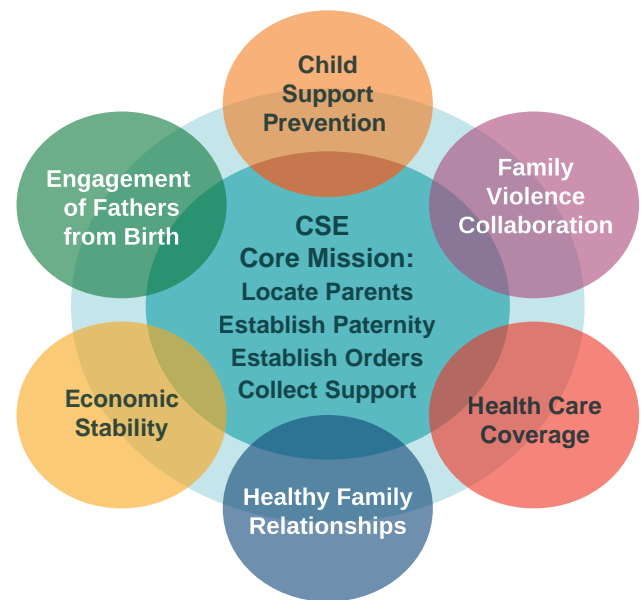


Ending Homelessness Among Veterans: The OCSE-VA-ABA Collaboration Project

The Promoting Child Well-Being & Family Self-Sufficiency Fact Sheet Series discusses how and why the child support program provides innovative services to families across six interrelated areas to assure that parents have the tools and resources they need to support their children and be positively involved in raising them.

This fact sheet focuses on the early implementation of a collaboration among the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Bar Association. The collaboration helps homeless veterans with child support obligations to gain permanent housing.



Over the last decade, the United States military has mobilized more troops than at any time since World War II. Now, many of these service men and women have returned home, and thousands more will follow. Most soldiers transition well to lives back home. However, some have suffered mental and physical wounds that impair their ability to work and maintain family ties. The transition from a life away from families to one where responsibilities now involve young children may be difficult for them. For others, relationships with the other parent have changed or their jobs have gone away.

It is important to recognize the critical role that veterans play as fathers and mothers in helping to support and raise their children. Many veterans are parents, and a significant number are noncustodial parents who do not live with their children, but are an important part of their lives nevertheless. Struggles with unemployment¹ and housing instability, income changes, frequent moves, and the overall stress of military service on family life create unique challenges for service members and veterans that can impact their child support cases.

Homeless veterans report that child support concerns are among their most difficult issues. For example, child support debt can hurt a veteran's credit rating and capability to rent or qualify for housing assistance, as well as obtain employment. A child support order that is not appropriate for the veteran's actual income level can make it difficult to pay for housing expenses.

To address these challenges and support veterans as parents, the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Health and Human Services (HHS), along with the American Bar Association (ABA), have launched a partnership to help homeless veterans gain permanent housing through assistance with modifying child support orders and reducing child support debt. The project also connects veterans with legal services, responsible fatherhood, and community-based programs that offer employment and other supportive services. In addition, the project has created informational resources for veterans, their families, advocates, and service providers.

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How was this partnership formed?

Homelessness is a persistent problem for some veterans.² To better coordinate services for homeless veterans, the VA launched Project CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) in 1994. Project CHALENG is an innovative program that enhances the continuum of care for homeless veterans provided by the local VA and its surrounding community service agencies.³

Homelessness not only affects veterans, but also their families. As part of the 2009 VA CHALENG survey, veterans and their advocates reported a strong need for assistance with child support matters; in fact, it was one of the highest areas of need. Surveyed veterans reported that current support orders, child support arrears, criminal justice fees and fines, consumer debts, and other legal judgments can prevent homeless veterans from finding permanent housing. Many of these obligations were incurred while the veteran was homeless, in a phase of active addiction, or otherwise untreated for a serious mental illness.

The CHALENG survey findings prompted HHS, the VA, and the ABA to partner on this project to work with homeless veterans to address their unresolved child support issues. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), the office within HHS that provides child support services, took the lead.

