

Executive Summary

CONNECTING PARENTS TO OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING

A Partnership Between
Child Support
Agencies and Local
Service Providers

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FUNDERS

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OVERVIEW

The Families Forward Demonstration (FFD) examined new strategies to increase the earnings of parents who owe child support but are unable to fully meet their obligations due to low earnings. Operated by child support agencies in five jurisdictions across the country from 2018 to 2020, FFD sought to integrate employment and training services into existing public child support programs. The FFD program included free occupational skill-building activities, to help parents qualify for higher-paying jobs, as well as employment services and wraparound supports. It also focused on “responsive” child support services that helped parents understand their support obligations, and even suspended certain enforcement actions while parents participated in the program.

This report presents the findings from the implementation and outcome studies of FFD.

KEY FINDINGS

- When tailoring the FFD model to the local context, each child support agency leveraged flexibility within its existing policies to design its child support services. This included assigning dedicated FFD child support workers to the program. These staff members were also encouraged to consider participants’ employment and training activities when deciding how or whether to apply enforcement measures that were already under the discretion of their agency.
- Recruiting parents to FFD and determining whether they would be eligible for the program was a labor- and time-intensive process. The programs struggled with recruitment for an array of reasons, including parents’ negative perceptions of child support, the agencies’ limited experience with recruitment, and a lack of alignment between parents’ interests and the service offerings.
- Nearly all parents enrolled in the study received some responsive child support services. This customer service-oriented approach made a positive impression on parents and child support staff alike, improving parents’ perception of child support and facilitating communication between the agency and participants.
- Almost 60 percent of study enrollees started an occupational skills training program. Among these parents, 70 percent completed training but less than half of them were employed at some point during the first six months after study enrollment.
- Following study enrollment, parents’ monthly child support order amounts declined, reversing upward trends prior to study enrollment. Additionally, parents were more likely to make a monthly payment and their monthly total payment amounts increased, reversing steady or downward trends prior to study enrollment. Together, decreasing order amounts and increasing payments resulted in increasing compliance rates after enrolling in the study, relative to declining trends prior to enrolling.

While more rigorous testing is needed, the FFD model shows some promise for connecting parents to jobs in their chosen career path and for improving their compliance with their child support obligations. However, the program would benefit from addressing operational challenges around recruitment and service delivery to scale up and serve a greater number of parents.

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The participating child support agencies were instrumental in developing the FFD program. These agencies included Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services, Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support, New York City Human Resources Administration Office of Child Support Services, and Washington State Division of Child Support. In addition, Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Child Support Services and Pennsylvania Bureau of Child Support Enforcement helped shape FFD through their contributions to the planning period. We are particularly grateful to the FFD program managers for their role in coordinating the program and partnerships: Rachael Balanson, Pete Cleary, Kim Kerns, Jorji Knickrehm, Christina Nichols, and Marlowe Paraiso. We greatly appreciate the staff members at all of the FFD program locations who participated in implementation site visits and were open and thoughtful in answering our questions, as well as the staff who facilitated data collection and sharing for the project.

Angie Kamath's expertise in implementing sector-focused employment programs helped shape the FFD program model.

This research would not have been possible without the work of many individuals at MDRC. Carolyn Hill directed the project and analyses. Lauren Cates managed the budget. Dan Bloom, Louisa Treskon, and Brit Henderson provided valuable comments on drafts of this report. We are grateful to Michelle Dixon, Sally Dai, Johanna Walter, Jennifer Hausler, and Jared Smith for their work analyzing the quantitative data as well as to Pei Zhu and Marie-Andree Somers for their contributions to the analysis design. Thanks are also due to Michelle Manno for advising on the implementation analysis and to her and Jennifer Hausler for their help with qualitative data collection. We also thank Louisa Treskon for advising on the expenditure analysis and Michelle Dixon for analyzing these data. Bret Barden, Samuel Diaz, Farhana Hossain, Christine Johnston, Vanessa Martin, and Molly Williams contributed to the initial phase of this project. Christine Johnston, Jennifer Hausler, and Molly Williams provided ongoing technical assistance to FFD child support agencies and their partners. Jacqueline Groskaufmanis coordinated the publication of the report. Jill Kirschenbaum edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

Finally, we are deeply appreciative of the parents who agreed to participate in FFD. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child support is a critical source of income for families and lifts around one million people out of poverty each year.¹ The Families Forward Demonstration (FFD) examined new strategies to increase the earnings of parents who owe child support but who are unable to fully meet their obligations due to low earnings.

Operated by child support agencies in five jurisdictions across the country, FFD sought to integrate employment and training services into public child support programs. Unlike most other child support–led employment initiatives, which focus on job search and placement services, the FFD program emphasized free occupational skill-building activities, combined with a suite of complementary services, to help parents qualify for higher-paying jobs.

This demonstration project was developed by MDRC in collaboration with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), and participating child support agencies. MDRC studied FFD to understand how child support agencies developed and implemented FFD in their communities and to gain insight into the experiences and outcomes of parents who took part in the initiative. Over 760 parents enrolled in the study between 2018 and 2020.

