation with the other parent, and monitoring.

PARENT classes started in 1996. Most of the initial referrals to the class came from customer service technicians at the child support agency who would speak to fathers calling in with problems

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<sup>1</sup> An OCSE-funded demonstration dealing with CSA to be conducted by the Family Support Bureau of San Francisco and the San Francisco Department of Human Services never got off the ground.

regarding their cases. The program gained a small but loyal following, and during the first year, about 16 fathers participated in PARENT and ten fathers set up official cases with the program. All parenting classes were open to the public and free of charge.

Despite positive feedback from participants, staff soon discovered that the class alone was not significantly helping unemployed and underemployed fathers meet their financial responsibilities, including paying their child support orders. In their view, these fathers needed some relief from their immediate financial burdens in order to pursue job training, job search, and other activities aimed at enhancing their financial capacity. Staff was also having difficulty motivating NCPs to participate voluntarily, as “many viewed the child support system as punitive.” To address this, the Larimer County DHS applied for and received a special improvement grant from OCSE in 1999 to add a child support assurance component to PARENT. The goal was to help unemployed and underemployed NCPs improve their earning abilities and increase their contact with their children by paying their child support obligations while they participated in the project. It was viewed as a “wonderful opportunity to provide tangible assistance to parents . . . and to provide much needed stability for families and children in Larimer County.”

PARENT was administered by the Child Support Enforcement Division of the Larimer County Department of Human Services. The program was staffed by a full-time case manager and a child support program specialist. Other key professionals included a community therapist who served as the facilitator for PARENT classes and a local fatherhood advocate who conducted support groups for NCPs. All program services were free for participants. Upon request, clients were referred to an attorney for legal assistance. The attorney charged a \$10 fee for the initial appointment, and any further services were charged on a sliding-scale basis. The attorney focused exclusively on custody and visitation issues and did not handle litigation dealing with child support.

### **==== *Program Setting***

Larimer County is the seventh largest and eighth fastest growing county in Colorado and is located in the North Central section of the state. It is a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural communities, with people living in the urban and suburban areas making up about 70 percent of the entire population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001). The population is overwhelmingly Anglo, with Non-Hispanic Whites comprising 91 percent of residents. Hispanics make up about 8 percent of the

population; Asian Americans, 2 percent; and African Americans and Native Americans about 1 percent each. Over half of the population falls between the ages of 20 and 54 years old, with a median age of 33 years old. Nearly a third, or 28 percent, of the population is under the age of 20, and about 10 percent of the population is over 65 years old (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001).

Based on 2000 U.S. Bureau of Census data, 40 percent of the workforce is employed in professional or managerial positions. For 2003, the unemployment rate stood at 5.1 percent, up from 3.0 percent in 2000 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003). Larimer County is relatively well educated, with 92 percent of the adult population holding at least a high school diploma, and just under half (40%) of the population having a bachelor's or advanced degree (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001). The median household income in Larimer County is slightly higher than the state average of \$47,203 and stands at \$48,655 per year. At 68 percent, Larimer County's home ownership rate mirrors that of the state. Its poverty status rate of households with children under the age of 18 headed by a single female is 24 percent, compared with a state average of 26 percent. Finally, while 6.8 percent of Larimer County's children under the age of 18 live in poverty, this is the case for 10.8 percent of the children in the state as a whole (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001).

### **==== *Participant Qualifications***

PARENT participants who wished to receive a child support assurance stipend were required to live in Larimer County or have a child support order in Larimer County. A further requirement was that they be unemployed or underemployed and unable to meet their financial responsibilities, a determination that was made by the project's case manager. Eligible participants may have received unemployment compensation benefits, workers' compensation, and/or disability benefits. The program was open to NCPs at all income levels and sought to serve those in the lowest income brackets, as well as those who failed to qualify for other public benefits but were still unable to make their child support payments. As the project director said, "If we had just gone for poor people, we would have missed the middle class who need help desperately."

## ***Program Requirements***

To remain active in PARENT, participants were required to attend parenting classes, keep scheduled meetings with their case manager, and perform the tasks itemized on their individualized plan, including making a requisite number of job contacts. The case manager met with participants at least once a month. An important feature of case management was developing and reviewing a participant's budget, with an eye toward trimming spending and boosting earnings. Once a participant successfully completed one month of PARENT, the Larimer County Child Support Enforcement Division sent an assurance stipend directly to the Family Support Registry for distribution to the custodial parent and/or the State if the custodial parent was a recipient of public assistance. The project paid the full monthly obligation for every child support order held by each NCP, including orders being enforced in other counties and/or states.

Monthly stipends were contingent on successful project participation in the prior month. In addition, NCPs were expected to pay a total of \$50 each month toward their arrears balance. If there was no arrears balance, the \$50 payment went toward their current support order. The program was committed to paying child support obligations for complying participants until they were earning a viable living wage. For example, while one client had increased his wage from \$7/hour to \$13/hour, staff expected that he would remain in the project until he earned the \$16/hour deemed necessary for him to become "independent" and able to support his six children.

Although there were no official time limits for receiving assurance benefits, it was very rare for a client to remain in the program longer than a year, with the average client tenure being only six months. The case manager made a subjective decision about when to discontinue assurance payments for a client based on a review of his budget and a demonstration of greater financial solvency. The case manager also determined how noncompliant clients were to be handled and when they were dropped. As she put it, "I'm pretty lenient. I call them and send them a letter. But if they are just blowing the program off, not doing case management or parenting classes, and not following up, then they are dropped."



## **Core Elements of the Program**

Successful participation in Larimer County’s PARENT program involved meeting with the program case manager to develop a set of goals; obtaining services from community agencies identified in an NCP’s individualized case plan; and attending parenting classes offered through the program. The following describes each of these program elements in greater detail.

### **A. Individual Case Management**

Once a qualified NCP was referred to the program, he met with the case manager for an assessment and to develop an individualized program plan, including a personal budget. When the budget form was complete, the case manager calculated what the client needed to be earning in order to meet his monthly expenses. While the case manager could and did refer clients to Consumer Credit Counseling and provided clients with advice on how to cut back on their spending, she found talk about budget trimming of limited utility because, “. . . in reality, these guys just don’t have many places to cut back. I usually just end up telling them how to do better grocery shopping.”

Individual program plans typically included a variety of elements such as job search (*i.e.*, turning in three new job contacts per week), GED classes, mediation, legal services, classes for expectant fathers, and referral to the Workforce Center or Consumer Credit Counseling. For example, one client enrolled in GED preparation, re’sume’ building, and career exploration programs, all associated with the Workforce Center. Another client worked two jobs to make ends meet. As part of her individual case plan, she was encouraged to cut back on her hours of work in order to participate in skill-building programs and use on-the-job-training (OJT) resources to increase her capacity to earn a viable wage.

Project staff also tried to identify relevant resources of which the client may have been unaware. For example, when it was discovered that one client was not receiving the veterans’ benefits to which he was entitled, he was encouraged to apply and subsequently began to receive them. A case manager helped another client who had cataracts that were limiting his employment options to set up a *pro bono* examination and arranged for his surgery through a medical program for indigents.

## **B. Collaborative Community Services**

Community collaboration was vital to the success of this project because resources that were simply unavailable within PARENT could often be found elsewhere in the community. Such services included job training, job coaching, educational or vocational training, new parent education, mediation, OJT, clothing, uniforms, and work tools. These resources came from a variety of nonprofit, community, and governmental agencies. For example, PARENT clients with disabilities were referred to the Larimer County Office of Rehabilitation, a program that addresses specific job development needs for disabled workers and acts as a liaison by training employers about different disabilities so that they are more comfortable and better equipped to hire such employees. Never-married parents who needed help developing parenting plans and other mechanisms to promote contact with their children were referred to the Larimer County Family Center, which receives support from the Colorado Judicial Department's Office of Dispute Resolution Service to provide mediation services; limited, low-cost legal assistance; and up to 30 hours per week of mentoring on fatherhood issues.

## **C. Employment Services**

The primary community entity that the PARENT project collaborated with for employment services was the Larimer County Welfare to Work (WtW) program, known as the Workforce Center. Some of the Workforce Center services included screening and assessment, re'sume` building, job search, vocational training, clothing for interviewing and work, fuel, work tools, and OJT. The Workforce Center offered individuals different services based on their eligibility for WtW and their ranking according to the Department of Labor's (DOL) "lower-living standard." Those who met the standard went through an initial assessment process that took about 40 hours, which was conducted in four to five days or spread over six weeks.

PARENT staff identified OJT as an attractive option for participants, but implementation was difficult due to a lack of staff resources at the Workforce Center. Geared toward the client who was ready and willing to work but lacked marketable skills, OJT targeted employers who hire or promote workers and train them so they can perform more skilled jobs. OJT programs provide employers with subsidies to make up the difference between the wages workers normally earn at their current

skill level and the wages they would earn once they have completed training. One of the attractions of OJT was that employers were able to increase their pool of skilled workers without having to pay for the training process, and studies of several programs in the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated that OJT increased overall wages, hours worked, and sustained employment (Brown, 1997; Michalopoulos, 2001). Some of the problems with OJT programs were their expense and time-consuming nature without any substantial increase in the number of people working (Brown, 1997; Martinson, 1998; Michalopoulos, 2001). Employers have also reported that OJT poses many administrative challenges, and studies show that only a small number of employers are willing to participate (Martinson, 1998).

It was up to the client in the PARENT program to identify the type of work he or she would like and an employer who might be amenable to OJT. A Workforce Center technician then contacted the employer to explain the details of the program. The client's job skill level was measured against the job description in a formula that determined the length of the OJT assignment. The OJT technician met with both the employee and the employer separately at least once per month. The OJT program paid up to 50 percent of the employee's income for up to six months.

According to Workforce Center staff, OJT was challenging to implement, both because of the cost of the salary supplement and the additional time that technicians had to spend to collaborate with employers. Furthermore, if a trainee did not fit well in a particular OJT assignment, that trainee risked spending a considerable amount of time learning a skill that he or she may never have used again. Other training programs, such as truck driving or vocational education, were also difficult to implement for unemployed and underemployed NCPs who typically could not afford to forego a paycheck for any length of time.

#### **D. *Fatherhood Classes***

The fourth component of the PARENT program was a six-week series of classes said to "...focus on eliminating barriers that often get in the way of fathers actively participating in their children's lives" (PARENT Brochure, 1999). There were three to four cycles of classes each year. Classes were two hours in length, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. The location varied for each cycle since local businesses donated facility space for PARENT classes. Food and beverages were provided.

With very few exceptions, all project participants were required to attend each class in the six-week program. The classes were also open to the public at no charge. The only PARENT participants who were excused from attending classes were those whose work schedule or visiting time with their children conflicted with class time. Some participants made up missed classes in the following cycle. During a cycle of classes observed by a Center for Policy Research (CPR) representative, two to ten parents attended each session. Half were PARENT participants, and half were community residents.

There were three facilitators for the PARENT fatherhood class: a marriage and family therapist who was himself a divorced father; the case manager for PARENT, who was often called upon to present “the woman’s point of view”; and the child support program specialist, who assisted with facilitation, room set-up, and food. The classes addressed seven topics, six of which were covered in each cycle. Facilitators reported that they had taken a flexible approach to curriculum design and considered participant suggestions. For example, a session on child development was phased out because fathers did not find it useful given their parent-child relationships. Class topics included The Importance of Fathers; Coping as a Single Father; Successful Step-Parenting; Anger Management; Stress Management and Depression; and Communication Skills. Highlights of each session appear in an Appendix to this report.

### **==== *Methods Used to Assess Participants and Outcomes***

The quantitative assessment of the Larimer County PARENT program was modeled after the assessment process used by the Center for Policy Research to evaluate eight OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood programs, including the Parent Opportunity Program (POP) in El Paso County, Colorado (Pearson, et al., 2000, 2003). Like PARENT, these programs recruited unemployed and underemployed NCPs and offered participants a variety of services aimed at enhancing their earnings, child support payments, and parent-child contact. While the eight responsible fatherhood sites offered some “enhanced” child support interventions such as case management, modifications of support orders, and/or suspensions of current support orders during project participation for up to 90 days, none had a child support assurance component where the agency actually paid the participant’s monthly child support obligation with the objective of

increasing parent-child contact and his capacity to earn and pay child support over time. Thus, by using a similar set of evaluation instruments, it was hoped that Larimer County could be compared with other responsible fatherhood projects and that the “added value” of a child support assurance component could be detected.