The OCSE-VA-ABA Collaboration Project began in January 2010 in nine cities recruited as pilot sites: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Diego, Seattle, and the District of Columbia. All sites have the same general framework that incorporates referrals from the VA and other veteran's service organizations, targeted child support strategies, and access to legal services. However, each site has also developed activities that fit the mix of services and resources available in that community as well as the specific needs of the homeless veterans served by that site.

At the end of the first year, project partners in each site summarized their progress and current operating model. The first part of the report reflects comments from the child support agencies in each pilot city participating in the OCSE-VA-ABA collaboration. It describes how sites are working—their successes, challenges, and lessons learned. The second part describes the working model in each site and resources available to other states and tribes related to homeless veterans.

What are the elements of this collaboration?

The nine pilot sites have greatly improved child support services for homeless veterans and positively touched the lives of veterans and their families. But it wasn't easy. The level of coordination and collaboration among the three partners was sometimes complex due to the different missions of each organization and the multiple layers of programs, operations, and regulations that govern each entity.

Early Outcomes

Project partners are working to compile and assess the final outcomes of this collaborative effort. Sites will report on a variety of outcomes such as:

- Client demographics
- Types and amounts of support owed (i.e., arrears only, current)
- Changes to the child support order
- Compliance with the child support order
- Arrearages modified or reduced
- Child visitation agreements established or modified

At this time, combined results from the nine pilot sites show that over 2,000 veterans contacted one or more of the project partners. All sites reported serving significant numbers of Vietnam and Persian Gulf War era veterans. Typically, these older veterans had prior child support debts, which were primarily owed to the state to repay welfare benefits received by their families. Combined these old child support debts were significant—over \$5 million. However, most veterans did not have ongoing current support obligations. The number of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans served was relatively low, although this is expected to increase as more troops come home.

In many of the sites, veterans received some type of assistance from more than one project partner. The partners provided services to over 1,000 veterans and resolved nearly \$800,000 in state-owed child support debt.

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Referral Processes

Every site has a process for referring homeless veterans to the child support agency. Most referrals are sent from either the VA or ABA partner in the pilot site, with the majority initiated by VA staff. Child support agencies also receive referrals directly from legal service programs and other ABA project designees. When the child support agency or the veteran's advocate determines that legal representation is needed, the veteran is referred to the ABA partner.⁴

Not all veterans served are referred from the VA or ABA. Homeless veterans enter the program through various points, including non-profits and community resources that shelter homeless veterans. These multiple points of entry can make it difficult for partners to predict the level of resources needed. Both the number of potential cases and the intensity of intervention required have fluctuated within each site.

Outreach

Project partners are in constant communication. They review efforts and develop ways to collaborate effectively to assist veterans who have identified themselves as homeless and needing child support assistance. This ongoing interaction creates opportunities for child support agencies to participate in veteran outreach events to identify and refer veterans for legal assistance and to develop materials and other ideas to assist veterans with their child support issues.

Child support outreach efforts help address the partners' lack of information and misconceptions about program services to noncustodial parents. Child support agencies conduct training to both VA and ABA staff to enhance their understanding of the program's process and to highlight the common goals shared among the partners to assist veterans, such as access to supportive services, modification of existing child support orders, and receipt of consistent family support. This training spurred the creation of a decision tree tool by one VA site to identify veterans with child support issues. The training sessions also help legal staff with limited experience in child support to gain a better understanding of the program.

Child support agencies also focus outreach efforts directly to veterans at Stand Downs and Operation Yellow Ribbon events. These events offer veterans the opportunity to seek assistance for many health, social, and family issues, including child support.

At some events, child support agencies provide one-on-one sessions with veterans to answer case specific questions, offer advice and research case information. Response to this type of outreach has been so successful that a few child support agencies are considering establishing and coordinating child support courts that would take place at Stand Down events.

VA hospitals, community agencies,⁵ and transitional living shelters also host child support outreach events. Plans are underway to coordinate larger veteran outreach efforts where several child support agency workers can interview the veterans, release driver's licenses that have been suspended for nonpayment of support, and negotiate arrears payments. Other ideas include the co-location of a child support agency representative in a live-in rehabilitation center for homeless veterans.

Creating *pro se* legal assistance clinics is another outcome of collaboration among project partners. Clinics are staffed with volunteer attorneys, student lawyers, veterans service officers, social workers, and representatives from each of the other entities attending and assisting with the clinics. New project sites are also emerging at state and local veterans service organizations that serve homeless veterans, while existing relationships with the compensated work therapy programs are attracting participation of more VA facilities.