FFD was supported through a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, public and private resources raised by participating child support agencies, and matching federal funds through Section 1115 Waivers approved by OCSE.

Child support payments make up about half of the average income of parents with low income who receive the payments.² Consistent child support payments are critical to these parents, who count on the income to support their child. Yet more than half of parents who are owed child support receive no payments or partial payments.³ At the same time, the majority of parents who struggle to pay child support are unemployed or underemployed, making it very difficult for them to meet their support obligations.⁴ Under the direction of OCSE, state and local child support agencies are increasingly trying to balance holding parents accountable for their support obligations with the need to address their financial capacity to pay.

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1. Office of Child Support Enforcement, *Child Support Fact-Sheet Series: Family-Centered Innovations to Improve Child Support Outcomes* (Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).
 2. Office of Child Support Enforcement, *2018 Child Support: More Money for Families* (Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, 2018).
 3. Timothy Grall, *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2013* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).
 4. Elaine Sorensen, Liliana Sousa, and Simon Schaner, *Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2007).

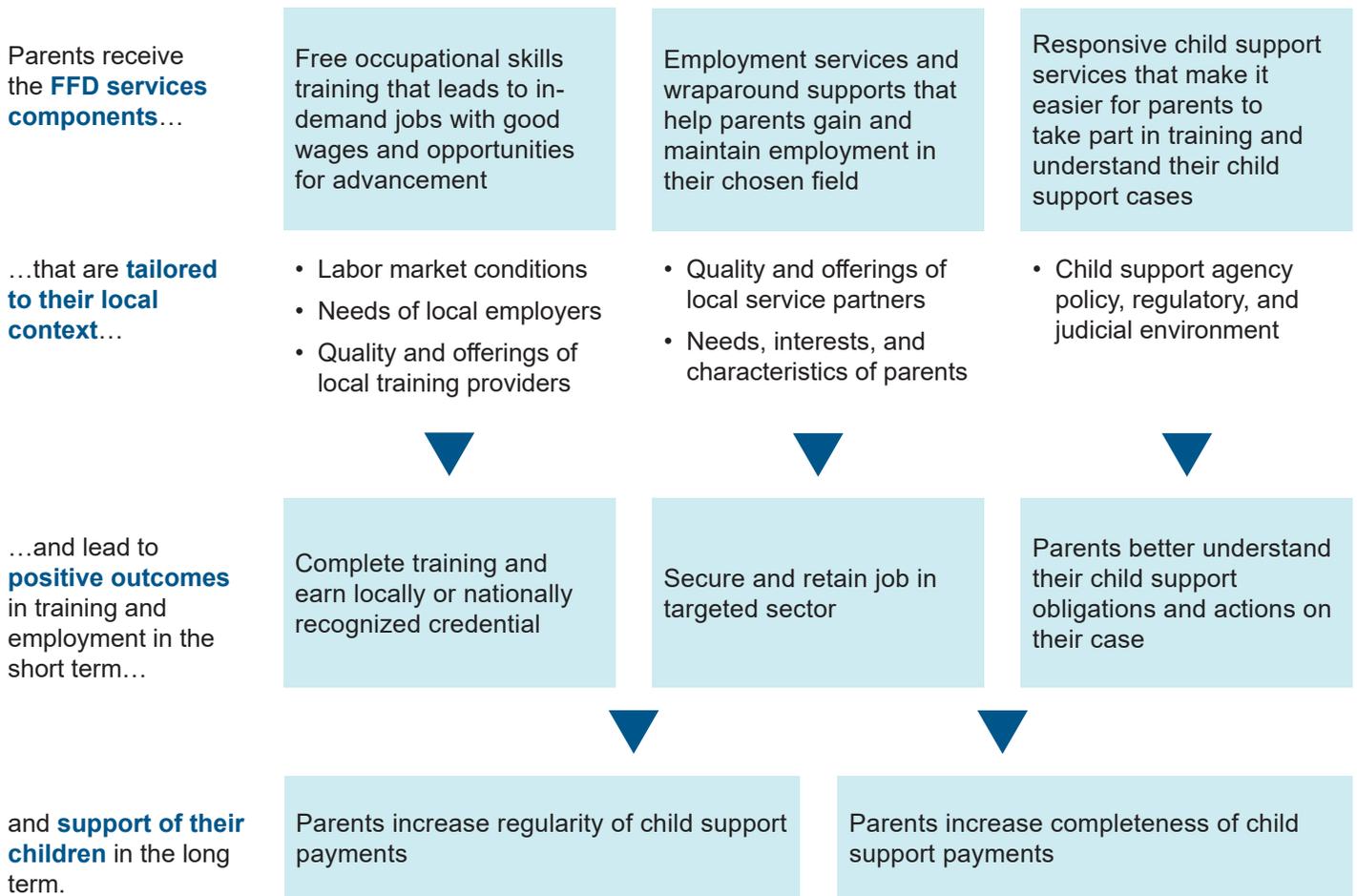
FFD PROGRAM MODEL

The overall goal of FFD was to help parents with low and moderate incomes make reliable child support payments by increasing employment, job stability, and earnings. It focused on demand-driven occupational skills training designed to meet local employers' need for skilled labor, as well as parents' need for high-quality jobs with advancement opportunities.

