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Many inmates leave prison with substantial child support obligations and arrears balances and face financial burdens and enforcement remedies that may jeopardize their successful reentry. With support from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, and child support and criminal justice agencies, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts and Texas have conducted projects, described below, to try to address these problems. All four involved providing inmates with: general information about child support; case-specific information and actions, especially those aimed at preventing the accumulation of unpayable arrears; and help with parenting, family re-integration and employment.

Collecting Child Support from Incarcerated and Paroled Obligor Project (1999-2003). Colorado Child Support Enforcement and the Colorado Department of Corrections collaborated for an electronic data match to identify their overlapping populations and test the feasibility and time frames associated with modifying child support orders of inmates. The agencies also created the Work and Family Center, a reentry program offering paroled and released offenders with minor-aged children assistance with employment, child support and family re-integration.

Father Reintegration Project (2002-2004). The Illinois Division of Child Support Enforcement and the DOC collaborated to provide child support assistance, responsible fatherhood classes and case management services, including order modification, to 187 inmates in two adult

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LESSONS FROM FOUR
PROJECTS DEALING WITH
INCARCERATION AND
CHILD SUPPORT

transition centers in Chicago administered by the Safer Foundation.

Fathers in the Criminal Justice System Project (2000-2003). The Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Child Support Enforcement Division, collaborated with the DOC and the Suffolk County House of Correction to send child support workers to prisons and jails to assist 600 inmates filing modification requests for their child support orders to be \$50 to \$80 per month, and to take other child support actions.

Family Reintegration Project (2002-2004). The Texas Office of the Attorney General, Child Support Division, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and community-based organizations collaborated to provide 317 inmates in state jails in Houston and El Paso with general and case-specific information about child support, family re-integration classes, assistance with communicating with children and families, and referrals to community-based agencies for employment assistance.

A FEW LESSONS

The following lessons are based on evaluations of the projects conducted by the Center for Policy Research.

Inmates and released offenders say they want help with child support, parenting and employment. Of the 317 inmates who participated in the Texas Family Reintegration Project, 78 percent said they wanted help “understanding my child support situation” and/or “fixing my child support situation,” 85 percent wanted help with “being a good parent,” 70 percent wanted help “getting to see my children,” 79 percent wanted job-skills training and 85 percent wanted help finding a job. The 10 most frequently mentioned types of aid sought by 350 paroled and released offenders who came to Colorado’s Work and Family Center were help with: child support (69 percent), transportation (57 percent), clothing (50 percent), finding a job (47 percent), tools for work (44 percent), housing (41 percent), food (31 percent), dental services (32 percent) learning job skills (26 percent) and seeing their children (26 percent).

The optimal time to present family re-integration, fatherhood and parenting programs is during incarceration.

While the 17-month Texas Family Reintegration Project was being conducted, project staff held 424 group sessions dealing with fatherhood, parenting and re-integration in El Paso and Houston jails, with 235 enrolled parents in Houston attending an average of 8.3 sessions. At the request of inmates, staff made 2,000 calls to the other parent, family members and children to explore interest in post-release contact and relationships. Not surprisingly, 96 percent of interviewed participants said the project helped them to be a better parent and to see their children more often. Most fathers (87 percent) interviewed following release reported seeing their children as frequently or more often than they did prior to going to jail. In contrast, far fewer paroled and released noncustodial fathers used free family law (16 percent) and counseling (29 percent) services available through Colorado’s Work and Family Center. Limited transportation and pressures to find employment quickly after release may explain why many released offenders did not take advantage of these resources.

Child support agencies have developed effective methods of communicating information to inmates at prison facilities. The information ranges from general child support facts to case-specific information about child support.

Child support agencies are finding presentations, videos, brochures and handbooks to be effective ways of communicating general child support information to inmates. Illinois, Massachusetts and Texas arranged for child support staff to make regular presentations to incoming inmates during orientation sessions held at prison and state jail facilities. Outreach at prison reception centers is particularly helpful since modifications and other child support actions can have the greatest impact at sentence start. The Texas Child Support Division created and printed a brochure comprising common questions and answers on child support, produced a 10-minute video on incarceration and began to write a column in the monthly Texas Department of Criminal Justice inmate newsletter. Colorado produced a handbook on child support and custody matters for incarcerated parents, which was distributed to facility libraries and prison case managers.