Dedicated Staff

Project work is staff-intensive for child support agencies because of the manual effort required to address the complex and time-intensive challenges facing veterans with child support, housing, and other substantive issues. This is particularly true in cases where the veteran may not have access to a support network that can assist with obtaining the necessary case information to proceed.

Since child support agencies, like the other project partners, have experienced recent staffing and resource reductions, consistent communication between agencies about referred cases is affected. Participating child support agencies have lost dedicated full-time staff to this project. Because of the staff shortage, the intake and referral processes can be lengthy, and not all staff have the skills and training required to work with the complex issues faced by homeless veterans.

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Programmatic and Caseload Complexity

The complexity of both the child support program and the VA program—and the scope of challenges faced by homeless veterans—make it difficult for each partner to know everything needed in order to provide successful service. For example, a lack of accurate information regarding the statutes and regulations that govern child support programs means that partner agencies may not always understand what a child support agency can and cannot do to help a veteran. Similarly, child support staff can have knowledge gaps about the specific workings of the VA or the VA programs or personnel. The disparate resources among sites and the project partners also play a role in the disposition of these cases.

Interstate Cases

The project sites reported that many of the referred veterans have interstate child support cases, but do not know where their case resides, making it difficult for the agencies to provide services. Federal partners are working to help sites develop a broader network of persons and agencies in other sites and jurisdictions that can help in resolving interstate child support cases. Many homeless veterans do not have access to transportation, have very limited resources, or may have psycho-social barriers that prohibit them from traveling to other locations to obtain and sign paperwork or appear in matters involving their cases. Child support agencies hope to facilitate communication in intergovernmental cases, for example where the other parent lives in a different state or on a tribal reservation.

What are some of the early implementation lessons?

Collaborations that have shown the most success in many instances are partnerships with veteran organizations that can provide an array of supportive services to veterans to help them with the complex set of issues that they face.

- It is beneficial to have a child support veteran or military liaison or advocate with military experience so that the staff person has a full understanding of not only child support, but also of the military, and can navigate in both worlds.
 - Debt management programs can be an effective tool in reducing the amount of arrears owed. In some cases, large amounts of arrears owed to the state to repay cash assistance have been compromised or forgiven, as well as state-owed interest and penalties in cases where some type of payment agreement has been reached between the child support agency and a veteran.
 - Child support orders also have been modified in some cases to reflect a veteran's actual ability to pay in light of the current economic situation that the veteran is facing.
 - Many of the cases referred to the project partners have an interstate component. In most cases, the "other state" is not part of this project, and project partners have had difficulty locating the necessary resources in the "other state," especially related to legal matters.
 - Because the cases are so complex, it can be a challenge to provide services with the existing resources available to project partners, including staff with subject matter expertise.
 - Project partners share a goal of helping homeless veterans manage their child support obligations. However, differences arise on how to achieve this goal. Organizations may differ in the way they balance safeguarding due process, protecting the financial benefit of those who have served, and ensuring that noncustodial parents are responsible and providing a stable source of income for their children.
- State veteran services organizations can be useful in establishing outreach and service strategies. Certain state veteran's organizations offer their own financial assistance to veterans that are a potential source of partnerships for child support. In exchange for paying a portion of their non-garnishable benefit, the child support agency exempts the veteran from certain enforcement measures like license suspension or bank levies. This type of agreement can allow a veteran to continue working and make consistent payments.

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Individual Site Models

Atlanta

Collaboration partners: Georgia Department of Child Support Services; Department of Veterans Affairs; Georgia Law Center (GLC).

The process model: The VA staff screen and assess applicants for referral to the Georgia East Point Child Support Services office for Fatherhood Program services and/or legal services (GA Law Center). The child support office houses two Georgia fatherhood agents and one paralegal from the Georgia Law Center. The Georgia fatherhood agents handle VA referrals twice a month for four work hours. Fatherhood agents address educational and employment needs, parenting/life skills, case management, and reviews and modifications. The paralegal (GA Law Center representative) handles referrals once a month for four work hours. The paralegal addresses legal issues that cannot be handled by the child support office (i.e., paternity issues and contempt actions).

Baltimore

Collaboration partners: Baltimore County Child Support Enforcement Agency; Baltimore City Office of Child Support Enforcement; Department of Veterans Affairs; The Baltimore County courts; Department of Social Services; Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP).

The process model: The VA staff initiates the referrals to the Baltimore County child support office. If the child support agency can assist the veteran with concerns noted on the referral sheet, the agency proceeds accordingly. If legal representation is needed, the child support office makes the referral to the HPRP. While the intent of the project is to focus on Baltimore City, project responsibility has been assigned to Baltimore County during reevaluation of the city's child support services contract. Baltimore City makes the appropriate referrals.

Boston

Collaboration partners: Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Child Support Enforcement Division; Department of Veterans Affairs, Compensated Work Therapy Programs (VA-CWT) in Bedford, West Roxbury, Northampton, MA; Massachusetts Department of Veterans Services; Shelter Legal Services; Volunteer Lawyers Project.

The process model: The Massachusetts child support agency continues to market its already successful collaboration with VA-CWT in the area and is trying to expand into other facilities. This model is described in DCL-05-24. Additionally, in August 2011, the child support agency launched a pilot program with local Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) in a select group of towns to collect a portion of a monthly stipend paid to needy veterans who are often homeless. In exchange for the payments, the child support agency agrees to suspend enforcement, allows the veteran to keep up to \$2,500 in a bank account, and can restore licenses revoked or suspended due to nonpayment of support.

Chicago

Collaboration partners: Illinois Office of Child Support; Illinois Attorney General's Office; Department of Veterans Affairs; John Marshall School of Law.

The process model: The Illinois child support agency has been conducting outreach to two VA hospitals and one VA outpatient treatment program. The child support program completed on-site visits and communicated with its project partners via e-mail and fax. The project relies on the VA sites to develop the referrals to the child support agency for a review of the veteran's child support case and issues. Cases that involve custody issues are referred to the John Marshall Law School Clinic.

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Los Angeles

Collaboration partners: Los Angeles County Child Support Services; Department of Veterans Affairs; ABA (Public Counsel); Homeless Coalition (Corp. for Supportive Housing).

The process model: Los Angeles County is conducting outreach to homeless veterans at Stand Down events and is co-located at a veteran's treatment facility with the Public Counsel (pro bono law firm) and a private attorney. Los Angeles is working on resolving veterans' requests for California's Compromise of Arrears Program (COAP) approvals and payment plans. The county is attempting to coordinate a larger veteran outreach where several child support officers can interview the veterans, release suspended licenses, and negotiate arrears payments. They are also hoping to coordinate a child support court for Stand Down events.

Minneapolis

Collaboration partners: Child Support Offices in Hennepin County, Ramsey County and Minnesota Department of Human Services; Minneapolis VA Hospital; Hennepin County Veteran's Service Office; Minnesota Justice Organization (MJO); Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV).

The process model: The project partners meet quarterly to review efforts and brainstorm on ways to collaborate effectively to assist veterans who have identified themselves as homeless and in need of assistance with child support issues. As a result, eight *pro se* legal assistance clinics were created, with six more scheduled. MJO and MACV are the primary sponsors of these clinics with volunteer attorneys, student lawyers, veterans service officers, social workers, and representatives from each of the other entities attending and assisting with the clinics. Three of these clinics have been held on-site at the VA Hospital. Hennepin County child support agency conducted training to VA staff for a better understanding of the child support process and system. VA staff created a decision tree tool to identify veterans with child support issues.

San Diego

Collaboration partners: San Diego Office of Child Support; Department of Veterans Affairs; Thomas Jefferson (TJ) Law School; Veteran Village of San Diego.

The process model: The San Diego child support agency conducted outreach to the Department of Veteran Affairs by presenting a workshop entitled Child Support 101. San Diego also developed an intake form for veterans with child support issues who attended Stand Down events. Veteran's Village makes referrals to Thomas Jefferson School of Law legal clinic. Veterans' cases are handled by law students, who are supervised by a law professor. The student attorneys represent the veteran and work with the local child support office, requesting documents from the child support agency and appearing in court on behalf of the noncustodial parent.

