**NCP Choices: Finding Work, Staying Employed, and Paying Child Support**

**Overview**
The Office of the Attorney General – Child Support Division (OAG) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) jointly developed a multi-site employment and child support enforcement program to help unemployed noncustodial parents (NCPs) find work and financially support their children. In 2005, NCP Choices began as a pilot project in five, largely urban sites. The success of the program at increasing child support payments and employment rates/retention among the hardest to serve NCP population led to expansion, and as of October 2010, the program operates in 17 workforce board areas that serve parents in 44 child support offices.

The NCP Choices Program starts with court-ordered program participation connecting NCPs to job search, employment support services, and limited short term training paired with close monitoring and compliance tracking. The program model is similar to the Texas Choices program—which is the employment services program for TANF recipients (custodial parents.) NCP Choices creates an equitable set of job support services and program compliance expectations for an NCP to those for a custodial parent (CP) receiving public assistance.

**Impacts**
The Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources (University of Texas) conducted an independent, third party evaluation of NCP Choices from the program’s initiation through four years of operation. The study compared NCP Choices participants to a matched comparison group of NCPs to determine program impacts. The big questions answered by the evaluation were:

- Do program participants pay more child support and pay it more consistently?
- Are program participants employed more and stay employed longer, and
- Do CPs associated with program participants use TANF to a lesser degree than CPs associated with the comparison group?

The results of the evaluation were unequivocal in finding significant increases in child support paid (both amount and consistency) and employment (entry and retention) for NCPs, and significant reductions in the use of TANF cash assistance by CPs associated with program participants.

---

“'I'd been laid off for seven months...you want to give up...I think if it wasn't for NCP Choices I'd still be looking for work...or I'd be in jail for child support.” – Fort Worth, Texas

---

**Average Monthly Child Support Payment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Monthly Child Support Payment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCP Choices</td>
<td>$169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>$112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NCPs (on average) have made no child support payments in the 8 months preceding their order into the program.
One of the most important indicators of the sustained impact of NCP Choices is the shift in payment sources by the NCPs in the program - almost twice as many program participants pay through wage withholding as compared to the control group. In the first two quarters of FY 2011, 86% of all collections ($7,349,622 from approximately 8000 NCPs in the program) were directly tied to employment as the source of payment.

Not all impacts are financial
The non-financial impacts of NCP Choices were not subject to the Ray Marshall Center evaluation, and as such, are difficult to quantify. There is however, qualitative evidence from program participants that their newly secured employment, and the resultant payment of child support, has reduced conflict in relationships with the mothers of their children and improved their access to and interactions with their children.

Background and Structure
The OAG and TWC both have extensive experience operating employment projects targeting NCPs. The OAG managed multiple child support demonstration projects designed to assist NCPs with employment and participated as a lead partner in the Texas Fragile Families Initiative. TWC and local workforce development boards participated in NCP Welfare to Work demonstration projects and offered employment assistance to NCPs referred by local courts and child support offices. The overarching challenges in these efforts were difficult recruitment, low retention rates, and equivocal employment and child support outcomes.
NCP Choices was intentionally designed to address previous program challenges by: leveraging existing agency capacity and structure (not create a “stand alone” project), including measures to prevent NCPs from slipping or falling through the cracks of a referral process, and fully engaging the judiciary as a key partner. The bottom line for NCP Choices’ success has been strong interoperability of program partners, each with shared responsibilities, shared power, and shared investment of funding and staff. Primary funding for the program comes from statewide TANF employment funds appropriated to TWC with additional funding coming from child support federal performance incentive funds (Texas is one of five states with federal approval to use performance incentives for NCP employment).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaboration between Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identifies eligible parents and prepares cases for enforcement hearings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Monitors payments and workforce status (COLTS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prepares legal actions, as needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Operation on the Ground**

There are four key elements to program success: program partners communicate often, workforce staff is at court to meet NCPs, judges require participation—with consequences for non-compliance, and technology is used effectively to track NCP’s progress.

**(1) Communication**

Program partners (OAG, TWC, Local Workforce, and Judiciary) communicate often and continually about program achievements and improvements. Each site has monthly meetings and lead points of contact from each agency to address local site operational issues.

**(2) Workforce staff in the courthouse**

Logistical arrangements (e.g. designated space at court, web connectivity, etc.) are made to ensure that Workforce staff can immediately meet with NCPs upon being ordered to participate.

**(3) Judges require participation – with consequences**

Judges communicate participation expectation to NCPs and hold compliance hearings with clear consequences for non-compliant NCPs.

**(4) Use of Technology to track program participation**

The OAG developed a technology solution to bridge the digital divide between the existing child support enforcement and workforce information management systems. The Choices Online Tracking System (COLTS) is an easy-to-access, secure communication and record keeping tool. Participation status, workforce activities, verified job and wage withholding issuance, payment information, and court hearing dates are readily available in COLTS for workforce and child support staff to access.
Eligibility
An NCP Choices participant is someone who:

- Could be facing jail time for non-payment of child support,
- Has a IV-D case that is current or former TANF or Medicaid,
- Is under- or unemployed, has a social security number, and
- Resides in the workforce development board’s service area.

Services
Participants receive help in removing employment barriers and building employability. Workforce provides participants with job referrals, tracks their job search efforts – 30 hours per week required, and monitors job retention for at least six months. Participants receive a range of services such as transportation assistance, help in obtaining work clothes or tools, short-term job training, subsidized employment opportunities, and GED or English as a Second Language courses.

Program Service Area
The program is operating in 17 workforce board areas serving 44 child support offices.
OAG identifies noncustodial parent (NCP) associated with TANF/Medicaid case who has unpaid child support.

IV-D field office sets court hearing for noncustodial parent.

NCP appears in court at enforcement hearing.

NCP is ordered into the program

Workforce does intake with NCP at court hearing.

Workforce services provided to NCP

Workforce and OAG monitor case for compliance

Court imposed sanctions

Is NCP compliant?

NCP graduates from the program after 6 months of retained employment.

NCP is participating in work activities at least 30 hours per week or employed, and pays child support.

NCP is able to work, but not fulfilling support obligation

Court determines that the NCP is in contempt.