General presentations often generated requests from inmates for case-specific information. For example, 300 Texas state jail inmates with 436 cases requested information and actions on their cases during the project. Massachusetts used data matches between child support and criminal justice agencies and responses from general presentations to identify inmates with child support cases who would benefit from meeting with child support staff in the facility. As a result, inmates established paternity and new, minimum orders at significantly higher rates than previously, and 183 inmates received a downward adjustment of their child support to \$50 to \$80 per month.

Child Support Enforcement agencies and DOCs find collaborative projects that focus on child support, employment and parenting to be beneficial. Effective interagency projects require the involvement of top-level administrators. Correctional staff and administrators view projects dealing with child support, parenting and employment as valuable ways of getting inmates to use their time effectively, deal with reality and promote pro-social behavior. These programs also help facilities that are less able to offer educational and counseling services due to budget cuts. From their perspective, child support agencies find that many incarcerated, noncustodial parents are unfamiliar with child support procedures in general, unsure of their own child support status and need help in requesting a review of their case. Communicating with this population helps the child support agency to identify obligors with orders that qualify for downward modification or closure, and to clean up complicated cases.

The involvement and support of upper-level administrators from participating agencies is critical to a successful collaborative project. Their participation helps to ensure that child support staff have access to facilities and can meet with inmates for child support and family re-integration meetings. Child support staff can contribute to DOC staff training sessions and reentry presentations. Staff from both agencies find it helpful to conduct frequent, automated data matches to identify their overlapping caseloads.

Employment is the key to child support payment following release, yet rates of employment and earnings are

CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES AND DOCS FIND COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS THAT FOCUS ON CHILD SUPPORT, EMPLOYMENT AND PARENTING TO BE BENEFICIAL.

extremely low among released offenders. Inmates with earnings pay more child support following their release. While the proportion of Texas jail inmates with child support orders who paid at least some support was an identical 43 percent to 45 percent in the year before they went to jail and the year following their release, the average amount of the obligation that was paid among those making at least some payment rose from 54 percent to 73 percent. Also, the amount collected through wage withholding among payers increased from 48 percent to 70 percent. Similarly, six months before paroled and released offenders visited Colorado's Work and Family Center, 43 percent had employer-reported earnings and 60 percent paid no child support. Six months after they visited the center, 71 percent had employer-reported earnings and the percentage paying no support dropped to 25.

Although employment is the key to child support payment, many offenders fail to become employed. Only one-third of 253 released, Texas jail inmates had any employer-reported earnings in the 7.5 months (on average) following their release and two-thirds had none. Among those with earnings, quarterly median and mean levels were low and stood at only \$695 and \$1,482, respectively. In Illinois, 78 offenders who found jobs while they were in a work release/residential program operated by the Safer Foundation earned a median and mean salary of \$960 and \$1,102 per month, respectively, with one-half finding work as laborers and 55 percent receiving no benefits. And only one-half of the 350 paroled and released offenders who came to a Colorado reentry program were employed full time and earned an average salary of \$9 per hour.

Employment programs are frequently unavailable or of limited use in helping released and paroled offenders become employed. Although 79 percent of Texas inmates wanted job training, a small fraction (9 percent)

reported receiving it while in jail. Following release, only 30 percent of the inmates referred to community employment programs contacted the service providers for help, resulting in two placements ultimately being made. Overall, only 34 percent of 253 released participants in Texas showed earnings on quarterly wage reports filed by employers. Similarly, less than one-half (47 percent) of released offenders who received help with job readiness and resumé writing in an Illinois child support project conducted with the Safer Foundation and for whom information was available, secured employment, earning an average wage of \$6.82 per hour. Few paroled and released offenders who found work and were interviewed credited the employment programs with their success. Almost all employed Texas inmates and 80 percent of Colorado's Work and Family Center clients who were interviewed after their release said that they had found their job on their own or returned to the job they held prior to their incarceration.

STEPS TOWARD IMPROVEMENT

Inmates clearly need and want help with employment, child support and family re-integration. While the projects conducted to date have achieved impressive results, employment, child support and criminal justice agencies should consider taking the following steps to improve outcomes even further.