A core feature of the evaluation used in both Larimer County and at the eight OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood sites was the Responsible Fatherhood Management Information System (RFMIS). Developed by the Lewin Group pursuant to a contract with the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Management of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, RFMIS is a client information system developed to maintain information on the characteristics of participants in responsible fatherhood programs and the services needed and delivered to fathers in such programs. It can be used as a paper and pencil tracking system or as an electronic database that uses Microsoft Access.<sup>2</sup>

Another feature common to the cross-site evaluation of OCSE-funded programs and Larimer County was a telephone interview on client outcomes conducted with participants six months following their enrollment in the fatherhood programs. As in the evaluation of OCSE-funded programs, PARENT participants were asked a series of questions on the services they received in the program, patterns of contact with their children, employment and earnings, and other changes that occurred in the six months following their enrollment. The questionnaire for Larimer County participants was amended to include items dealing with child support assurance and its impact on long-term payment prospects. In both the cross-site and the Larimer evaluations, respondents received an incentive payment of \$25.

Finally, both evaluation efforts involved reviewing automated databases maintained by state agencies dealing with employment and child support and extracting information needed to gauge participant earnings and child support payment patterns prior to and following project enrollment. (See Pearson, et al., 2000, and Pearson, et al., 2003, for additional information about the eight OCSE-funded Responsible Fatherhood Sites.)

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<sup>2</sup> RFMIS can be downloaded from the Internet at <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/guidebook99/index.htm>.

The sources of information used in the Larimer County evaluation can be summarized as follows:

- **RFMIS Intake and Assessment Form:** This form was completed when the client first met with program staff; it gathered demographic, employment, and family history information, as well as recorded information on the client's employment history, information on each child the client had under the age of 18, and the amount of contact and type of relationship the client had with his or her child(ren). The form noted the types of help the client wanted and the services the client needed while participating in the PARENT program.
- **RFMIS Tracking Form:** This form was completed by program staff each month to monitor the client's participation in the program and to record the client's activities. Case closures were also noted, along with the reason that participants ended their relationship with the PARENT program. Reasons for case closure included successful completion of program requirements, noncompliance with program rules, an out-of-state move, and dropping out or losing contact with program staff.
- **Follow-Up Telephone Interview:** The interview was conducted with participants six months following their enrollment in the PARENT program. Information was gathered regarding program outcomes, including the client's employment status, parent-child contact patterns, the perceived utility of the program, and the client's perceived ability to pay child support following his or her exit from the program.
- **Colorado UI Database:** A database maintained by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment contains employer-reported wage reports compiled as part of the Unemployment Insurance (UI) system. It was checked for all program participants, and information was extracted on quarterly earnings prior to and following enrollment in PARENT. This provided an employer-generated portrait of earnings for all participants who were employed within Colorado. There is often a lag of six months in posting employer wage reports on the UI database.

- **Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES)**: ACSES was reviewed by experienced child support technicians, and information on each PARENT participant was extracted. This review was done six months prior to program enrollment, during program enrollment, and 6 months and 12 months following program exit. In the course of conducting these reviews, technicians noted the monthly support obligation; total amounts due and paid during targeted time periods; actions on the case taken by the child support agency; and changes in case category, class, and status.

All the aforementioned data sources were utilized to generate a portrait of participants in the PARENT program. This report focuses on the 136 clients who enrolled from the program's inception in October 1999 through May 2002. For our analysis of outcomes dealing with earnings, we compared earnings reported by employers in quarterly wage reports for all clients in the two quarters prior to their enrollment in PARENT with earnings in the two quarters following their enrollment. For a sub-group of early participants who enrolled in the PARENT program from October 1999 to December 2001, we examined earnings for up to four quarters following program enrollment. For a third sub-group of clients — those who enrolled from October 1999 to December of 2000 — we examined earnings reported for up to eight quarters following their enrollment. These groupings allowed enough time to pass for clients to reliably exhibit post-enrollment earnings in the UI database. To assess child support, we focused on all clients who enrolled from October 1999 to May 2002 and reported their payment behaviors over a 12-month period of time.

### **==== *Client Referrals***

Staff report that PARENT clients were recruited from many sources: CSE technicians, CSE customer service technicians, the Larimer County Workforce Center, the Larimer County Family Center, DHS, the courts, family members, and friends. The program was publicized in newspaper and radio ads. Program staff promoted PARENT among CSE technicians and customer service representatives for the child support agency, who regularly deal with NCPs who are behind in their payments and have been subject to various enforcement actions. They mailed brochures to NCPs who had their driver's licenses suspended for nonpayment of support. During the 36-month evaluation of PARENT (October 1999 to May 2002), the PARENT program served a total of 136

participants with over 306 children. At full capacity, PARENT typically had 30 active participants and a waiting list of six.

An analysis of the information recorded on the RFMIS intake and assessment forms shows that the child support agency played a big role in the recruitment process, with many clients (35%) reporting that they heard about PARENT at a meeting with a child support technician. The next most common ways clients heard about the program were by a letter from the child support agency (11%), through an advertisement and/or the media (10%), or from a welfare/TANF technician (10%). Relatively few clients reported hearing about the program from community organizations or word-of-mouth sources. These referral patterns are very similar to those reported by clients who participated in POP, a responsible fatherhood project conducted in El Paso County, Colorado. Forty-one percent of the 163 fathers who participated in POP heard about the program at a meeting with a child support technician. POP, like PARENT, is based in the child support enforcement agency and is strongly supported by IV-D agency technicians. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1. Referral Source (N=136)**

Letter from child support agency	11%
Meeting with child support technician	35%
Welfare/TANF technician	10%
Court	4%
Therapist	1%
Friend	4%
Spouse, ex-spouse, or boyfriend/girlfriend	4%
Contacted by program staff	2%
Advertisement/media	10%
Community organization	6%
Attorney	1%
Other	17%



## **Portrait of Clients**

Like most programs for noncustodial parents, the majority of the 136 clients who enrolled in PARENT were fathers (90%). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 57 years, with the average and median being 35. Reflecting the demographics of Larimer County, most of the clients enrolled in the program were white (65%), with only a few African-American (7%), Hispanic (15%), Native American (4%), and Asian (2%) participants. The majority of clients reported their marital status at intake as divorced (51%), while 17 percent reported being married, and 8 percent were separated. Only 23 percent had never been married.

Many Larimer County project participants reported living alone (31%). Others lived with one or both of their parents (12%), a sibling (4%), a spouse (15%), a girlfriend/boyfriend (15%), or a friend (12%). Just over 10 percent of the program participants (13%) lived with their own children. Very few (2%) reported living in a shelter or being homeless. In contrast, 18 percent of POP participants in El Paso county were living in a shelter or halfway house when they enrolled, and 11 percent had been homeless sometime in the six months prior to their enrollment.

Nearly one-third of the participants (29%) entered the program with a high school diploma, 23 percent had a GED, while 20 percent had not earned any diploma. Fifteen percent of the program participants had earned a technical/A.A. degree, and another 13 percent had a college degree. These educational attainment patterns were much higher than those reported by POP participants, 12 percent of whom had more than a high school diploma. An additional 7 percent of PARENT participants were currently enrolled in school, which was very similar to the school attendance rate reported by POP clients (5%). (See Table 2.)

**Table 2. Client Demographics (N=136)**

Sex	Male	90%
	Female	10%
Age	Average	35
	Median	35
Race/Ethnicity	White, non-Hispanic	65%
	African American	7%

**Table 2. Client Demographics (N=136)**

	Hispanic	15%
	Native American	4%
	Asian American	2%
	Other/Unknown	7%
Marital status at intake	Married	17%
	Separated	8%
	Divorced	51%
	Never married	23%
	Widowed	1%
	Unknown	1%
Living arrangement	Alone	31%
	Parents	12%
	Sibling	4%
	Spouse	15%
	Girlfriend/boyfriend	15%
	Friend	12%
	Other relative	5%
	In a halfway house/shelter	2%
	Other	4%
Living with children	Own children	13%
	Spouse/partner's children	4%
Highest degree	None	20%
	GED	23%
	High school diploma	29%
	Technical or AA degree	15%
	BA level or higher	13%
Current school enrollment	Yes	7%
	No	93%

## ==== **Child and Family History**

With the exception of one client, PARENT participants had at least one child under the age of 18 when they enrolled, with 32 percent reporting one child, 32 percent reporting two, 21 percent reporting three children, and 15 percent reporting four or more children. Most children lived with the other parent (93%), and 60 percent of the clients were previously married to their children's other parent. This contrasts sharply with other fatherhood programs, which tend to serve a never-married population. For example, 43 percent of participants in POP were never married, and across seven Responsible Fatherhood Programs funded by OCSE and evaluated by CPR, the percent of never married clients stood at 52 percent with a range of 40 percent to 78 percent. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3. Children's Living Arrangement and Client's Relationship with Other Parent (N=136) \***

<b>Where children live</b>	At least one lives with client	2%
	At least one lives with the other parent	93%
	At least one lives with a grandparent	7%
	At least one lives in foster care	1%
	At least one in some other living arrangement	4%
<b>Client's relationship with other parent</b>	Currently married	3%
	Previously married	60%
	Never-married - lived with in past	24%
	Never married - never lived with in past	19%

\* Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple children.

Nearly all clients (88%) reported that legal custody for their children had been established. This also differs from the legal contact patterns reported in other fatherhood programs. For example, 70 percent of POP clients reported lacking legal access to at least one of their children. Slightly over half of PARENT clients (57%) had joint legal custody with the other parent holding primary physical custody. Nearly half (46%) reported that the other parent had sole legal custody for at least one child. Four percent of clients reported being the subject of a temporary restraining order limiting contact with the other parent. An additional 4 percent reported being the subject of a permanent

restraining order. In El Paso County, 11 percent of POP participants were the subject of at least one permanent restraining order.

**Parent-Child Contact Patterns**

Clients reported a wide range of contact patterns with their children in the 12 months prior to their enrollment in PARENT. Nearly 40 percent saw at least one child one or more times a week, and another 23 percent reported parent-child contact levels of one to three times per month. At the other end of the spectrum, 26 percent had virtually no contact with at least one of their children. These contact levels are somewhat higher than those reported by fathers who enrolled in POP, 39 percent of whom had virtually no contact with their children.

Not surprisingly, Larimer County project participants were less dissatisfied with their contact patterns than their counterparts in El Paso County. While 55 percent of POP participants reported extreme dissatisfaction with the contact they had with at least one child, this was the case for 35 percent of Larimer County project participants. Satisfaction with parent-child contact is elusive for many non-resident fathers in both client groups, only about 15 percent reported high levels of satisfaction.

Despite their higher levels of contact, Larimer County clients were equally likely as POP clients to feel left out and uninvolved in making decisions about their children. More than half of the fathers in both the POP and PARENT client groups reported having no influence in making decisions for at least one child and only about 10 percent reported exercising a great deal of decision-making authority. (See Table 4.)

**Table 4. Contact with Children and Reactions to Contact Patterns (N=136) \***

Frequency of contact with children in 12 months prior to enrollment	
Never saw at least one child	18%
Saw at least one child only once	7%
Saw at least one child several times	22%
Saw at least one child one to three times per month	23%
Saw at least one child about once a week	10%
Saw at least one child several times a week	29%

**Table 4. Contact with Children and Reactions to Contact Patterns (N=136) \***

<b>Degree of satisfaction with contact</b>	
Very satisfied for at least one child	15%
Somewhat satisfied for at least one child	27%
Somewhat dissatisfied for at least one child	33%
Very dissatisfied for at least one child	35%
<b>Amount of influence in decision making during past 12 months</b>	
A great deal for at least one child	11%
Some for at least one child	36%
None for at least one child	59%

\* Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple children.

### ***Relationship with the Other Parent***

When they enrolled in PARENT, each client was asked to describe certain aspects of his or her relationship with the custodial parent. Their responses suggest a fairly even split across all relationship categories, with relatively equal proportions reporting cooperation and hostility. Clients were also evenly divided in their assessments about whether the custodial parent wanted him or her to have a relationship with their child(ren). (See Table 5.)