FFD provided access to free occupational skills training, removing cost as a barrier to entry. The program targeted middle-skill jobs that could be accessed with training that took six months or less to complete. Other program services helped parents participate in such training and find employment in their chosen field, suspended discretionary child support enforcement activities, helped parents understand their child support obligations, and guided them through order modification and arrears-forgiveness processes when appropriate. Figure ES.1 provides an overview of the FFD services and their intended outcomes.

FIGURE ES.1

Families Forward Demonstration Logic Model



Child support agencies in five locations implemented FFD: Cuyahoga County, Ohio; Franklin County, Ohio; Calhoun and Jackson counties in Michigan; New York City; and Benton and Franklin counties in Washington State. They operated the program in partnership with local colleges, training providers, workforce development agencies, and community-based organizations that offered screening and enrollment, employment, and training services. The child support agencies began designing their FFD programs in 2016 and launched the programs between 2018 and 2019 as they finalized their plans for service delivery and partnerships. The programs enrolled parents in the study through June 2020; however, many programs stopped enrolling parents earlier due to disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA SOURCES, AND ANALYSIS APPROACHES

This study focuses on how child support agencies developed and implemented FFD. It also includes some initial information about its outcomes. The research team sought to answer six questions:⁵

1. How was the FFD program developed, implemented, and adapted by child support agencies and their service partners?
2. What were the characteristics of parents who decided to take part in FFD?
3. What were enrollees' participation levels and patterns?
4. What were the experiences of parents who enrolled in FFD?
5. What were the training, employment, and child support outcomes for parents who enrolled in FFD?
6. What aspects of the local, state, and community context constrained or enabled implementation of FFD?

The study's data sources included interviews with child support agency staff and program partners who provided services; interviews with parents who enrolled in the study; survey data collected at the time of study enrollment; data from service providers on program participation, service delivery, and job placements; and administrative data from child support agencies. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic fallout associated with it, had direct implications for the study follow-up period. The FFD study was able to follow participants for 6 months after enrollment in all sites, and for 12 months for a subset of the study sample. Results from similar prior studies indicate that FFD's follow-up period was likely too short to observe effects of FFD on employment and child support outcomes.

5. The study also includes some initial information about the expenses associated with operating FFD.

The research team used an interrupted time series nonexperimental design to test whether trends in child support outcomes after enrolling in FFD were different from previous trends for the same individuals.⁶ While suggestive, this design did not allow the research team to attribute change in these outcomes to FFD. Thus, results from these analyses should be considered exploratory.

KEY FINDINGS

The study provides important information for practitioners and policymakers about how child support agencies might support efforts to help parents increase their earnings and support their children financially.

- Child support agencies tailored the FFD model to their local context, developing plans for service delivery and partnerships. While challenges with the procurement of service partners slowed down some agencies, their development of the program’s child support services was a bright spot: Child support agencies leveraged flexibility within their existing policies to design “responsive” services that focused on assigning dedicated FFD child support workers and encouraging them to take into account participants’ employment and training activities when deciding how to apply the enforcement measures that were already under their discretion.
- A key question was whether parents would be interested in taking part in a skills training opportunity led by a child support agency. The programs struggled with recruitment for an array of reasons, including parents’ negative perceptions of child support, the agencies’ limited experience with recruitment, lack of alignment between parents’ interests and the service offerings, and the general challenges of getting word out about a new program. Recruiting parents to FFD and determining whether they would be eligible for the program was a labor- and time-intensive process.
- Nearly all parents enrolled in the study received some responsive child support services. This customer service-oriented approach made a positive impression on parents and child support staff alike, improving parents’ perception of child support and facilitating communication between the agency and participants.
- Almost 60 percent of study enrollees started a training program. Among these parents, 70 percent completed training but less than half of them were employed at some point during the first six months after study enrollment.

6. For additional information about interrupted time series design, see James Lopez Bernal, Steven Cummins, and Antonio Gasparrini, “Interrupted Time Series Regression for the Evaluation of Public Health Interventions: A Tutorial,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 46, 1 (2017): 348-355.

- Following study enrollment, parents' monthly child support order amounts declined, reversing upward trends prior to enrollment. Declines in order amounts are likely due to child support agencies "right-sizing" parents' orders so that they align with parents' current financial circumstances. Additionally, parents were more likely to make a monthly payment and their monthly total payment amounts increased, reversing steady or downward trends prior to study enrollment. Together, decreasing order amounts and increasing payments resulted in increasing compliance rates after enrolling in the study, relative to declining trends prior to enrolling.

While more rigorous testing is needed, the FFD model shows some promise for connecting parents to jobs in their chosen career path and for improving their compliance with their child support obligations. However, the program would benefit from addressing operational challenges around recruitment and service delivery to scale up and serve a greater number of parents.

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION, IS COMMITTED TO finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles.