



The Child Support Connection: Giving Children a Brighter Future

The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
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On October 20, 2011, HRA's Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), in conjunction with the CUNY School of Professional Studies and The Future of Children project, a collaboration of Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, co-sponsored a conference titled, "The Child Support Connection: Giving Children a Brighter Future". HRA Commissioner Robert Doar welcomed participants and emphasized that the goal of the conference was to stimulate discussion and ideas among a diverse group of professionals about how the child support program can continue to achieve its mission of promoting child well-being by ensuring that children receive financial support from both parents.

Opening remarks were given by Vicki Turetsky, Federal OCSE Commissioner, and Frances Pardus-Abbadessa, HRA OCSE Executive Deputy Commissioner. The keynote address was provided by Professor Hillard Pouncy, Lecturer on Social Policy at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. There were three breakout discussion sessions: Why Child Support Matters: Connecting Families to the Child Support Program; Employment and Incarceration; and Linking Child Support to Workforce Programs. Participants in the breakout sessions were asked to identify recommendations that both policymakers and practitioners could consider implementing to help expand the number of families receiving child support. Following the breakout sessions, an expert roundtable weighed-in on the recommendations which included Commissioners Doar and Turetsky, Larry Mead, Professor at New York University, and Liberty Aldrich, Director of Domestic Violence and Family Court Programs at the Center for Court Innovation.

The event was attended by 175 people, including program administrators, policymakers, academics, and advocates. It continued a very important dialogue on new ways to engage more families in the child support program, as well as strategies for helping low-income non-custodial parents (NCPs) obtain employment, establish financial stability, and fulfill their child support obligations. The following is a synopsis of the full-day event.

In addition, the full conference agenda and speaker PowerPoint presentations may be downloaded at:

http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/child_support_reports/child_support_connection_2011.pdf



Opening Remarks

Vicki Turetsky, OCSE Commissioner, U.S. Administration for Children and Families
Frances Pardus-Abbadessa, HRA OCSE Executive Deputy Commissioner

Federal OCSE Commissioner Vicki Turetsky began her remarks by emphasizing the need to reintroduce and reorient the child support program, so that it can better connect to a broader social services delivery network. New York City's child support program and approach to inter-agency collaboration serves as a national model and honors the role that Congress intended for the program, which is for families to collect child support dollars, but to do so in a way that is informed by research, the circumstances of the families served, and the diversity of the families on the caseload.



Vicki Turetsky

President Obama's Responsible Fatherhood Initiative takes a similar approach and includes a three-part strategy of: (1) community engagement, (2) cross-department collaboration, and (3) policy changes that recognize the critical role that both parents play in raising children, as well as help fathers to be there and stay there for their children. The child support program is about work and families, and straddles those two perspectives. The federal OCSE is a key partner in the U.S. Department of Labor Transitional Jobs Initiative, the Department of Justice Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative, the Department of Veterans Affairs Homeless Veterans Initiative, and the Administration for Children and Families Asset Building Initiative.

The President's 2012 Budget proposes significant policy changes for child support. If passed by Congress, the statutory purposes of the child support program would change to greater reflect the need to assist NCPs by increasing their ability to provide regular child support payments by having stable, reliable jobs. In addition, the federal OCSE plans to change its name in 2012 to the Office of Child Support Programs to reflect this shift in emphasis, as several states across the country have already done. The budget proposals also include additional authority and incentives to states to get out of the welfare cost recovery business by instead distributing all collections directly to families.

Other child support proposals in the President's 2012 Budget include the following:

- State option to eliminate assignment of child support rights for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) applicants altogether;
- State requirement that child support collected for children in foster care be used in the child's best interest, such as putting the money into a trust account until the time that s/he leaves foster care;
- State requirement to have procedures in place to reduce child support debt that is owed to the state;
- Prohibition on state laws that equate incarceration with voluntary unemployment, which prevents reducing a child support order when a parent goes to prison (New York has taken important steps in this area);
- State requirement that courts would have to address the issue of parenting time at the same time that an initial court support order is entered for parents who have never been married and lack a divorce decree; and
- State requirement to offer some set of services related to mediation to develop parenting plans, co-parenting education, domestic violence services, and similar types of wrap-around services.

Commissioner Turetsky has travelled to 40 states in the last two years to talk with attorneys, judges, case workers, and parents about the child support program's new family-centered direction. And, even though states currently face

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significant budget cuts, consensus exists in moving the program in this direction. In fact, many states have actually been heading in this direction for a while.

States have also been making progress in implementing three other key policy changes:

- 1. Debt Compromise/Reduction Policies** – As of September 2011, 44 states and the District of Columbia have policies in place at either a state and/or local level to compromise child support debt that is owed to the state.
- 2. Programs to Ensure that Child Support Orders Reflect Current Earnings** – As of September 2011, at least 21 states and the District of Columbia operate at least 35 programs at either a state and/or local level designed to ensure that child support orders reflect current earnings at establishment and are modified when earnings change.
- 3. Work-Oriented Programs for NCPs with Active Child Support Agency Involvement** – As of September 2011, at least 28 states and the District of Columbia operate at least 38 work-oriented programs for NCPs with active child support agency involvement. Some of these programs are statewide, but most of them are not.



Frances Pardus-Abbadessa

While many of these began as small pilot projects and initiatives, child support programs have begun to institutionalize policies and practices based on research and experience, as well as provide resources to support them -- something which should create genuine and lasting change for children and families.

Following Commissioner Turetsky's remarks, HRA OCSE Executive Deputy Commissioner Frances Pardus-Abbadessa provided an overview of the child support program in New York City. The child support program ensures that children receive financial and medical support from both parents. It ensures that paternity is established and that the cost for raising a child is shared by both parents, which when combined with other work supports such as Food Stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit, assist in reducing child poverty. Children benefit when dads are in their lives, as well as when mothers receive regular and consistent payments which help them to plan and budget their money.

New York City's child support program is jointly funded by the federal, state, and county governments under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act. In New York State, the child support program is state supervised and locally administered, and child support orders are set by the court. HRA OCSE locates NCPs, establishes child support orders, collects child support payments, distributes payments to custodial parents, and enforces child support orders both administratively and judicially. New York City's child support program serves about 405,000 families and approximately 70% of those families have orders established. Nearly half (47%) of the families that OCSE serves have received cash assistance in the past, 17% currently receive cash assistance, and 36% have never received cash assistance.

The Executive Deputy Commissioner also highlighted several key statistics related to New York City's child support program:

- Despite a weak economy, child support collections continue to increase -- from \$477.1 million collected in 2001 to \$699.9 million collected in 2010 – with about 91% of the money going directly to families;
- About 75% of child support collections come from wage garnishments from employers;

- The average number of NCPs paying child support each month continues to increase – from 114,270 in 2007 to 124,880 in 2010; and
- Despite the effectiveness of the child support programs, many low-income, single-parent families who could benefit do not have a child support order in place, with a significant number not even connected to the program. Of all New York City children in single-parent families with incomes of 150% of the poverty level, approximately 25% (110,284) have a child support order in place; another 40% (175,700) of these children are known to OCSE, but do not have an order in place; and another 35% (154,038) are not connected to the formal child support system.

New York State also provides safeguards for low-income NCPs. While these safeguards are robust, they require NCPs to show up at all of their court hearings, or else the safeguards cannot be applied. These safeguards include establishing minimum orders (\$0-\$25 per month) for NCPs living at or below the federal poverty level (annual incomes of \$10,830 or less); and capping arrears at \$500 in these situations. In addition to protections for those living below poverty level, a Self Support Reserve (SSR) has been established, which is the minimum income level at which a person can be considered self-sufficient. Currently, the SSR is \$14,620 annually. If an NCP's earnings are at or below the SSR, a minimum order of \$50 per month will be established for that person. In addition, New York State recently passed a law that allows incarcerated NCPs to petition the court for a modification of their orders while they are in prison.

The Executive Deputy Commissioner described the reasons why NCPs may have high orders and arrears, and offered some preventive actions that they can take, including:

- Show up to all court hearings, and read and respond to all mail;
- Bring financial documentation showing actual income and expenses;
- Pay immediately, since child support obligations start the date the petition is filed; do not wait for your employer to make payments on your behalf via wage garnishment, but make them yourself until your income garnishment is in place;
- File for the earned income tax credit (EITC), which is available to NCPs who pay a current support order and earn below \$30,000 a year; and
- Return to court on a timely basis when circumstances change, such as a job loss or new employer, disability, address change, parents reconcile, or the child emancipates.

OCSE's Customer Service Unit offers programs to help NCPs meet their child support obligation, including the Modified DSS Order (MDO), Arrears Cap Program, and Arrears Credit Program. Under the Arrears Cap program, 748 NCPs have had their DSS arrears reduced by over \$7.5 million, which resulted in an increased number of NCPs paying child support, from 40% to 61%. Under the Arrears Credit Program, NCPs with arrears owed to the government may have them reduced by \$15,000 over three years in exchange for paying their monthly child support obligation -- currently 20 NCPs are participating in this program.

To assist NCPs who are unemployed, OCSE administers the Support Through Employment Program (STEP), a court-mandated or voluntary program that helps NCPs with job skills development and job placement by referring them to an HRA Back to Work vendor (there are seven vendors in total). Approximately 500 NCPs are referred from court to STEP each month. In FY 2011, all NCPs that have been referred to STEP since 2002 (the year the program began) paid \$27.8 million in child support, up from \$22.1 million in FY 2010.

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In addition, OCSE has a number of other initiatives targeted toward NCPs, including:

- A program on Rikers Island where staff are on-site one day per week to meet with inmates and discuss their child support case, as well as conduct workshops on child support;
- Programs that offer parents access to free or low-cost mediation for such issues as custody and visitation;
- The Problem Solving Court Pilot, a partnership between the Brooklyn Family Court, the Center for Court Innovation, F.E.G.S. (an HRA Back to Work vendor), and OCSE, that serves non-cash assistance cases in Brooklyn where the NCP is in violation. NCPs referred to the program receive a service plan that includes employment services, financial counseling, parent education, and individualized services, and they must appear weekly until they are in compliance;
- The Cash Assistance Agreement Pilot, an initiative to administratively establish child support orders for families who receive cash assistance. The program allows parents (in Manhattan) to sign a child support agreement outside of Family Court at OCSE's Customer Service Center. This agreement is then sent to court to be formally converted into a child support order; and
- Partnerships with other agencies, including the NYC Departments of Corrections, Homeless Services, Probation, Education, and Health.

Child Support in the Context of Fragile Families: A Review and Reassessment

Irwin Garfinkel, Professor, Columbia University and Lenna Nepomnyaschy, Assistant Professor, Rutgers University

A “fragile family” refers to a family in which a child is born to unmarried parents, a trend that has dramatically increased for all ethnic groups since 1960. These families are defined as fragile, because they are at greater risk of breaking up and living in poverty than more traditional families. The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study has been underway for 10 years and was designed to learn more about the nature of the relationships between unmarried parents, how the children of unmarried parents fare, and the impact of government policies on these families. More information about the study and its publications may be found at: www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu.



Irwin Garfinkel

In order to get a nationally representative sample, researchers studied approximately 4,000 children born to unmarried parents in 20 large U.S. cities (cities with populations of over 200,000) between 1998 and 2000. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed at the time of birth, as well as when the child was one, three, five, and nine years old.

A few of the lessons for child support enforcement include:

- A big gap exists between payment potential and actual payments. This gap is primarily attributable to upper-income versus lower-income fathers as well as the failure to increase child support orders when NCPs begin earning a higher income, rather than the failure of child support agencies to collect;
- The ability of fathers in Fragile Families to pay is even less than previously thought due to multiple partner fertility, and fathers’ low and irregular earnings; and
- A state’s commitment to paternity establishment is associated with not only more paternities being established, but also more formal and informal payments to the families, as well as a higher proportion of fathers having an overnight visit with the child.

Some of the study’s key findings to date include the following:

- Non-resident fathers in Fragile Families have tremendous barriers to paying regular child support:
 - 70% have been in jail;
 - 70% have children with other mothers; and
 - Only 55% were working.
- Nonetheless, fatherhood involvement – both financial and physical – is substantial:
 - 30% are paying formally and/or informally;
 - 50% are contributing in-kind; and
 - 50% saw their children in the past month.



Lenna Nepomnyaschy

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However, this involvement drops off substantially after five years.

Based on its results to date, the Fragile Families study offers the following recommendations and considerations for policies and programs:

- Consider the barriers of the fathers, such as multiple partner fertility, low levels of work and education, and high rates of incarceration;
- Consider the informal and in-kind support also provided by fathers (e.g., toys, food, medicine, clothing);
- Support fathers' commitment to being involved with their children;
- As children age, consider the increasingly important role that child support plays in their lives;
- Redirect the focus of the child support program away from law enforcement/welfare cost recovery toward social welfare services for children and their families; and
- Create an assured child support benefit in order to substantially reduce poverty and insecurity -- enforcement of private support alone is not enough.

Keynote Address

Professor Hillard Pouncy, Lecturer on Social Policy at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

Professor Hillard Pouncy began his address by describing the change that is taking place across America with respect to father involvement. He said that it mirrors the changing patterns that are occurring in family formation, with an increase in both cohabitation without marriage and non-resident family formation. He stated that child support enforcement would be this decade's critical policy laboratory, in much the same way that welfare reform was in the 1990s. Professor Pouncy said that as we learn more about father involvement, there are practitioners who are eager to apply this knowledge. He said that one of the key issues for practitioners is: During the time that you are providing workforce development services to NCPs, how do you help fathers to conduct themselves until a job comes along? Professor Pouncy responded by saying, "You don't go underground, you don't let your arrears pile up, and you take advantage of what Fran and her staff are doing here in New York. Many of the practitioners that I talk with say that if we can just get the fathers involved, then we have a thread to help say that we can make it worth your while to engage with this system."



Hillard Pouncy

In order to understand patterns of father involvement better, Professor Pouncy looked at father involvement through four distinct categories: (1) high involvement and stable over time, (2) low involvement and stable over time, (3) high involvement and decreasing over time, and (4) low involvement and increasing over time. About 7 in 10 fathers had a stable level of involvement over time, with slightly more having a high-stable level of involvement, versus those with a low-stable level of involvement (38% vs. 32%). Among fathers who had a changing level of involvement, the percentage of fathers in the high-decreasing category was greater than the percentage in the low-increasing category (23% vs. 8%). However, it was still notable that 8% of fathers began with little involvement and increased this over time.

Breakout Sessions and Recommendations

During each breakout session, participants heard from both practitioners and researchers on specific child support topics and promising program approaches related to those topics. Participants were then asked to identify three key policy or program recommendations that address the topics covered in the sessions.

Breakout Session I: Why Child Support Matters: Connecting Families to the Child Support Program

(Moderator: Lauren Moore Case, Future of Children; Practitioner: Mark Kleiman, Community Mediation Services, Inc.; and Research Presenters: Maureen Waller, Cornell University and James McHale, University of South Florida - St. Petersburg)

Studies have shown the positive impact that child support has on families, in many cases serving as a catalyst for reducing child poverty. One of the challenges that HRA OCSE faces is encouraging more families to participate in the child support program and establish formal orders.

This breakout session explored some of the ways in which more families can connect to the child support program through access and visitation, as well as responsible fatherhood programs. Presenters explained that these strategies are now more commonly referred to as “co-parenting”, or approaches to how adults work together to socialize, care for, and raise children for whom they share responsibility.

Having reviewed several studies and evaluations of co-parenting programs, the presenters drew the following general conclusions:

- Access and visitation programs improved both the level of contact that fathers had with their children, as well as the regularity of their child support payments;
- Fathers were more involved when they and their child’s mother create cooperative co-parenting relationships, and children show better socio-emotional outcomes when their parents form positive co-parenting alliances;
- Access and visitation, as well as responsible fatherhood program evaluations, indicated that “trust of child support enforcement agencies” was an issue for NCPs;
- Unmarried mothers and fathers were concerned that participating in child support enforcement would increase conflict in their co-parenting relationships; and
- Co-parenting alliances did evolve during the infant and toddler years in fragile families, even when there was no sustained romantic involvement, so long as the adults remained on reasonably good terms.

Some of the newer models of co-parenting programs, which are more directly designed to support low-income fragile families, include:

- Engaging couples in groups to enhance father involvement with young children;
- Engaging parents to enhance awareness of father involvement and shared parenting;



Lauren Moore Case

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- Engaging young adult fathers in groups to help create co-parenting awareness and skills;
- Engaging unmarried teen parents in couples counseling to create a co-parenting alliance together; and
- A community-based co-parenting court.

Recommendations:

- *Consider and develop strategies for ways that the child support program can look at families in a more holistic manner.*
- *Develop more comprehensive partnerships with CBOs that provide services to parents and families at the early stages of their child's development (e.g., during age zero to 18 months), and use these opportunities to connect parents to the more formal child support system.*
- *Address child support and custody/visitation issues simultaneously in Family Court, as well as provide programs that assist parents with parenting skills and conflict resolution.*

Breakout Session II: Employment and Incarceration

(Moderator: Valentina Duque, Columbia University; Practitioners: George T. McDonald, The Doe Fund and Kathleen Coughlin, NYC Department of Probation; and Research Presenter: Amanda Geller, Columbia University)

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 1.5 million people in the U.S. were incarcerated in either a state or federal prison in 2008, and over half (53%) of these individuals were parents. In New York City, approximately 27,000 people are currently on probation -- 25,000 of them are age 16 or older (7,500 of these are between the ages of 16 and 24) and 84% are men. Many NCPs who are involved with the criminal justice system have difficulty obtaining employment and successfully paying their child support orders. However, having a positive relationship with one's family, securing employment, and reintegrating into one's community reduces the likelihood of recidivism.



Valentina Duque

This breakout session explored a range of approaches to helping NCPs who have been involved with the criminal justice system to connect to employment, while also assisting them with their child support orders. These included the NYC Department of Probation's child support and employment-focused initiatives, as well as The Doe Fund's *Ready, Willing & Able* transitional work program.

Kathleen Coughlin with the NYC Department of Probation said that the agency carries out its mission of "supervising people on probation and fostering opportunities for them to move out of the criminal justice system through meaningful education, employment, health services, family engagement, and community participation" through a number of different strategies. These include:

- Administering risk/needs assessments to structure Individual Achievement Plans that are developed and monitored with clients;
- Collaborating with government and community partners, including: HRA for child support data matching and follow-up services for child support orders; CBOs for parenting and other services; and the Citywide Fatherhood Initiative.

- Using graduated rewards and sanctions, including early discharge from Probation;
- Focusing on intrinsic, as well as external motivation;
- Collecting data on what is working and with whom; and
- Continuing to work with researchers to explore evidence for additional opportunities.

George McDonald, Founder and President of The Doe Fund, said that over 75% of the homeless men who enter his *Ready, Willing & Able* program have a history of incarceration. *RWA* is a holistic, residential, work, and job skills training program which helps homeless individuals to become self-sufficient, contributing members of society. Since its inception, *RWA* has helped more than 4,500 men and women become drug-free, secure full-time employment, and obtain their own self-supported housing. Upon entering the *RWA* program, participants immediately give up any entitlements and receive a \$15 per week stipend, along with a clean, comfortable bed and all of their meals. For one month, participants spend four hours a day in an orientation program, where they learn about the operation, security, and maintenance of the program facility under the close supervision of the case management staff. After the one-month orientation, participants engage in paid work projects such as street cleaning, pest control, energy efficient building maintenance, security, culinary arts, business support, and others. They are paid \$7.40 - \$8.15 per hour, and invest in their future by saving an average of \$33 per week. Upon graduation from the program, their accumulated savings is returned to them and they also earn a \$1,000 grant from The Doe Fund, which is paid in \$200 installments upon confirmation of continued employment, housing, and sobriety.