**Table 5. Relationship with the Custodial Parent (CP) (N=136) \***

<b>How well does NCP get along with CP</b>	
Very friendly with CP	14%
Somewhat friendly with CP	23%
Neutral relationship with CP	26%
Somewhat hostile with CP	21%
Very hostile with CP	6%
No relationship with CP	24%
<b>Believe that custodial parent wants NCP to have a relationship with the child</b>	
Believe at least one CP definitely does	33%
Believe at least one CP does somewhat	25%

**Table 5. Relationship with the Custodial Parent (CP) (N=136) \***

Believe at least one CP does not	30%
Don't know how at least one CP feels	21%

\* Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple children.

An assessment of client reports of the conflict they experienced with the other parent about various issues showed the highest levels of conflict over the amount and frequency of child support payments, with 31 percent reporting a “great deal of conflict” with the custodial parent. Clients were less apt to report conflict over custody, where the children will live, what occurs during visits, decision making about the children, as well as issues not related to the children. (See Table 6.)

**Table 6. Amount and Sources of Conflict with the Custodial Parent (N=136) \***

Amount of conflict in the past 12 months over...		
Custody of child	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	20%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	25%
	No conflict with at least one CP	65%
Where child will live	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	18%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	29%
	No conflict with at least one CP	62%
How the child will be raised	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	28%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	34%
	No conflict with at least one CP	44%
Amount/frequency of child support payments	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	31%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	32%
	No conflict with at least one CP	45%
When and how visitation occurs	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	28%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	37%
	No conflict with at least one CP	44%
What occurs during visits	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	16%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	29%

**Table 6. Amount and Sources of Conflict with the Custodial Parent (N=136) \***

Amount of conflict in the past 12 months over...		
	No conflict with at least one CP	65%
Decision making about the child	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	19%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	40%
	No conflict with at least one CP	51%
Issues not related to children	A great deal of conflict with at least one CP	22%
	Some conflict with at least one CP	23%
	No conflict with at least one CP	62%

\* Totals may exceed 100 percent.

Most clients reported that when disagreements arose with the custodial parent, he “keeps his opinions to himself” or “discusses things calmly.” Relatively few reported having frequent arguments, with 15 percent reporting occasionally “throw(ing) things or hit(ting).” Indeed, more than one-half reported that they never argue or yell and 89 percent reported never throwing things or hitting. (See Table 7.)

**Table 7. Methods of Displaying Conflict with the Other Parent (N=136) \***

When there are serious disagreements with a CP, how often does NCP . . .		
With at least one CP, NCP keeps opinion to himself/herself	Often	31%
	Occasionally	44%
	Never	31%
With at least one CP, NCP discusses things calmly	Often	30%
	Occasionally	45%
	Never	35%
With at least one CP, NCP argues or yells	Often	9%
	Occasionally	40%
	Never	57%

**Table 7. Methods of Displaying Conflict with the Other Parent (N=136) \***

When there are serious disagreements with a CP, how often does NCP. . .		
With at least one CP, NCP throws things or hits	Often	1%
	Occasionally	15%
	Never	89%

\* Totals may exceed 100 percent.

### **==== *Employment and Earnings***

Most of the program participants (96%) had been employed full-time at some point in their lives. At intake, just over half (54%) of the participants were employed on a full (37%) or part-time (17%) basis and 35 percent were unemployed. The high rate of unemployment among participants helps to explain the appeal of PARENT, which offered assistance with employment. Among employed clients, average hourly wages ranged from \$3.57 to \$31.25, with the average being \$10.93 per hour and the median being \$10 per hour. Most clients who were employed full time did not receive any type of fringe benefits (72%). Only 18 percent reported receiving paid vacation, while 28 percent said they received paid vacation and medical coverage. Only 17 percent of the clients reported receiving any type of state/federal assistance during the 12 months prior to their enrollment, with small percentages of clients receiving TANF (5%), SSI (1%), SSDI (2%), food stamps (15%), and VA benefits (2%). Ten percent reported receiving workers' compensation benefits, and 13 percent reported receiving unemployment insurance benefits. Employment and earnings for the El Paso County POP clients looked much worse. At intake, 50 percent of these clients were unemployed. Of those who were employed, 46 percent did not receive any fringe benefits, a sharp contrast to the 72 percent who did not receive benefits in Larimer County. Fewer El Paso County POP clients reported receiving federal/state assistance compared with the PARENT clients. Nearly the same amount (4%) reported receiving TANF in the previous 12 months, however, only 6 percent reported receiving food stamps, 1 percent reported receiving unemployment benefits and workers' compensation benefits, and no one in the El Paso County POP program reported receiving veterans' benefits. (Thoennes and Pearson, 2002). (See Table 8.)



**Table 8. Employment and Earnings Reported by Clients at Program Enrollment (N=136)**

Percent Employed		54%
	Full-time	37%
	Part-time	17%
Hourly earnings for employed	Mean	\$10.93
	Median	\$10.00
	Range	\$3.57-\$31.25
Percent receiving any type of fringe benefits		28%
Percent receiving any type of federal/state assistance in prior 12 months		17%
Percent receiving UI benefits		13%
Percent receiving worker's compensation benefits		10%

An examination of earnings data maintained by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment for participants during the two quarters immediately prior to their enrollment shows a certain amount of fluctuation in employment rates from one quarter to the next. For example, 63 percent (N=85) of the clients enrolled in PARENT were employed two quarters prior to their enrollment, while 70 percent or 95 clients showed earning activity in the quarter immediately prior to their enrollment. The patterns were similar for POP program participants in El Paso County, Colorado, 68 percent and 62 percent of whom showed earning activity two and one quarter prior to program enrollment, respectively. (See Table 9.)

**Table 9. Employment and Earnings Patterns for Clients Prior to Enrollment in PARENT Based on the State UI Database (N=136)**

		2 quarters prior to program enrollment	1 quarter prior to program enrollment
Percent employed		63%	70%
Earnings for all clients	Mean	\$2,929	\$2,523
	Median	\$1,642	\$1,444
	Range	\$0-\$15,410	\$0-\$16,535

**Table 9. Employment and Earnings Patterns for Clients Prior to Enrollment in PARENT Based on the State UI Database (N=136)**

		2 quarters prior to program enrollment	1 quarter prior to program enrollment
Earnings for employed clients	Mean	\$4,687	\$3,612
	Median	\$4,177	\$2,847
	Range	\$28-\$15,410	\$40-\$16,535

***Child Support Payments and Informal Support***

Information on child support obligations and payment patterns came from client reports at the intake interview and a review of automated child support records (ACSES). A comparison shows that clients tended to accurately report their monthly support obligations, with average reports and ACSES order levels standing at \$384 versus \$376. The payment behaviors they reported also matched those noted on ACSES, with individuals reporting that they had paid 38 percent of what they owed in the six months prior to enrolling in PARENT while ACSES showed payment rates of 39 percent. Clients were much less accurate about their child support arrears and understated their balances. At program entry, they reported owing an average of \$9,399 in back due support. In actual fact, ACSES showed their average balance to be \$13,741. The highest arrears balance for a project participant was \$184,447. Half of all PARENT participants owed less than \$5,340 and half owed more. POP clients in El Paso County owed less at program enrollment than their counterparts in the PARENT program. The average monthly support orders for POP clients was \$319, and the average arrearage balance was \$10,908. (See Table 10.)

**Table 10. Child Support Order Levels and Arrears Balances at Program Enrollment (N=136)**

	Client Report	ACSES Records
Average MSO	\$384	\$376
Percent MSO paid	38%	39%
Average arrears	\$9,399	\$13,741
Median arrears	\$2,600	\$5,340

**Table 10. Child Support Order Levels and Arrears Balances at Program Enrollment (N=136)**

	Client Report	ACSES Records
Arrears range	\$0-\$290,000	\$0-\$184,447

Asked whether they had provided their children with any type of informal support, 47 percent of clients reported giving money directly to the children or the children’s other parent. Forty-three percent said they had purchased clothes, furniture, bikes, and other major items for their non-resident children. Fifteen percent reported paying medical bills, school fees, buying lunches, or insurance. And 19 percent said they had not provided any type of informal support. Seventy percent of El Paso County POP clients reported not providing any type of informal support, while 18 percent reported giving money directly to the custodial parent and 14 percent said they had purchased clothes or other substantial items for their children.

**Other Client Characteristics and Barriers**

Like most fatherhood programs, PARENT participants reported many barriers to employment, child support payment, and successful parenting. In intake interviews with program staff, over half of enrolling clients reported that they had been convicted of a misdemeanor (54%), while 23 percent had been convicted of a felony. Nearly one-third (28%) reported having health problems or a disability. Substantial proportions of participants said they had substance abuse problems, with 26 percent reporting an arrest for drunk driving and 20 percent reporting current participation in an alcohol or drug treatment program. Homelessness had been a recent issue for 15 percent of project participants and a nearly identical proportion reported some episode of incarceration. Of course, as in all self-reports of socially undesirable behaviors, the true incidence of these problems is likely to be substantially higher.

Without minimizing the difficulties that PARENT participants face or the fact that the program serves an at-risk population, it is worth noting that their levels of dysfunction were substantially lower than those reported by POP participants in El Paso County. In that client body, rates of participation in a drug/alcohol program stood at 39 percent, the lack of permanent housing

was 32 percent, the incarceration rate was 52 percent (60% for male clients), and the felony conviction rate was 46 percent (50% for male clients). (See Table 11.)

**Table 11. Client Characteristics and Barriers at Program Enrollment (N=136)**

Health problems/disabilities	28%
Problems with alcohol or drugs	4%
Trouble reading or writing	9%
Lack of child care	6%
Convicted of a misdemeanor	54%
Convicted of a felony	23%
Convicted of a violent crime	7%
Convicted of spousal or child abuse	7%
In an alcohol or drug treatment program	20%
Arrested for DUI or DWI	26%
Ever been incarcerated	16%
Currently on probation/parole	15%
Current charges pending	10%
During the past 6 months, have been homeless/lived in a shelter	15%
During the past 6 months, have lived in a halfway house	2%

### ***Types of Help that Clients Want***

Given the unique assurance component of the project, it is perhaps not surprising that the most common form of assistance that clients wanted when they enrolled in the program was help with child support payments. This was reported by 85 percent of participants. Just over half (51%) reported wanting help finding a better paying job. Approximately one-third of the participants also wanted help getting to see their children more often (32%), finding a job (46%), getting additional education or training (42%), getting on the right track (32%), and improving their relationship with the other parent (32%). Twenty-four percent of the participants reported wanting help with parenting skills/being a better parent. A much smaller percentage reported wanting help with

substance abuse treatment (23%), help with anger management (7%), health services (9%), and talking with others in the same situation (14%).

The case manager used the information that clients provided at intake to determine the types of services that were offered through the PARENT program. According to these assessments, project staff indicated that the majority of clients needed help with job referrals (68%), parenting education (53%), assistance with child support (85%), and case management (88%). These determinations mirror the chief components of the PARENT program, which involve child support assurance, referral to the Workforce Center, and attendance at classes dealing with parenting. Far fewer clients (18%) were assessed as needing help with getting to see their children. (See Table 12.)

**Table 12. Client Service Needs Identified by Project Staff (N=136)**

<b>Education/Training/Job Placement Needs</b>	Secondary education/GED preparation	4%
	Post-secondary education	6%
	Job referrals	68%
	OJT/apprenticeship/subsidized job	13%
	Job skills training/vocational education	22%
	Job readiness/life skills/pre-employment	2%
	Other	17%
<b>Child Support/Parenting/Visitation Needs</b>	Help with paternity establishment	2%
	Help with modifying a child support order	7%
	Help with child support arrearage	2%
	Help with establishing/modifying visitation order	2%
	Help establishing/modifying custody order	1%
	Help establishing a parenting plan	1%
	Help getting to visit children	18%
	Parenting education	53%
	Assistance with paying child support	85%
<b>Other Needs</b>	Medical/dental/vision exams and treatment	4%
	Substance abuse treatment/counseling	3%
	Mental health treatment/counseling	7%

**Table 12. Client Service Needs Identified by Project Staff (N=136)**

Services related to partner abuse	3%
Housing placement assistance	2%
Money management/budgeting	7%
Other legal assistance	2%
Case management	88%

### **Types of Help that Clients Get**

Tracking forms completed by the case managers every month show that clients tended to receive the forms of assistance noted on the assessment form. Every client who actively participated in the program received assistance with making their child support payments. Virtually every client (84%) participated in case management. Over half (63%) received services aimed at improving their jobs and earnings. Access and visitation services were provided to 18 percent of clients. And a smaller proportion (15%) received help with money management and budgeting. (See Table 13.)