Employment programs should offer released inmates immediate work opportunities coupled with training and support services. Paroled and released offenders need some stronger arrangements to link them to jobs and child support payments. One promising approach is paid, transitional employment, which has been used with parolees and other offenders in New York City by the Center for Employment Opportunities. Immediately upon

release, parolees are employed in a business operated by the center that involves performing maintenance and repair work for government facilities in the New York City area. They work four days per week, earning the minimum wage and getting paid at the end of each workday. One day per week, the parolees attend "soft skills" workshops dealing with anger management, work force behavior, resumé writing, interview skills and responsible parenting. Individuals also meet with a job developer to begin the process of looking for employment in the private sector. Those with child support obligations get help navigating the system, including wage attachments and order modifications at appropriate levels.

Although the program has not been formally evaluated, the New York child support agency reports that participants transition to private sector jobs that pay an average of \$9.25 per hour. Eighty percent of participants with child support orders pay child support and 45 percent pay on a regular basis. The center's transitional jobs program is partially funded by contracts with New York correctional agencies. It may also be possible to help to fund transitional jobs programs using federal child support incentive funds.

Child support agencies should adopt policies to better deal with inmates and other "hard-to-serve" populations. To avoid the accumulation of unpayable arrears, child support guidelines must be amended to ensure that they do not generate orders that are unrealistically high for low-income parents. The Colorado Child Support Guidelines Commission recently recognized this problem and effective Jan. 1, 2003, new child support orders and motions for modification in Colorado were set at \$50 per month when parents' monthly gross income is less than \$850. Those parents who earn more than \$850 but less than \$1,850 per month will be subject to a new low-income adjustment calculation that will be added to minimum child support amounts of \$75 for one child and \$150 for two (14-10-115 C.R.S.).

Child support agencies should also modify and reinstate child support orders for incarcerated parents on a more systematic basis. For example, an administrative rule in Oregon establishes that incarcerated obligors who are confined for at least six consecutive

months with a gross monthly income of less than \$200 are presumed to have a zero ability to pay support and will have their orders modified to \$0 upon request. By statute, 60 days after the inmate is released, the order automatically reverts to its pre-incarceration level.

Finally, states should use the flexibility they possess to adjust or settle uncollectible child support arrears owed to the state for welfare paid on behalf of their children by inmates as well as other hard-to-serve parents. This is the approach adopted by the Massachusetts child support agency, which recently acquired discretionary authority to settle arrears accumulated during periods of unemployment or incarceration. Among the terms or conditions of settlement that might be required are regular payments of current support and/or active participation in job search, community service or a responsible parenthood program.

Prisons and jails should offer programs to inmates that enhance successful reentry. These programs should include vocational education, substance abuse treatment, employability training, fatherhood, parenting and child support awareness. Most

state DOCs have Adult Basic Education and GED programs in place, but the availability of these services to inmates is often limited. Declining opportunities for vocational education, job training and employment in prison industries during the past decade are often attributed to funding cuts. Still other programs designed to prepare inmates for reentry have been seriously diluted. For example, due to budget constraints, the Adult Transition Centers of Illinois, which were designed to assist offenders with reentry by engaging them in employment activities and a variety of services and treatment programs during the last two years of their sentence, now receive inmates only a few months before their release, limiting the offenders' exposure to new patterns of behavior. Cognitive intervention programs at the Texas state jails were discontinued during the Texas Family Reintegration Project, and parenting programs and vocational training classes were cut back or eliminated in the state and county facilities in Massachusetts during the demonstration project.

Criminal justice agencies must press legislatures and policy-makers

to invest in reentry by funding educational, vocational and family reunification programs in prison so that inmates leave with the attitudes, relationships and skills needed to succeed in the community.

The projects described above provide a critical contribution to the growing field of reentry programs and services. Far from being a minor financial obligation, formal child support obligations that remain unaddressed can add a substantial barrier to released offenders seeking successful reentry into the community. These projects, involving agency collaborations and outreach, demonstrate several models for using child support as a springboard to encourage offenders/parents to develop their parenting and relationship skills, to seek viable employment and training, and to accept their responsibilities as parents and members of society.

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