Recommendations:

- *Incentivize the placement of formerly incarcerated NCPs into employment for both employers and workforce development agencies.*
- *Modify and suspend child support orders during incarceration or immediately upon release.*
- *Develop broader and more enhanced public education on formal child support policy and parental rights.*

Breakout Session III: Linking Child Support to Workforce Programs

(Moderator: Rae Linefsky, Consultant; Practitioner: Virginia Cruickshank, F.E.G.S.; and Research Presenters: Elaine Sorensen, The Urban Institute and James Riccio, MDRC)



Rae Linefsky

The child support program works well for families in which the NCP is steadily employed, but it is less effective for families in which the NCP has little or no reported earnings, and potentially high child support arrears. This breakout session explored some of the ways in which workforce programs and the child support program can work together to connect low-income fathers to employment.

Elaine Sorensen of the Urban Institute described how a work-oriented child support demonstration program which operated from 2006-2009 in five New York State locations (including two in New York City) resulted in a 22% increase in wages for program participants compared with non-participants, as well as a 38% increase in child support payments by program participants compared with non-participants.

She said that the New York State demonstration, as well as other successful employment-focused child support demonstration programs that she has studied, typically incorporate the following key program elements:

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- Successful recruitment strategies, such as court referrals, internal program referrals, television advertising, and community outreach;
- A case management model, where each participant is assigned a case manager who works with that participant throughout their involvement with the program;
- Job developers and job placements, as well as skills training (if necessary); job search services and job readiness training alone are not enough to achieve positive employment outcomes;
- A child support advocate for NCPs to help them navigate the systems for re-instating drivers' licenses, modifying orders, obtaining custody, and understanding visitation rights;
- A fatherhood/parenting curriculum, especially if taught in an interactive peer support format with trained facilitators; and
- Incentives, such as transportation assistance, dinners, state-owed debt forgiveness for obtaining the first job, and financial incentives for attaining employment and retention milestones.

Recommendations:

- *Better incorporate child support and fatherhood development services into the workforce program delivery model, as well as keep a focus on job retention.*
- *Given the success of OCSE's Child Support Specialists in HRA's Back to Work Program, OCSE should consider ways to integrate the program design into other workforce development or community-based programs.*
- *Consider changing the name of the "Child Support Specialist" to reduce the intimidation or anxiety that NCPs might feel based on their perception of the child support program. Changing the name might offer more opportunities for engagement.*

Roundtable: Reactions and Recommendations

Moderator: Robert Doar, Commissioner, NYC HRA; Panelists: Vicki Turetsky, Commissioner, Office of Child Support Enforcement, U.S. Administration for Children and Families; Larry Mead, Professor, New York University; and Liberty Aldrich, Director of Domestic Violence and Family Court Programs at the Center for Court Innovation

An expert roundtable provided reactions to the recommendations that were developed by conference participants during the breakout sessions.

NYU Professor Larry Mead began the discussion by stating his observation that the child support field's tendency to focus on micro-level details often detracts from its ability to see a larger vision for the program. For example, supporting fathers and promoting their employment should be a central goal of the system, equal to supporting families. These goals are not in conflict with one another and by helping fathers to work at more sustained levels, collections and support to families would increase. One way to do this is to create mandatory work programs, similar to welfare reform's wage subsidy and transitional jobs programs, as part of the routine child support process. In addition, he explained that the role of the judges is very important and suggested that they be better integrated into the child support enforcement process and work focus so that the program can serve a much higher proportion of men who need that level of oversight. Child support payments,



Robert Doar

therefore, would be increased through a public subsidy that would be earned through work and then passed on to the families, helping both families and fathers simultaneously.

Liberty Aldrich, Director of Domestic Violence and Family Court Programs at the Center for Court Innovation, described a child support/workforce development initiative that her organization has been piloting in Brooklyn for the past nine months. The pilot is a partnership between the family court and HRA to tighten up the relationship between child support enforcement mechanism and mandated workforce programs. Through this problem-solving model, ownership is provided to the NCP over his or her own order. Therefore, by creating tools like the problem-solving model, we can ensure enforcement and accountability, and bring the promise of a workforce program to fruition.

Commissioner Doar mentioned that, in order to support HRA OCSE's current efforts and partnership with the courts and workforce programs, the City's TANF programs -- which were designed mostly for mothers -- would need to be made available to NCPs so that they can also access services. However, limited funding exists for these services. The Commissioner wondered if the child support funding stream, which is 66% federally funded (and federal dollars are uncapped), could be a source for supporting employment services for NCPs if it was administered locally on a pay-for-performance basis.

Federal OCSE Commissioner Vicki Turetsky said that both Congress and the White House are having some initial conversations about whether the child support program could serve as a funding source to sustain workforce development programs for NCPs, however neither of them have taken official positions on the issue yet. She said that some of the pros to doing so include: (1) many workforce programs already serve men and understand something about their needs after many years of working with them; (2) employment programs that have already been partnering with the child support program are better able to achieve results and serve the family holistically; (3) TANF employment programs can mandate work participation and some research suggests that mandatory participation improves impacts for TANF recipients; (4) workforce programs have robust relationships with employers, and (5) workforce programs have the ability to track and manage data.

Commissioner Doar also focused on the issue of connecting child support to other programs and whether or not the courts should be more involved with custody and visitation issues, as well as parenting skills and conflict resolution.

Aldrich said that a legislative change would be required in order to better integrate the child support visitation, parenting time, and custody issues, because they are currently separated. However, she mentioned that the court system has gone through a substantial change in the last 15 years by trying to take a more holistic look at who the litigants are and what problems are driving their participation in the court system. Therefore, opportunities do exist within the current structure to take advantage of some existing programs, such as building in mediation services for litigants.

Commissioner Turetsky said that federal OCSE does not want to push states toward one type of structure or another, but there have been positive reports about working with parents in a conciliatory mediation setting to develop joint parenting plans on a voluntary basis. She also emphasized the importance of partnerships and that perceptions about the child support program can begin to change when partnerships are formed. Federal OCSE has a robust partnership with the Department of Labor around its Transitional Jobs Initiative and at first, USDOL was not interested in the partnership. They saw OCSE as coming in and "swooping up all of the dollars that they had worked so hard to secure for their guys," she said. However, once USDOL learned that OCSE has the flexibility and the job to set realistic child support orders, they became increasingly interested in a partnership. Similarly, there is a perception among the public assistance programs that the child support program does not provide much income to families. However, when child support is coming in, it actually contributes more income to the budgets of poor and low-income single parent families than any other source (except for the mom's own earnings).

Commissioner Doar also mentioned that HRA will soon release its Back to Work RFP and that it will include a provision that the agency can provide a higher payment to the provider for successful placement of the more difficult cases into

employment, such as formerly incarcerated individuals or NCPs. This will help incentivize service providers to not just focus on the easier cases.

Executive Deputy Commissioner Pardus-Abbadessa closed the conference by reiterating her commitment to OCSE's continued direction towards expanded support services for NCPs, focused on outreach to parents through enhanced community partnerships among key stakeholder groups that need these services the most, and an ongoing public awareness and engagement campaign on the benefits of the formal child support program, including navigating the system and parental rights.

"I really hope that we achieved our goal today to stimulate thought and to think a little bit more about how we integrate child support into other social services programs, how we make the program stronger on behalf of children, and how we connect more dads to employment for the purpose of not only reducing child poverty, but also to hopefully break that cycle of poverty," she said.