**Table 13. Services Clients Received (for at least one month) as Noted by Project Staff (N=136)**

Educational services - Primary education, basic skills, pre-GED - Secondary education/GED preparation - Post-secondary education - ESL	13%
Job related services - Job assessment - Job referrals/job search - OJT/apprenticeship - Job skills training/vocational education - Job readiness/life skills/pre-employment - Job retention services	63%
Child support assurance (from child support records)	100%
Access and visitation - Help establishing/modifying visitation order - Help establishing/modifying custody order - Help establishing a parenting plan - Help getting to visit children - Mediation	18%
Parenting education	42%

**Table 13. Services Clients Received (for at least one month) as Noted by Project Staff (N=136)**

Case management	84%
Peer support	3%
Medical/dental/vision exams and treatment	7%
Services related to anger management	2%
Mental health treatment/counseling	7%
Substance abuse treatment/counseling	7%
Money management/budgeting	15%
Other legal assistance	7%
Other services/assistance	28%

It is trickier to determine the precise types of job assistance that clients received and whether they translated into new jobs or wage boosts that might lead to greater financial capacity. The specific services offered at the Workforce Center ranged from independent job search to employment assessments to OJT programs. According to records maintained by the case manager, just over one-quarter (29%) of clients changed or lost a job while in the program. Nearly half of those reporting job changes told case managers that they had found a better job (45%), while others reported they had quit (30%). Other reasons why clients reported job losses or changes were being laid off (10%), being terminated/fired (15%), or other reasons (23%).

There is little evidence from the records maintained by program staff to indicate that job changers experienced wage increases while they were in the program. Indeed, new wages reported for job changers were equivalent to those reported for those clients who did not change jobs. Clients who changed jobs while in the program reported hourly wages that ranged from \$3.04 to \$17.66. The wage range for those employed clients who did not change jobs was \$2.13 to \$27.28 per hour. And while the average and median wage for those who did not change were \$9.48 and \$8.87 per hour, respectively, the average and median for those who changed jobs were \$9.90 and \$9.50, respectively. This suggests that clients who received job assistance were given assessments and were instructed to engage in “self-directed job search” rather than more structured interventions or training programs leading to wage growth.

The assurance benefit — an intervention accorded to all project participants — was the main form of child support assistance that clients received. Another routine benefit of project participation was the reduction in the monthly arrears payment to \$50 per individual. A review of ACSES records for the clients enrolled in PARENT shows that another common form of child support assistance was reinstatement of driver’s licenses, with 17 percent of clients receiving this form of help. According to the project staff, child support modifications were not pursued very often because clients wanted to keep their old orders. Review and adjustment procedures frequently lead to order increases due to the judiciary’s tendency to base orders on a capacity to earn as reflected in prior earnings rather than current circumstances. Only 8 percent of clients had their child support orders modified while they were enrolled in the program. In addition, another 8 percent had their arrears modified during the months they participated in PARENT. One client established paternity and a child support order, and another client had his support abated and his case closed.

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### ***Case Closure***

Despite the program’s attractions, attrition was a problem. Since the assurance benefit consists of a monthly child support stipend that goes to children and the other parent rather than to the client himself, project participants did not experience any direct financial benefit from participation. Delayed gratification was another factor that affected participants since the assurance benefit was only paid if the client met his project commitments during the preceding month, which consisted of paying \$50 per month toward current child support obligations or arrears, maintaining contact with the case manager, attending parenting classes, and pursuing job referral activities specified by the Workforce Center.

According to case managers, nearly half of all participants (47%) successfully completed the PARENT program requirements and had their cases closed for positive reasons. Twenty-seven percent of participants were terminated for non-compliance. These individuals had neglected to pay \$50 per month toward child support, perform the requisite number of job search activities, meet with their case manager, and/or attend PARENT classes. Fifteen percent of participants dropped out of the program and could not be located by staff. Finally, 3 percent moved out of Larimer County, 2



percent were referred to another program for assistance, and 7 percent had their case closed for “other” reasons.

### **===== *Outcomes Dealing with Employment and Earnings***

One of the major objectives of the PARENT program was to increase the financial capacity of NCPs so that they could demonstrate more financial and emotional responsibility toward their children. To gauge the impact of the program on employment and earnings, we reviewed the state UI database and extracted information on quarterly earnings for participants. Since most clients tended to be in the program for five months and there may be a lag in posting UI information of up to five months, we conducted the earnings analysis for three different time periods with three groups of clients. The first group of clients consists of all 136 enrollees and presents their quarterly earnings in the 2 quarters immediately prior to and following program enrollment. The second group consists of 112 clients who enrolled October 1, 1999, through December 31, 2001. For this group, we compared earnings in the two quarters prior to enrollment with earnings in the four quarters following. The third analysis provides a long-term (eight quarters following program exit) view of what client earnings look like two years following program enrollment. The analysis is conducted with 71 clients who enrolled in the PARENT program from October 1, 1999, through December 31, 2000. Our reviews of UI wage records were conducted in November 2001 and again in July 2003.

Table 13 compares pre- and post-enrollment earnings for all 136 clients. The analysis suggests that there were modest improvements in earnings over time. In particular, average client earnings in the second quarter following program enrollment were slightly higher than those exhibited in the first quarter prior to enrollment. On average, PARENT clients earned \$2,523 in the quarter before they enrolled, as compared with \$2,856 two quarters following their enrollment in the program. While none of the differences between pre- and post-enrollment earnings were significant, the patterns are encouraging.

When the comparison of client earnings before and after enrollment was restricted to those who were employed, the pattern looked very similar. Although average earnings were higher in the quarters following program enrollment, the differences were not statistically significant, indicating

that they may have been due to chance alone. Another pattern that did not change over time was the percent of clients who showed evidence of earning activity. Two quarters prior to enrollment, 63 percent of clients showed evidence of employment; two quarters following program enrollment, the percent employed was nearly the same at 67 percent. (See Table 14.)

**Table 14. Wage Data for All Clients Enrolled in the PARENT Program (N=136)**

	2 quarters prior to program enrollment	1 quarter prior to program enrollment	1 quarter following program enrollment	2 quarters following program enrollment
Earnings for all clients enrolled during the time period				
Mean	\$2,929	\$2,523	\$2,398	\$2,856
Median	\$1,642	\$1,444	\$1,159	\$1,765
Range	\$0-15,410	\$0-16,535	\$0-13,836	\$0-14,914
Earnings for clients employed during the time period				
% employed	63%	70%	63%	67%
Mean	\$4,687	\$3,612	\$3,837	\$4,268
Median	\$4,177	\$2,847	\$3,616	\$3,960
Range	\$28-15,410	\$40-16,535	\$117-13,836	\$29-14,914

Table 15 presents employment and earnings data for the 112 clients who enrolled from October 1, 1999, through December 31, 2001. Earnings and employment patterns for this group of clients with four quarters of post enrollment data were very similar to patterns for all clients. One quarter prior to program entry, clients earned an average of \$2,621. Four quarters (12 months) following enrollment, quarterly earnings averaged \$2,881. The picture did not change when we focused on earnings for only those clients who were employed. There was a slight increase in earnings over time; however, this increase was not statistically significant. The percent of clients employed also remained steady, with 79 percent reporting earnings one quarter prior to program enrollment and 71 percent reporting earnings four quarters following program enrollment. (See Table 15).

**Table 15. Wage Data for Clients Enrolled in the  
PARENT Program 10/1/1999 through 12/31/2001 (N=112)**

	2 quarters prior to program enrollment	1 quarter prior to program enrollment	1 quarter following program enrollment	2 quarters following program enrollment	3 quarters following program enrollment	4 quarters following program enrollment
Earnings for all clients enrolled during the time period						
Mean	\$2,959	\$2,621	\$2,548	\$2,924	\$2,722	\$2,881
Median	\$1,377	\$1,554	\$1,528	\$1,734	\$1,242	\$1,579
Range	\$0-15,410	\$0-16,535	\$0-13,836	\$0-15,393	\$0-14,308	\$0-15,170
Earnings for clients employed during the time period						
% employed	63%	71%	64%	67%	61%	63%
Mean	\$4,667	\$3,715	\$3,963	\$4,367	\$4,483	\$4,545
Median	\$4,177	\$2,948	\$3,677	\$4,309	\$4,242	\$3,919
Range	\$28-15,410	\$121-16,535	\$117-13,836	\$29-15,393	\$93-14,308	\$51-15,170

The 71 clients who enrolled from October 1999 through December 2000 afford an opportunity to assess longer-term patterns over a 24-month period. The results of the eight-quarter assessment were similar to those observed for two and four quarters. While earnings increased during the 24 months following program enrollment and averaged \$3,405 in the eighth quarter as compared with the average pre-enrollment levels of \$2,528, the difference was not statistically significant. Likewise, the percent employed remained relatively flat, with 72 percent reported as employed in the quarter prior to enrollment, as compared with 62 percent in the eighth quarter following program enrollment. (See Table 16).

**Table 16. Wage Data for Clients Enrolled in the  
PARENT Program 10/1/1999 through 12/31/2000 (N=71)**

	2 quarters prior to program enrollment	1 quarter prior to program enrollment	1 quarter following program enrollment	2 quarters following program enrollment	3 quarters following program enrollment	4 quarters following program enrollment	5 quarters following program enrollment	6 quarters following program enrollment	7 quarters following program enrollment	8 quarters following program enrollment
Earnings for all clients enrolled during the time period										
Mean	\$3,205	\$2,528	\$2,477	\$3,065	\$2,921	\$3,158	\$3,156	\$3,004	\$3,143	\$3,405
Median	\$1,652	\$1,283	\$1,175	\$1,067	\$1,383	\$2,246	\$2,164	\$1,229	\$1,021	\$1,336
Range	\$0-15,333	\$0-16,535	\$0-13,836	\$0-15,393	\$0-\$14,308	\$0-15,170	\$0-14,612	\$0-21,415	\$0-14,952	\$0-16,430

**Table 16. Wage Data for Clients Enrolled in the PARENT Program 10/1/1999 through 12/31/2000 (N=71)**

	2 quarters prior to program enrollment	1 quarter prior to program enrollment	1 quarter following program enrollment	2 quarters following program enrollment	3 quarters following program enrollment	4 quarters following program enrollment	5 quarters following program enrollment	6 quarters following program enrollment	7 quarters following program enrollment	8 quarters following program enrollment
Earnings for clients employed during the time period										
% employed	65%	72%	66%	65%	63%	63%	59%	65%	58%	62%
Mean	\$4,946	\$3,520	\$3,742	\$4,730	\$4,609	\$4,982	\$5,335	\$4,637	\$5,443	\$5,495
Median	\$4,236	\$2,245	\$3,198	\$4,364	\$4,330	\$4,704	\$4,930	\$3,302	\$5,444	\$5,536
Range	\$28-15,333	\$121-16,535	\$117-13,836	\$29-15,393	\$93-14,308	\$263-15,170	\$46-14,612	\$74-21,415	\$176-14,952	\$97-16,430

Since earnings as a whole did not significantly increase over time following participation in the PARENT program, we looked at only those clients who received job services through the PARENT program to see if they had a higher incidence of employment over time. Table 17 compares the rate of employment between those clients who were reported by case managers to have received job services versus those clients who got no job help through the program. We focused again on the three groups of clients used in the previous analysis: all 136 clients enrolled in PARENT; the 112 clients who enrolled October 1, 1999, to December 31, 2001; and the 71 clients who enrolled October 1, 1999, to December 31, 2000.

This analysis showed that the PARENT program did impact short-term employment patterns. The percent of clients employed two quarters following program enrollment was significantly higher for those clients who received job services (72%) through PARENT versus those clients who did not receive job services (59%). This difference faded over time however, and by eight quarters following program enrollment, the percentage employed in groups with and without job services stood at 67 percent and 55 percent, respectively. While the program held short term employment benefits for clients, the higher employment rate achieved immediately following the receipt of job services could not be sustained over time. (See Table 17.)