Seattle

Collaboration partners: Washington Division of Child Support; Department of Veterans Affairs; American Bar Association, Northwest Justice Project (NWJP); Union Gospel Mission, Homeless Shelter.

The process model: The VA point person ensures the case managers at various VA programs, especially transitional housing sites, are aware of the project, identify veterans who could benefit from the pilot, and refer clients for services.

The ABA is the primary point of contact once a veteran is identified. Referrals are made to an ABA volunteer coordinator for intake and referral to an assigned legal services volunteer. The veterans' issues are assessed and coordination is made with the local child support office, as needed. As a key ABA partner, the NWJP secured an AmeriCorps grant to hire an attorney to focus on veteran issues.

Dedicated child support staff in the Seattle office field inquiries from ABA volunteers, provide information about the client's child support issues, and suggest potential ways of resolving them. Staff also attend numerous community outreach events, and with on-site computer access to case-specific data, they provide real-time assistance at the events. The state child support office has designated liaisons, which allows the VA social worker or ABA staff member working with a veteran to have one dedicated point person to contact to learn more about the status of the veteran's child support case. Each local child support office now also has a designated veteran's outreach point person.

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District of Columbia

Collaboration partners: District of Columbia's Child Support Services Division; Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia (LAS); Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (WLCH); Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC).

The process model: The goals of the VA and the child support office are to enhance services to veterans who are noncustodial parents with child support obligations. VA staff are responsible for connecting the child support office to veterans or service providers who provide services to veterans. Child support staff disseminate information to veterans about services, programs, and procedures. Legal services attorneys assist veterans with legal matters such as child support, housing, and benefits.

Legal Aid refers veterans for numerous services including advice and representation on family law issues (child support, divorce and/or custody); initiation of requests for modification of interstate orders; initiation of requests for reinstatement of a driver's licenses; referral of veterans to pro bono attorneys; and referrals to legal providers in other states for veterans with out-of-state issues.

The VAMC has set up several outreach events for the project, identified and referred veterans for legal aid, and scheduled bi-monthly meetings to assess progress. Child support staff provide veterans with information at all outreach events. They also offer one-on-one sessions with veterans to answer individual questions.

Resources for Assisting Homeless Veterans

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

www.nchv.org

Department of Veterans Affairs

www.va.gov/HOMELESS/

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

www.usich.gov

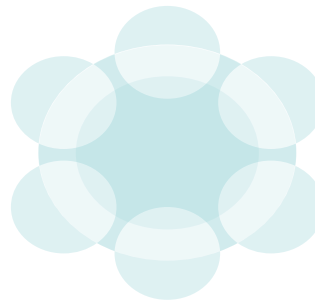
The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement's monthly online newsletter, *Child Support Report*:

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2010/csr/csr1011.pdf

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2010/csr/csr1001.pdf

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2009/csr/csr0906.pdf

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References

- ^{1.} In September, 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was 12.4 percent in July, up from 11.8 percent in July 2010.
- ^{2.} More than 10,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are homeless or in programs aimed to keep them off the streets, a number that has doubled three times since 2006 according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- ^{3.} The specific legislative requirements relating to Project CHALENG are that local VA medical center and regional office directors:
 - assess the needs of homeless veterans living in the area
 - make the assessment in coordination with representatives from state and local governments, appropriate federal departments and agencies, and non-governmental community organizations that serve the homeless population
 - identify the needs of homeless veterans with a focus on health care, education and training, employment, shelter, counseling, and outreach
 - assess the extent to which homeless veterans' needs are being met
 - develop a list of all homeless services in the local area
 - encourage the development of coordinated services
 - take action to meet the needs of homeless veterans
 - inform homeless veterans of non-VA resources that are available in the community to meet their need
- ^{4.} In some sites, attorneys provide a variety of legal services, including advice and representation on family law issues (child support, divorce, or custody); initiating a request for modification of an interstate order; and initiating a request to reinstate a driver's licenses. In other sites, law students represented the veterans, working with the local child support office to obtain documents and appearing in court on behalf of the noncustodial parent.
- ^{5.} VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program is offered annually (as funding permits) by the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Programs to fund community agencies providing services to homeless veterans. The purpose is to promote the development and provision of supportive housing and/or supportive services with the goal of helping homeless veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and/or income, and obtain greater self-determination.
www.va.gov/homeless/GPD.asp