**Table 17. Percent of Clients Employed Based on Wage Data by Those Who Received Job Services and Those Who Did Not Get Job Help**

	Client Received Employment Services	Client Did Not Receive Employment Services
Percent Employed 2 Quarters Following Program Enrollment (N=136)		

**Table 17. Percent of Clients Employed Based on Wage Data by Those Who Received Job Services and Those Who Did Not Get Job Help**

	Client Received Employment Services	Client Did Not Receive Employment Services
Percent Employed	72%	59%
Percent not Employed	*28%	41%
Percent Employed 4 Quarters Following Program Enrollment (N=112)		
Percent Employed	68%	57%
Percent Not Employed	32%	43%
Percent Employed 8 Quarters Following Program Enrollment (N=71)		
Percent Employed	67%	55%
Percent Not Employed	33%	45%

\*Chi-square is significant at .1

### **Outcomes Dealing with Child Support Payment**

Improving the payment of child support was another objective of PARENT, particularly after the suspension of the assurance benefit when responsibility reverted back to the client. To assess whether this objective was achieved, we compared client payment behaviors during several distinct time periods: six months before enrollment in PARENT, during the months of enrollment, and six months and 12 months following exit from PARENT. All the information for this analysis came from computerized child support records. The analysis was performed for all clients enrolled in the PARENT program. Child support records were reviewed and the data was extracted in July 2003.

Table 18 shows that there was little change in the number of child support orders held by participants over time, with the average being 1.5 to 1.4. Monthly support order levels remained stable at about \$340 per month. Monthly amounts due (MAD) for unpaid child support also remained relatively constant and stood at \$114 in the six months prior to project enrollment and \$74 in the 12 months following. (The MAD declined during program participation as a result of temporary adjustments of the monthly arrears obligation to \$50.)

Finally, child support arrears for PARENT participants changed very little over time. Six months prior to enrollment and 12 months following program exit, they ranged from \$30 to approximately \$100,000; averages at the two time points stood at \$9,584 and \$11,794, respectively. The reduction of arrears was not an objective of PARENT, which aimed to promote the payment of

current monthly support orders by lifting the child support burden during project participation so that clients could improve their capacity to earn and pay. (See Table 18.)

	<b>Baseline (6 months prior to program enrollment)</b>	<b>During program</b>	<b>Six months following program exit</b>	<b>Twelve months following program exit</b>
<b>Percent of cases with an order established</b>	70%	67%	68%	59%
<b>Number of child support orders</b>				
Mean	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.4
Median	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Range	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-4
<b>Monthly support order (MSO)</b>				
Mean	\$345	\$350	\$338	\$341
Median	\$275	\$275	\$273	\$267
Range	\$47-1,590	\$47-1,590	\$47-1,590	\$25-1,500
<b>Monthly MAD amount (current delinquency)</b>				
Mean	\$114	\$56	\$67	\$74
Median	\$67	\$50	\$50	\$50
Range	\$10-\$999	\$24-250	\$5-300	\$5-500
<b>Total arrearage due</b>				
Mean	\$9,584	\$9,998	\$9,805	\$11,794
Median	\$5,654	\$5,243	\$6,520	\$8,591
Range	\$30-90,234	\$29-99,999	\$50-99,999	\$89-99,999

The analysis of child support payments shows that while there were dramatic increases in payments during project participation when Larimer County was providing assurance benefits, these improvements were not sustained after clients exited PARENT and the assurance benefit ended. Thus, six months prior to their enrollment in PARENT and six and 12 months following their exit, there was an increase in the amount of child support paid, but it was not statistically significant. In the months before enrolling, clients paid 45 percent of what they owed, and 12 months after leaving the program, they paid 60 percent of what they owed. Mean amounts paid in the six months before and after program participation went from \$1,015 to \$1,068. Median payment amounts rose from \$623 to \$678. Obviously, payment behavior was best during the months in which clients participated in the project and payments were made by Larimer County.

While there was little evidence of overall improvement in child support payment patterns following project participation, there were changes in the proportions of clients paying nothing and those paying more than 75 percent of what was owed. A comparison of pre- and post- program payment patterns showed that the incidence of those who paid nearly all of what they owed rose from 21 percent to 34 percent, while the proportion paying nothing declined from 30 percent to 15 percent. This sharp reduction in the number of clients paying nothing suggests the PARENT program had a positive effect on child support payments, with more clients paying at least something towards their monthly child support obligation following participation in the program.

Another indicator of the child support performance of project clients following their exit from the program comes from a review of child support actions taken by child support staff in the six and 12 months after clients ceased to participate in the project. An inspection of ACSES records for the 136 program participants showed that 32 percent of clients had their driver’s licenses suspended for failure to pay child support in the six months following program exit and another 19 percent had their driver’s license suspended 12 months following program exit. This contrasts sharply with the 7 percent and 13 percent, respectively, who had license reinstatements during the same time period. Other child support actions recorded for this group were case closures (4% to 7%), order modifications (4%), arrearage modifications (3% to 4%), abatements of support (2% to 1%), and a contempt action (1% to 2%). Overall, negative actions outweighed the positive ones. (See Table 19.)

**Table 19. Monthly Child Support Payment and Action Patterns for All Clients (N=135)**

	<b>Baseline (6 months prior to program enrollment)</b>	<b>During program</b>	<b>Six months following program exit</b>	<b>Twelve months following program exit</b>
<b>Amount due during the time period per month</b>				
Mean	\$414	\$447	\$414	\$315
Median	\$330	\$358	\$357	\$258
Range	\$0-2,788	\$0-1,960	\$0-1,640	\$0-1,800
<b>Amount paid during the time period per month</b>				
Mean	\$169	\$425	\$178	\$156
Median	\$104	\$343	\$113	\$64
Range	\$0-910	\$0-3,572	\$0-1,446	\$0-1,323

**Table 19. Monthly Child Support Payment and Action Patterns for All Clients (N=135)**

	Baseline (6 months prior to program enrollment)	During program	Six months following program exit	Twelve months following program exit
<b>% of total amount paid</b>	45%	100%	57%	60%
% paying 0	30%	2%	19%	15%
% paying 1-25%	13%	2%	26%	23%
% paying 26-50%	16%	13%	11%	17%
% paying 51-75%	21%	15%	12%	12%
% paying more than 75%	21%	69%	32%	34%
<b>Child support actions taken</b>				
Suspended driver's license	N/A	12%	32%	19%
Reinstated driver's license		17%	7%	13%
Established paternity		2%	0	0
Established child support		2%	0	1%
Closed case		3%	4%	7%
Modified order		8%	4%	4%
Modified arrears		8%	3%	4%
Abated support		2%	2%	1%
Bank levy		0	4%	4%
Contempt action filed		1%	2%	1%
Payment schedule modified		19%	20%	13%

Larimer County spent \$321,307 making child support payments for 136 PARENT participants. This translates into an average per-client payment of \$2,655. The range of payments made on behalf of individual clients by Larimer County was \$148 to \$21,209, with half the clients receiving less than \$1,598 and half receiving more. During the same time period, these 136 clients themselves contributed \$136,435 towards their child support obligations. On average, they paid \$1,011. This included monthly contributions of \$50 towards arrears or current support as well as intercept payments, which continued to occur automatically. Taken together, families of the 136 PARENT participants received a total of \$457,742 in child support during the time period clients were enrolled in the program and receiving assurance benefits. Table 20 shows aggregate payments by Larimer County and PARENT clients.



**Table 20. Child Support Payment Patterns for All Clients (N=135)**

	Baseline (6 months prior to program enrollment)	During program	Six months following program exit	Twelve months following program exit
<b>Total amount due during the time periods</b>				
Mean	\$2,481	\$3,514	\$2,481	\$3,777
Median	\$1,980	\$2,004	\$2,142	\$3,096
Range	\$0-16,730	\$218-25,870	\$0-9,842	\$0-21,600
<b>Total amount paid by Larimer County</b>				
Mean	N/A	\$2,655	N/A	N/A
Median		\$1,598		
Range		\$149-21,209		
Sum		\$321,435		
<b>Total amount paid by NCP</b>				
Mean	\$1,015	\$1,011	\$1,068	\$1,876
Median	\$623	\$392	\$678	\$770
Range	\$0-\$5,457	\$0-23,117	\$0-\$8,675	\$0-15,875
Sum	\$137,049	\$136,435	\$144,180	\$253,224

**==== *Earnings, Child Support Obligations, and Payments***

An important indicator of monthly child support payment is the monthly child support obligation as a percent of client earnings. An analysis of monthly earnings and child support obligations for PARENT clients six months following program participation revealed that the burden of child support clearly affected child support payment patterns. Clients who paid the best had child support obligations that comprised a relatively modest proportion of their income, while clients who paid the worst had obligations that consumed a large proportion of their reported earnings. Clients with the lowest levels of reported earnings had child support obligations that were excessively high. Indeed, among clients earning \$500 per month or less, obligations were 269 percent of monthly earnings and slightly more than half (57%) of the obligation was paid. Clients who earned between \$501 and \$1,000 per month had obligations that comprised 47 percent of their earnings and also paid only about half (51%) of what they owed in monthly child support. In contrast, clients who earned between \$1,001 and \$2,000 per month and those earning \$2,001 or more had orders that were 20 percent and 17 percent, respectively, of their income. They did the best job and paid 62 percent of their monthly obligation.

CPR reached similar conclusions in its evaluation of the OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs in eight states. For example, clients in Washington State, who resembled PARENT participants in many ways displayed virtually identical payment patterns when their employer-reported earnings and child support obligations were compared. Washington parents earning between \$1,001 and \$2,000 per month had order levels that were 24 percent of their income and paid 70 percent of their child support that was due. For those clients earning over \$2,000 per month, order levels stood at 16 percent of monthly income and clients paid 82 percent of what was due in monthly child support. Both studies show that the burden of child support is extremely high for those at the lowest income levels and that unrealistic child support obligations go unpaid. (See Table 21.)

**Table 21. Child Support Obligations and Payments Six Months Following Program Participation, by UI Earnings (N=135)▲**

	Monthly obligation expressed as a percent of monthly earnings six months following program exit	Percent of obligation paid in the six months following program exit
Monthly Earnings shown in UI system six months following enrollment		
-Less than or equal to \$500	*269%	57%
-Between \$501-\$1,000	47%	51%
-Between \$1,001-\$2,000	20%	62%
-Over \$2,000	17%	62%

▲ Child support payment information was collected for the six months after client exited from the program. UI was data was only available for the 6 months following program enrollment. However, client employment and earnings patterns did not change significantly from the enrollment to post-enrollment period, so these patterns would be expected to hold.

\* 269% is significantly higher than all other figures in monthly obligation column.

### ***Earnings and Child Support Outcomes for Clients Who Complete the Program Successfully***

While there were no statistically significant differences in employment, earnings, and payment outcomes for PARENT participants as a group, there was a segment of the client population that did exhibit some significant improvements. There were clients who completed the program and were neither terminated by the staff for non-performance nor dropped out on their own. Overall, 53 percent of clients with outcome information were classified by project staff as being “successful” program participants, while 47 percent were determined to be “unsuccessful.” In the ensuing analysis, we focus on the characteristics of each group and explore their outcome patterns.

Clients who completed the program were significantly older (36 years versus 34 years), better educated (42% versus 16% with some college), and were less likely to have been convicted of a misdemeanor (41% versus 71%) or arrested for DUI or DWI (20% versus 32%). The successful group also had significantly higher monthly child support orders (\$404 versus \$305). They were equally apt to have reported being employed when they enrolled in the project (56% versus 57%). Successful clients reported higher hourly earnings (\$11.48 versus \$9.07), a pattern that was confirmed in wage reports by employers. (See Table 22.)

**Table 22. Selected Profile and Comparison of Client Characteristics by Program Outcome**

		Completed Program (N=64)	Terminated Program (N=56)
Sex	Male	94%	89%
	Female	6%	11%
*Age	Average	36	34
	Median	35	31
Race	White	72%	64%
	African American	8%	5%
	Hispanic	8%	18%
	Native American	5%	5%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	3%	2%
	Other	5%	6%
Marital Status	Married	14%	21%
	Separated	5%	13%
	Divorced	53%	45%
	Never married	28%	20%
	Widowed	0	0
	Unknown	0	2%
Highest Degree Completed	None	14%	21%
	GED	14%	32%
	High School Diploma	30%	30%
	*Some college or higher	42%	16%
Employment	% Employed	56%	57%

**Table 22. Selected Profile and Comparison of Client Characteristics by Program Outcome**

		Completed Program (N=64)	Terminated Program (N=56)
	Full-time	75%	66%
	Part-time	25%	31%
Hourly earnings	Mean	\$11.48	\$9.07
	Median	\$10.29	\$8.30
	Range	\$4.09-\$31.00	\$3.57-\$20.00
Child support order levels	*Average MSO	\$404	\$305
	% MSO paid	49%	46%
	Average arrears	\$8,007	\$11,606
	Median arrears	\$4,027	\$7,195
	Range	\$30-90,234	\$164-86,600
Barriers	Health problems/disabilities	31%	18%
	Problems with alcohol or drugs	3%	5%
	Trouble reading or writing	9%	9%
	Lack of child care	5%	7%
	*Convicted of a misdemeanor	41%	71%
	Convicted of a felony	17%	23%
	Convicted of a violent crime	3%	7%
	Convicted of spousal abuse or child abuse	6%	4%
	In an alcohol or drug treatment program	19%	20%
	*Arrested for DUI or DWI	20%	32%
	Ever been incarcerated	13%	18%
	Currently on probation/parole		
	Current charges pending	5%	14%
	During past 6 months, have been homeless or lived in a shelter	13%	20%
	During past 6 months, have lived in a halfway house	3%	2%

\* Differences between those who completed the program and those who were terminated are significant at .1

While there were few differences in outcomes dealing with earnings and child support payments for PARENT program clients when the group was considered as a whole, those who completed the program successfully did perform better than their counterparts who dropped out or were terminated from the program for noncompliance. Clients who were classified by program staff as having completed the program earned more money than those who terminated the program unsuccessfully. They also paid significantly more child support. For example, in the six months following program exit, successful clients paid 77 percent of what they owed, while their counterparts who dropped out or were terminated paid 30 percent. One year following program exit, these statistically significant differences persisted, with successful clients paying 71 percent of what they owed while those clients who were terminated paid 48 percent. In the quarter following their enrollment, successful clients earned \$3,148, while unsuccessful clients earned \$1,606. The differences in quarterly earnings between successful and unsuccessful program participants were statistically significant. On the other hand, there was no evidence that clients in the two groups experienced wage growth over the life of the project. Two quarters prior to and two quarters following enrollment, successful clients earned an average of \$3,653 and \$3,692, respectively. On average, their unsuccessful counterparts earned \$2,260 and \$2,190 at these same time points. (See Table 23.)

**Table 23. Earnings and Child Support Information by Client Program Outcome**

Earnings information from quarterly wage reports								
	2 quarters prior to enrollment		1 quarter prior to enrollment		1 quarter following enrollment		2 quarters following enrollment	
	Completed program	Terminated program	Completed program	Terminated program	Completed program	Terminated program	Completed program	Terminated program
Percent employed	77%	68%	66%	61%	67%	63%	* 77%	* 61%
Quarterly earnings (mean)	(64) *\$3,653	(56) *\$2,260	(64) \$2,867	(56) \$2,255	(64) *\$3,148	(56) *\$1,606	(64) *\$3,692	(56) \$2,190
Child support information by client program outcome								
	Baseline (at program enrollment)		During program		Six months following program exit		Twelve months following program exit	
	Completed program	Terminated program	Completed program	Terminated program	Completed program	Terminated program	Completed program	Terminated program

**Table 23. Earnings and Child Support Information by Client Program Outcome**

MSO (mean)	*\$404	*\$305	*\$391	*\$310	*\$378	*\$305	*\$410	*\$304
Total arrearage due (mean)	\$8,007	\$11,606	*\$6,696	*\$14,242	*\$7,382	*\$12,662	\$10,252	\$13,312
Total amount due (mean)	\$2,643	\$2,583	*\$5,557	*\$2,891	\$2,587	\$2,599	\$3,581	\$4,246
Total amount paid (mean)	\$1,211	\$1,007	*\$5,998	*\$2,891	*\$1,568	*\$580	\$2,174	\$1,693
Child support information by client program outcome								
	Baseline (at program enrollment)		During program		Six months following program exit		Twelve months following program exit	
Total amount NCP paid (mean)	N/A	N/A	*\$1,466	*\$597	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
% of total amount paid (mean)	<sup>+</sup> 49%	46%	106%	91%	* <sup>+</sup> 77%	*30%	* <sup>+</sup> 71%	* 48%

\* Differences between those who completed the program and those who were terminated are significant at .1

<sup>+</sup> Among clients who completed the program, differences between baseline and 6 and 12 month time period are significant at .05

It is relevant that the two groups had consistent differences in earnings before they enrolled in PARENT. Thus, two quarters before enrollment, PARENT clients who were ultimately successful in the program earned an average of \$3,653 per quarter, while their unsuccessful counterparts earned \$2,260. This suggests that clients who completed the program were predisposed to succeed by virtue of their ability to earn. Program participation, however, may have helped successful clients do a better job paying child support. While the percent of child support paid by both groups prior to program entry was equivalent, with successful and unsuccessful participants paying 46 to 49 percent of what they owed in child support, payment rates among successful clients rose significantly from 49 to 71 percent, following their exit from the program. In contrast, the percent of child support paid by those clients dropped from PARENT stayed the same. That mean quarterly earnings for successful clients remained steady throughout the study period suggests that clients improved their child support payment patterns after successfully completing the program, even though they did not experience wage growth. Unsuccessful clients showed few changes over

time. They earned approximately the same amount each quarter, and the proportion of child support that they paid went from 46 to 48 percent, a non-significant difference.

Child support obligations were significantly less burdensome for successful PARENT clients and their payment patterns were significantly better than payment patterns for unsuccessful clients. On average, obligations comprised 23 percent of monthly earnings for successful clients and payments averaged 77 percent of what was owed. For unsuccessful clients, child support consumed 36 percent of monthly earnings, and they paid only 30 percent of what they owed. Differences in the child support burden (23% versus 36%) and payments for the two groups (77% versus 30%) were statistically significant. These patterns underscore the mismatch between earnings and child support obligations for extremely low-income individuals and the importance of keeping monthly obligations near 20 percent of client earnings in order to realize the best payment outcomes..

### **===== *Reactions to Program Components***

All of the other project outcomes — parent-child contact, relationship with the custodial parent, client satisfaction, and the perceived impact of the program on other aspects of a client’s life— came from information provided by clients in interviews conducted approximately six months following their enrollment in PARENT. Interviewers were able to locate and interview 68 of the 136 program participants. This constitutes a response rate of 50 percent which was much higher than the overall response rate of 31 percent in the Responsible Fatherhood Program evaluation, and suggests that PARENT program participants were a more stable population. In the 15 minute interview, clients were asked to evaluate the services they received in the program, describe changes in the amount of time they spent with their children, and assess changes in many aspects of their life in the months since their enrollment.

The interviews reveal that child support assurance was the most widely utilized component of the PARENT program. All the interviewed clients (100%) said they had wanted and received help with their child support situation. Nearly one-quarter (24%) indicated that they had wanted help with their parenting skills and all of these clients reported receiving assistance. Help with employment was a distant third priority, with only 10 percent reporting an interest in assistance. Only 6 percent of the 68 interviewed clients said they wanted help getting to see their children. Most

clients who wanted help characterized the services that they received as “very helpful.” (See Table 24.)

**Table 24. Services Wanted and Obtained (N=68)**

Services	% wanted help	% obtained help
Help so you could see your children	6%	75%
Help with employment	10%	86%
Help with education	0	n/a
Help with child support	100%	100%
Help with parenting skills	24%	100%

### ***Reactions to Child Support Assurance***

Most interviewed clients (85%) reported that the program had paid their child support obligations as part of the assurance component. Respondents reported receiving one to 18 months of payments, with the average being 5.1 months and the median being 5.0 months. Although half (49%) said that they would have enrolled in PARENT even if their support had not been paid, the assurance component was clearly a major attraction. Just over one-third (35%) said it was the only reason he or she joined the program, and 43 percent said it was one of several reasons why he or she joined the program. Only 22 percent said that the child support payment was not a factor in their decision to join.

Clients were understandably confused about the child support agency’s relationship to PARENT since staff deliberately hid the connection between the two in order to promote public acceptance of the program. Not surprisingly, almost half of the clients (43%) said they were “not sure” whether the program and the services it offered were part of or separate from the child support agency and only 6 percent correctly noted that the program was part of the child support agency. Just over half (51%) said that PARENT and the child support agency were separate. Perhaps this explains why clients were divided in their attitudes toward the child support agency, with 55 percent reporting that their attitude toward the agency had changed as a result of the project, while 31 percent reported no change. Overall, 20 percent of the clients reported their opinion about the child



support agency was “much better,” 31 percent characterized their opinions as “somewhat better,” 14 percent said their opinion of the agency was “somewhat or much worse,” and 34 percent reported no change of opinion.

A key consideration about the assurance component was how well clients were able to assume their child support responsibilities once the program stopped making their payments. These interviews indicate that many clients anticipated difficulties. Over half (57%) of interviewed clients who had ceased receiving assurance benefits (typically after five months of assistance) and were responsible for making child support payments on their own said it was “very difficult,” and another 33 percent said it was “somewhat difficult.” Only 10 percent characterized the task as “not at all difficult.” Asked to evaluate whether paying child support today was more or less of a problem than before the client had enrolled in the program, 47 percent characterized it as “more of a problem” and 34 percent said it was “about the same.” Only 19 percent said it was “less of a problem.”

Respondents who were still receiving assurance benefits had much of the same to say about the difficulties that they anticipated once the agency stopped paying their child support. Sixty-two percent thought that making payments on their own would be “very difficult,” 48 percent said it was “very unlikely” that they would be able to do it, and 22 percent said it was “somewhat unlikely.” (See Table 25.)

**Table 25. Client Reactions to Paying Child Support After the Assurance Benefit Ends (N=68)**

		PARENT Program stopped paying child support (N=15)	PARENT Program still paying child support (N=11)
Number of months client has been responsible for paying the full amount of his/her child support since the assurance benefit ended	Mean	7.3 months	N/A
	Median	6.0 months	N/A
Degree of difficulty client experiences (or anticipates) in making child support payments once the agency stops the assurance benefit	Very difficult	57%	62%
	Somewhat difficult	33%	35%
	Not at all difficult	10%	4%
Is paying child support today more or less of a problem than it was before client joined the PARENT program?	More of a problem	47%	N/A
	Less of a problem	19%	N/A
	About the same	34%	N/A

**Table 25. Client Reactions to Paying Child Support After the Assurance Benefit Ends (N=68)**

		PARENT Program stopped paying child support (N=15)	PARENT Program still paying child support (N=11)
How likely do you think it is that you will be able to make all your child support payments once the agency stops paying in the coming year?	Very unlikely	N/A	48%
	Somewhat unlikely	N/A	22%
	Somewhat likely	N/A	11%
	Very likely	N/A	19%

On a positive note, the majority of interviewed clients reported a variety of attitudinal benefits to the experience of having the program pay their child support obligations. More than three-fourths (78%) said that it had made them feel as though they could “get my financial situation under control,” and 72 percent said it had made them feel “better about myself.” Having payments come from the child support agency made 57 percent of respondents “feel like I deserve to see my children.” And almost half (47%) of interviewed respondents felt that the payment activity had “made the other parent more cooperative.” This is consistent with staff observations about the effect of the assurance component. They cite the example of one father who reported that the stipend had relieved his sense of shame about his frequent inability to pay child support, and that as a result, he had contacted a daughter he had not spoken with for ten years. (See Table 26.)

**Table 26. Perceived Impact of the Child Support Assurance Component on Client’s Life(N=68)**

Do you think the agency’s payment of your child support order changed any of the following in your life:	
Made the other parent more cooperative	47%
Made me feel like I deserve to see my children	57%
Made me feel better about myself	72%
Made me feel like I can get my financial situation under control	78%

### ***Changes in Parent-Child Contact and Family Relationships***

Another objective of the PARENT program was to enhance parent-child contact and improve the parenting skills of participating NCPs. Since there were no “objective” measures of these

outcomes, we had to rely exclusively on reports by interviewed clients about their relationships before and after enrolling in the project.

According to interviewed clients, most experienced no change in the amount of contact they had with their children. In response to questions comparing contact levels at program enrollment with contact in the six months following enrollment, half (52%) of responding clients said they saw children who do not live with them “about the same.” While nearly a quarter (21%) reported higher levels of contact during the six months since program enrollment, approximately the same number (28%) reported less frequent contact. POP program participants reported a greater increase in parent child contact following their enrollment in the program. While slightly more clients in the El Paso County program reported seeing their children “about the same” (56%), nearly one-third (32%) reported seeing their children “more often” since enrolling in POP. A much smaller percent (12%) of the POP participants reported seeing their children “less often” following their program participation.

In assessing their relationships with the other parent, Larimer County PARENT respondents were evenly divided among those reporting that things were “better” (29%), “worse” (31%), and “about the same” (41%). Not surprisingly, most of those who reported seeing their children more often attributed the increase to improved relationships with the other parent, while most of those who reported less contact blamed it on worsening relationships with the other parent. All the parents who reported more contact said that they see their children several times a week, up from once a week or once or twice a month. Those who reported less contact went down to once or twice a month, every other month or not at all. While most NCPs who reported no change in contact patterns continued to see their children about once or twice a month, once a week or more, 30 percent said they still did not see their children at all.

Interviewed clients also reported few changes in their reactions to the levels of parent-child contact and input that they experienced. Almost half (45%) reported that their level of satisfaction with the amount of time they spent with their children was “about the same.” More than two-thirds (68%) reported that their level of satisfaction with the amount of input they had in their children’s lives was “about the same.” Compared with El Paso County POP participants, Larimer County PARENT program clients were less satisfied with the amount of access they had to their children.

El Paso County clients reported greater levels of contact with their children since they had enrolled in POP, and their levels of satisfaction were understandably higher than PARENT clients. Thirty-nine percent of POP clients reported they were “more satisfied” with the amount of access they had to their children, and one quarter reported their satisfaction was “about the same.” Fifty-five percent of POP clients reported the amount of input they had in their children’s lives was “about the same” following participation in POP. (See Table 27.)

**Table 27. Client Assessments of Their Relationship with Their Children and the Other Parent as Compared with Six Months Ago at Program Enrollment (N=68)**

See children	More often	21%
	Less often	28%
	About the same	52%
Satisfaction with amount of time spent with children	More satisfied	25%
	Less satisfied	31%
	About the same	45%
Satisfaction with amount of input you have in making major decisions about your child's life	More	15%
	Less	17%
	About the same	68%
How well you get along with child's other parent	Much better	6%
	Somewhat better	23%
	About the same	41%
	Somewhat worse	27%
	Much worse	2%
	Varies by parent	2%

Totals may exceed 100% due to rounding.

### ***Other Outcomes and Program Ratings***

Although respondents did not report big changes in the amount of contact they have with their children or the quality of their relationship with the other parent, they did tend to report that many aspects of their lives were “better” since enrolling in PARENT. About half of interviewed

clients rated themselves as “better” at being a parent, handling their job, and getting their “life together.” (See Table 28.)

**Table 28. Client Assessments of Their Lives Since Enrolling in the PARENT Program (N=68)**

	Better	Same	Worse	Not Applicable
The job you are doing as a parent	55%	36%	8%	2%
How well you get along with the other parent	30%	46%	18%	6%
How well you provide for your children financially	37%	33%	28%	2%
How well you provide for yourself financially	34%	39%	24%	3%
Getting your child support situation under control	40%	39%	19%	2%
Your job skills	57%	39%	2%	3%
Keeping a job	40%	55%	0	5%
Getting your life together	61%	28%	10%	0
Using contraceptives more regularly	25%	57%	3%	15%

This sense of client optimism was reflected in the overall rating for PARENT given by respondents. More than half (59%) of respondents gave the program an overall grade of “excellent,” while 31 percent rated it as “good.” The program received highest marks for less tangible outcomes such as, “helping you see that others have similar problems,” “Giving you hope about your future,” and “understanding your situation.” Nearly 50 percent of respondents rated these aspects of the program as “excellent.” To contrast, virtually none of the interviewed clients rated the employment components of the project as “excellent.” Indeed, nearly all (88% to 89%) indicated that aspects of the program pertaining to “providing you with specific job opportunities and getting you job interviews” and “improving your chances of getting or keeping a job” were irrelevant and indicated that these were “not an issue.” (See Table 29.)

**Table 29. Client Rating of Selected Aspects of the PARENT Program (N=68)**

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Not an Issue
Helping you understand your child support situation	38%	39%	17%	0	6%

**Table 29. Client Rating of Selected Aspects of the PARENT Program (N=68)**

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Not an Issue
Help you understand your legal rights and responsibilities with respect to your children	33%	25%	25%	8%	8%
Providing group support	40%	22%	18%	10%	11%
Helping you learn about community services	39%	17%	16%	14%	14%
Helping you to be a better parent	37%	38%	10%	0	16%
Providing you with specific job opportunities and getting you job interviews	5%	0	5%	3%	88%
Improving your chances of getting or keeping a job	5%	2%	3%	2%	89%
Improving your chances of being involved with your children	33%	23%	13%	8%	23%
Helping you see that others have similar problems	45%	31%	9%	0	14%
Giving you hope about your future	42%	33%	16%	5%	5%
Improving how well you co-parent with the child's other parent	33%	17%	13%	8%	30%
Improving how well you communicate with the child's other parent	33%	19%	14%	6%	28%
Changing your attitude about relationships	33%	20%	19%	2%	27%
Understanding your situation	50%	31%	14%	2%	3%
<b>Overall rating for the program</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4%</b>

### ***Discussion and Summary of Findings***

Like other responsible fatherhood programs, Larimer County's PARENT aimed to improve the financial and emotional involvement of NCPs with their children through the provision of a variety of services dealing with employment, child support, case management, and parenting. Unlike other fatherhood programs, Larimer County paid the child support obligation of project participants for an average of five months, with the goal of helping clients improve their financial situation so that they could manage their child support responsibilities on a long-term basis. Another goal of the assurance component was to eliminate the payment barriers that might inhibit NCPs from visiting with their children and to enhance parent-child contact. The project was open to NCPs who lived in Larimer County and/or had a Larimer County child support order who were unemployed or underemployed and were unable to meet their financial obligations.

CPR's evaluation of PARENT mirrors the evaluation it conducted of eight responsible fatherhood programs funded by OCSE. The Larimer County project, like the OCSE-funded projects, used the RFMIS developed by the Lewin Group to record the characteristics of participants in responsible fatherhood programs and to monitor the services they receive. Outcomes were tracked through follow-up interviews with participants six months following their enrollment. Finally, the evaluation involved a review of automated records maintained by child support and employment agencies to record earnings and child support payment patterns before and after project enrollment.

The following provides a summary and discussion of outcomes based on the evaluation of the PARENT program.

- 1. The child support agency played a critical role in recruiting PARENT project participants; relatively few were generated through word-of-mouth or community organization referrals.** Although some advocates challenge the efficacy of referrals by the child support agency, the Larimer County project confirms the importance of having child support technicians and customer service staff who are aware of fatherhood programs and committed to directing NCPs to them for appropriate services. This is consistent with the implementation lessons for the OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood programs, where evaluators concluded that many recruitment strategies should be used and that referrals from child support agencies were important sources that should not be overlooked.
  
- 2. PARENT served a population that had many problems but was better educated and faced fewer barriers to work than those served in other responsible fatherhood programs.** PARENT tended to serve divorced, white NCPs who have high school diplomas or higher degrees. Despite these characteristics, many faced considerable barriers to employment, with more than half reporting a misdemeanor conviction and a third reporting a disability or a health problem. At the same time, the rates of substance abuse, felony conviction, and domestic violence stood far below rates reported in the OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood programs. This reflects the relatively prosperous profile of Larimer County residents and the commitment by program architects to serve middle-class NCPs as well as the poor.

- 3. PARENT served a population that was older than the population targeted in many responsible fatherhood programs.** The average age of a PARENT participant was 35. This was older than the age group targeted in the Partners for Fragile Families (PFF) programs, which focus on young fathers under the age of 24, but is consistent with the participation patterns found in the OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood programs. This underscores the salience of child support and parenting issues for fathers of all ages and the importance of maintaining flexible recruitment strategies.
- 4. Like many other responsible fatherhood programs, PARENT involved many inter-agency relationships and public-private partnerships.** PARENT’s core features were its child support assurance benefit, a series of six parenting classes offered three to four times a year by a mental health professional, case management by program staff, and referral to the county Welfare-to-Work program for employment services. Some clients were referred to a variety of public and private agencies for other services dealing with consumer counseling, mediation, and health. Program architects emphasize the importance of utilizing a wide range of services available in the community.
- 5. Although a stated goal of PARENT was to improve the employment status of participants and increase their earnings, participants did not appear to receive services through the county’s Workforce Center that led to these changes.** Few PARENT participants met the Welfare-to-Work eligibility criteria and/or the DOL’s lower-living standard, which would qualify them for intensive training services and OJT opportunities. As a result, most NCPs appear to only have received assessments and to have engaged in “monitored, self-directed job search,” activities that frequently do not lead to new jobs or salary increases.
- 6. Overall, clients did not appear to show statistically significant increases in child support payments after they exited the PARENT program and their assurance benefits stopped, although the percentage paying nothing dropped.** Understandably, while they participated in the project and assurance benefits were paid, all clients met their monthly



child support obligations. After the benefit ended, however, many clients did not appear to make their payments independently. A comparison of pre- and post-program payment patterns shows that the percent of owed child support that was paid went from 45 percent to 60 percent. While this difference was not statistically significant, there was a sharp decline in the proportion of clients who paid nothing toward their child support following program participation which dropped from 30 to 15 percent.

**7. The assurance benefit and the routine reduction in monthly arrears obligations were the exclusive child support interventions that most clients received.** All clients received the assurance benefit. They also had their monthly arrears obligations reduced to \$50, which remained at this level pending the regular payment of monthly support. One-fifth experienced a reinstatement of their driver’s licences; others avoided a suspension through the intervention of project staff. In addition, a few experienced modification of their child support orders or case closures. The project’s most compelling child support benefit — child support assurance — was limited to the period of active project participation and led to few changes that produce long-term reductions in monthly payment obligations. Project staff had hoped to use interparty stipulations between custodial parents and noncustodial parents to achieve lower monthly support obligations, but were unable to negotiate this in all but one case due to high levels of parental hostility.

**8. Interviewed participants reported few changes in parent-child contact, satisfaction with their involvement with their children, and/or relationships with former partners.** About half of interviewed clients said that they had experienced no changes in parent-child or parent-parent relationships following program participation, a quarter said that things had improved, and a quarter said that things had gotten worse. Perhaps because they tended to be divorced rather than never-married, NCPs in Larimer County reported higher levels of legal access to their children and parent-child contact when they enrolled in the program and fewer restrictions to contact than those reported in other responsible fatherhood programs.

**9. Interviewed parents report substantial levels of satisfaction with the PARENT program.** Six months after enrolling in PARENT, interviewed participants reported more

optimism about their lives, improved self-esteem, and high levels of satisfaction with the program, particularly with respect to more nebulous outcomes like feeling hopeful about the future and realizing that others have similar problems.

**10. Earning patterns for PARENT clients were mixed. While average earnings rose, the proportion who were unemployed remained constant over time.** There were increases in quarterly earnings for clients when the wages they earned one quarter prior to their enrollment were compared with earnings they showed two, four, and eight quarters after enrollment, but none of these differences were statistically significant. A comparison of employment patterns for clients who did and did not receive employment services from PARENT showed that those who received job services had significantly higher rates of employment two quarters following their enrollment but that this difference disappeared by four and eight quarters following project enrollment. Thus, while the PARENT program appears to have provided short-term employment benefits to clients, there were few lasting effects on client employment and earnings.

**11. Like many other responsible fatherhood programs, attrition was a problem and many participants disappeared or failed to comply with program rules.** The case manager reported that slightly more than half of participants successfully completed program requirements and terminated their relationships with PARENT for positive reasons. The rest dropped out on their own, disappeared, or were terminated by staff for not complying with the program rules.

**12. Clients who successfully completed the program entered with fewer barriers than those who dropped out and demonstrated more positive outcomes following their exit.** Clients who successfully completed PARENT were older, better educated, and less likely to have been involved with the criminal justice system than their non-successful counterparts. They also had higher earnings before they entered the program although they were no more likely to be employed and paid a statistically identical fraction of their monthly child support obligations (49% versus 46%). Following their exit from the

program, successful clients exhibited higher rates of employment and earnings than those who dropped out and did a better job paying their child support, with the percent paid rising from 49 to 71 percent. Clients who were dropped or terminated continued to pay less than half of what they owed (46% to 48%). These findings mirror those found in many studies of self-sufficiency and employment services programs, which typically achieve their best results with clients who are most motivated and face the fewest barriers.

**13. Clients who completed the program successfully exhibited stable rates of employment and earnings, lower child support burdens and better child support payment patterns.**

Clients who successfully completed the program paid significantly higher proportions of their child support obligations six and 12 months following their exit from the program, as compared with their payments in the six months prior to enrollment. In the six months prior to enrolling in the program, these successful clients paid 49 percent of their total child support due. Twelve months following their exit from PARENT, these same clients were paying 71 percent of their total amount due, a significant increase. Their rate of employment (77%) and average quarterly earnings remained constant (\$3,653 versus \$3,692), suggesting that they were more stable individuals who may have used the program to get “on top” of their finances. It is also relevant that child support was less burdensome to clients who completed the program successfully. On average, their orders comprised 23 percent of their monthly earnings. Among unsuccessful clients, child support obligations consumed 36 percent of reported monthly earnings.

**14. While interviewed clients appreciated the assurance component and credited it with helping them to feel better about themselves and getting their financial situation under control, the intervention does not appear to lead to improvements in an individual’s perceived ability to pay his child support over time.** Among those who were no longer receiving assurance benefits and face making full payments independently, more than half characterized the burden as “very difficult” and another 33 percent say that it was “somewhat difficult.” Among those who were still receiving assurance benefits when they

were interviewed, over half anticipated that paying on their own would be “very difficult.” Nearly half said they were “very unlikely” to manage the payments on their own.

**15. Since the child support agency deliberately hid its relationship to the PARENT program, it did not get the credit it deserves among clients for the PARENT program and the assurance component.** Fearing that a connection to the child support program would deter clients from participating in PARENT, project staff hid the relationship between the two and housed the program away from the child support agency. As a result, most clients praised the PARENT program highly but were confused about its connection to the child support agency, with only 6 percent correctly noting that the PARENT program was part of the agency. About one-third reported that their attitude toward the agency had not changed as a result of the project and many continued to hold negative views.

**16. The child support payment behaviors that PARENT clients exhibited were better than those observed in several programs for low-income, noncustodial parents but were still far from perfect.** On average, PARENT participants paid 60 percent of what they owed for child support 12 months after they completed the program. Clients who successfully completed the program paid 71 percent of what they owed. While these patterns fall far short of full payment, they are better than payment patterns observed in several programs that provide employment, child support, and parenting assistance to low-income NCPs. For example, 12 months after enrolling in the El Paso County, POP, noncustodial parents paid an average of 36 percent of what they owed. At the responsible fatherhood project site in the state of Washington, which had a client base that resembled PARENT participants in Larimer County, the percentage of owed child support that was paid in the 12 months following project enrollment was 55 percent. In all these projects, improvements in payment were chiefly due to reductions in unemployment and declines in the proportion paying nothing rather than wage growth among those already employed. These studies suggest that child support obligations may be unrealistically high for many low-income, noncustodial parents and impossible to fully pay.

**17. Child Support payment patterns were best for those with reasonable child support burdens.** Child support was significantly more burdensome for clients with the lowest earnings. For those who had reported earnings of \$500 per month or less, obligations were more than twice as high as reported earnings. Among those who earned \$2,000 per month or more, obligations consumed only 17 percent of reported earnings. Not surprisingly, payments were better for those with lower child support burdens. On average, clients whose child support burden stood at approximately 20 percent of income paid 62 percent of what they owed, while those with higher burdens paid about half. Among clients who completed and failed to complete the PARENT program, the differential between burdens and payments was even more pronounced. On average, clients who completed the program had child support obligations that consumed 23 percent of their monthly incomes and they paid 77 percent of what they owed. In contrast, those who dropped out or were terminated from the program had child support obligations that consumed 36 percent of what they earned and their payments comprised only 30 percent of their obligations. These patterns mirror those found in evaluations of responsible fatherhood programs that show that child support obligations are extremely high for those with the lowest reported earnings and their payments are the worst. (Pearson, et al., 2003) They are also similar to those gleaned in a recent analysis of child support debtors in California which showed that at the lowest income levels (\$5,000/year or less), child support orders were twice as high as monthly incomes (Sorensen and Zibman, 2002). All these studies underscore the importance of setting realistic child support obligations, particularly for low-income parents.

## **==== *Conclusions***

While PARENT was attractive to participants and garnered praise for helping NCPs improve their self-esteem and their feelings about the future, it led to few tangible improvements in employment, earnings, child support payments, and/or parent-child contact levels in the overall client population. The assurance component offered participants a temporary respite from their child support obligations, but there is little evidence that clients used the grace period to do the training or make the job changes that might lead to higher earnings and an enhanced capacity to pay child

support independently. As a result, they faced an enormous “cliff effect” when the assurance benefit terminated and responsibility for paying child support reverted back to them.

The one group that did exhibit improved child support payment patterns following their exit from PARENT were clients who successfully completed the program. These clients entered the program with somewhat fewer barriers (higher education and less involvement with the criminal justice system) and higher earnings. They were able to sustain consistent employment and earnings over time and demonstrate significant improvements in child support payment. .

Clients who dropped out, on the other hand, faced more barriers, had less evidence of employment, earned lower amounts, and showed no evidence of improved earnings or child support payments a few quarters after they enrolled although there was a drop in the percentage paying no support.

Child support obligations were most burdensome for those with the lowest levels of reported income where obligations sometimes exceeded reported earnings and payment patterns were the worst. Payment patterns were best for those with more modest child support obligations that consumed approximately 20 to 25 percent of reported earnings.

Of course, without a control group, it is difficult to say how PARENT clients would have fared in the absence of the program. Nevertheless, patterns for PARENT participants are largely consistent with those observed in the evaluation of PFS, which did have a control group and an experimental design and found little evidence of changes in employment, earnings, child support payment patterns or parent-child contact following program participation. These patterns are also consistent with many studies of welfare reform showing that it is extremely difficult to achieve measurable differences in employment behavior and parental functioning among those with many barriers and that the best results are achieved with those who are most motivated. Finally, patterns for PARENT clients track with those observed in several other projects serving low-income, noncustodial parents that show that while child support payment patterns improve (chiefly due to declines in the proportion paying nothing), they remain far from complete and that obligations are frequently too high to be fully paid, especially for parents with the lowest incomes.

PARENT offers a number of lessons for architects of future programs. If the assurance benefit is offered it should be modified to avoid cliff effects. Numerous welfare reform studies conclude that sudden drop-offs in benefits are difficult to manage and tend to lead to regression. In

light of this finding, future programs should taper child support assurance benefits so that clients do not experience complete subsidies at the front end or steep cut-offs at the end of the program.

Another lesson is to introduce more opportunities for wage growth for project participants. Program staff contend that wages in Larimer County are very low except for highly skilled workers and that the program was compromised by the lack of opportunity for wage growth. Although they had hoped that this would be remedied in the second year as a result of a loosening of the Welfare-to-Work eligibility criteria and a grant to the Workforce Center to extend OJT opportunities to clients who fail to meet the DOL's lower-living standard, this failed to happen. Assessments and monitored job-search activities have limited impact on client earnings. Programs that rely on these job services exclusively will face disappointing results.

A third lesson would be for programs to recruit non-paying and partial-paying noncustodial parents who have the potential to become better payers, rather than focus exclusively on extremely disadvantaged parents with many barriers to employment and earnings. Many noncustodial parents need services. Child support enforcement agencies have typically recruited the most disadvantaged parents for fatherhood programs and used conventional enforcement remedies with somewhat less troubled fathers. Rather than relying on punitive enforcement remedies, the child support agency might find it more effective to offer noncustodial parents with modest earnings who fall behind in payment some temporary support and help with getting their finances under control through a program like PARENT. While short-term programs are rarely able to help individuals with severe barriers to employment and earnings, they may produce improvements for those who present less severe dysfunctions and needs.

Finally, future programs should include taking child support actions with participants that may have more lasting effects on obligations, such as modifying child support orders to more realistic levels and exploring arrearage forgiveness in exchange for the regular payment of monthly support. Many studies of low-income, noncustodial parents show that child support order levels are disproportionately high for low-income parents. Indeed, effective January 1, 2003, Colorado guidelines were amended so that parents earning \$850 or less paid \$50 per month and those who earned \$850 to \$1,850 per month were subject to new, low-income adjustment calculations. It remains to be seen whether these new order levels are being used to modify existing orders and/or

whether they better reflect an individual's true ability to pay and translate into improved payment patterns.



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## **APPENDIX A**

Observations of a cycle of PARENT Fatherhood Classes revealed the following highlights about each session:

- **The Importance of Fathers:** After introductions and rapport-building activities, the discussion dealt with fathers as role models, cultural messages about fathers, and consequences of teaching boys not to express their feelings. The video “Fathers and Sons” was shown and discussed in class. Handouts were distributed about fathers and daughters, including the fact that daughters tend to marry men like their fathers, so the father’s role as a model is very important to girls, too.
- **Coping as a Single Father:** For this topic, participants were asked to complete a chart that highlights differences in parent-child relationships for NCPs and custodial parents. Client complaints about mothers who spend child support money on themselves prompted the facilitators to initiate a discussion about the costs of raising children. Fathers also discussed how difficult it is for them to pay the rest of their bills in addition to child support and living expenses, with one father confessing to making ends meet by using food banks. Participants also discussed the “Disneyland Dad Syndrome” and the importance of being involved with children rather than just trying to entertain and indulge them. Participants were given a test to measure how well fathers know their children.
- **Coping With Your Child’s Other Parent and Successful Step-Parenting:** This class began with a video hosted by Dick Van Patton from the step-family sitcom “Eight is Enough.” It was followed with a discussion of rights and responsibilities for step-parents. The general sentiment was that step-parents often have responsibilities but that they have very few rights. Next, the facilitator distributed a quiz on the common myths of blended families. Some of these myths are instant integration, instant affection among all family members, and step-parents replace missing parents.
- **Anger Management:** The focus of this class was on the different ways that men and women manage their anger. Using an anger management scale, the facilitators noted that men tend to react quickly and strongly, while women let their anger build at lower levels for longer lengths of time. Besides gender issues, other sub-topics handled in the session were the physical expression of anger, how to avoid “blowing-up,” positive anger, and anger as a motivator.
- **Stress Management and Depression:** This class covered the topics of stress, physical stress versus mental stress, internal versus external pressures, and positive stress. The facilitators offered suggestions on how to alleviate stress. Next, the discussion moved to a consideration of depression, its pervasiveness in our culture and gender differences. One father started a discussion about the stresses that children experience. The group reviewed a Social Readjustment Scale, which assesses the severity of various stressors, such as death in the family; divorce; major legal problems; money shortages; work issues; and legal problems, such as having your driver’s license taken away. For the last activity, the group took a quiz aimed at distinguishing Type A/Type B personality characteristics.

- **Communication Skills and Maintaining Healthy Relationships:** The class discussion focused on the difficulty that many men face in demonstrating love and expressing emotion. The class then watched the video, “Men are From Mars and Women are From Venus,” hosted by author John Grey, which highlights differences in patterns of communication and behavior for men and women. After the video, the group talked about the importance of being conscious of communication issues and that stereotyping male and female behaviors can be misleading. The session ended with the distribution of a written program evaluation, the results of which were strongly positive and revealed interest in more interactive activities and suggestions for additional classes on financial and legal issues.