

TANF and Child Support Moving Forward Project

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Child support participant interview guide

Introductory Statement and Consent

Thank you so much for talking with me today. My name is _____ and my colleague, _____, is on the call as well. I am with an organization called [Mathematica/MEF]. We are assisting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in learning about the changes that child support programs made in response to the challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this study, we are talking to people like you to better understand people's experiences with the child support program now that many of these programs have made changes because of the pandemic.

During this interview, we will ask you questions about:

- Your background and involvement with the child support program
- How you experienced the pandemic and its disruptions, and
- Experiences you or your family had with the changes implemented in the child support program during the pandemic

Our conversation will take about one hour. During our conversation, anything you say will be private, except if you say something that suggests you are very likely to harm yourself, that you are planning to hurt another person or child, or that someone is likely to harm you. We may use what you say during the interview in our reports, but we won't use your name or any other identifying information when we report the results of our study. We also won't share what you say with [name of program] or any other program.

Please remember that we are interested in your experiences and opinions; there are no right or wrong answers. In appreciation for participating in this discussion, we will give you a \$30 gift card.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, it will not affect any benefits or services you receive now or may receive in the future. It is possible that some questions may be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer any question you don't want to. We can skip any question or stop the interview at any time if you don't want to continue. If you stop the interview, you will still receive the gift card.

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0970-0531 and the expiration date is XX/XX/2025.

I would like to record our conversation so I don't miss anything. No one will hear the recording except for members of the research team. Once we finalize our notes, we will delete the recording. Is it okay with you if I record this conversation? If anyone wants me to turn the recorder off for any reason or at any time, just say so. We also request that everyone here today keep this conversation confidential and not share what you've heard today with others outside this group.

[INTERVIEWER: WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS.]

[INTERVIEWER: PRESS RECORD IN THE WEBEX AND ASK, “JUST TO CONFIRM, BEFORE WE FORMALLY BEGIN THE INTERVIEW, DOES ANYONE IN THE GROUP OBJECT TO ME RECORDING THIS INTERVIEW?”]

[INTERVIEWER: SPECIFY YOUR NAME, THE DATE, THE STATE THAT PARTICIPANTS ARE AFFILIATED WITH, AND THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE DISCUSSION.]

Interview Questions

Respondent background

- Why don't we start with you telling me a little bit about yourselves and your families?
 - o Your first name
 - o How many children do you have?
 - Do any of them live with you?
 - o How long have you been in the child support program?
 - o [For custodial parents only] When you first entered the child support program, were you referred to the program from an assistance program or did you apply for the program?

Pandemic disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable challenges to all aspects of our lives.

- What were the most significant disruptions for you and your families?
 - o How did the pandemic affect your employment?
 - Were you working when the pandemic started? Are you currently working? Are you working remotely or in person?
 - Did you lose your job at any point?
 - Did you have the option to work from home? Did you have to continue to go to work in person?
 - o How did the pandemic affect your children's schools or childcare?

Child support changes

[INTERVIEWER: REVIEW STATE RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND ANY OTHER INTERVIEWS THAT HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED IN THE STATE SO FAR AND PROBE ON RESPONSES TO SPECIFIC CHANGES]

Child support program operations and policies were disrupted during the pandemic, and many of these programs made changes to how they serve families. I want to understand how you all might have experienced these changes. If you've been involved with the child support program for a long time, you might think about what the program is like now compared to how it was when you first started participating. If you've just started participating in the child support program, you can just talk about your experiences with how the program is currently serving you.

- We know that office closures and ongoing health concerns led many child support programs to use different ways of communicating with customers, such as texting, emailing, offering online apps, and holding virtual meetings and hearings (e.g. video conferencing or virtual court hearings). We are particularly interested in learning about how that has been for you.
 - Did you interact with the child support program through any of these other means besides in-person communications since the pandemic began?
 - Which of these methods did you experience?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Which, if any, of these methods do you prefer?
 - Why do you prefer these methods?
 - If applicable, how is this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
 - Did you communicate with any other staff, such as attorneys or call center staff virtually, over the phone, online, through an app, or video conferencing?
 - We also understand that some child support programs established ways that you could submit and sign forms online.
 - Did you ever complete and submit forms online?
 - Do you recall which forms you submitted online?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful or more convenient or did it cause challenges for you?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
 - Did you ever sign forms electronically?
 - Do you recall which forms you signed electronically?

- What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful or more convenient or did it cause challenges for you?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
- [Noncustodial parents only] How did you pay your child support?
 - Did you pay through income withholding or some other way? What other ways did you use? Did you ever submit payments online?
 - What was your experience like using each of these methods to pay your child support?
 - Was any method more helpful or more convenient than others?
 - Did any method cause more challenges than others?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you paid your child support before the pandemic?
- Did you ever attend a virtual or telephonic court hearing during the pandemic?
 - What was the purpose of the court hearing?
 - What was your experience like during the court hearing?
 - Was the court hearing more convenient? Did it cause challenges for you?
 - If applicable, how was this different from how you participated in court hearings before the pandemic?
- Were there other new ways that the child support program did business during the pandemic that helped you complete certain tasks? If yes, what were those new ways? What was that experience like for you?
 - [Noncustodial parents only] Did you use drive-up paternity testing?
 - Did you participate in pre-hearing mediation or receive pre-hearing outreach from child support staff?
 - Anything else?
- Some child support offices did not close entirely but instituted other changes to keep families safe. You might have experienced things like meetings by appointment only, health screenings before entering an office, or using self-service kiosks.
 - Did you experience any changes like these? If so, what were they?
 - What was that like for you?
 - Was this helpful or more convenient? Did it cause challenges for you?

- If applicable, how was this different from how you were served before the pandemic?
- As we discussed, COVID-19 disrupted day to day life for most people. Many of these disruptions may have made it hard for you to meet requirements of the child support program.
 - Has the pandemic affected your ability to meet the requirements of the child support program? If yes, what requirements of the child support program became more difficult for you to meet?
 - To what extent do you still deal with these challenges to program requirements?
 - Were child support staff understanding of how COVID-19 impacted your ability to meet their requirements?
 - Has the child support program helped you during the pandemic? If yes, how?
 - [For noncustodial parents only] Have you had a hard time paying your child support since the pandemic started? If yes, did you receive any assistance from the child support program with regard to paying your child support?
 - Did you receive assistance in modifying your child support order?
 - Did you receive assistance managing your child support debt?
 - Were you told that you wouldn't have your driver's license suspended?
 - Did anyone from the program help you find a job?
 - Did you get referrals to other programs to help you find a job or meet other needs?
 - Was there anything else the program did for you?
 - [For custodial parents only]
 - Did you get referrals to other programs to help you meet your needs?
 - Was there anything else the program did for you?
 - If you are required to cooperate with the child support program as a condition of receiving public assistance, did you have difficulty meeting this cooperation requirement during the pandemic?
 - If yes, are you willing to describe your difficulties?
 - If yes, were child support staff understanding of how COVID-19 impacted your ability to meet the cooperation requirement?

- At any time during the pandemic, did you request an exemption or good cause from cooperating with the child support program? If yes, are you willing to explain why you made this request? Did you receive the exemption? If you didn't request it, do you wish you had? If yes, can you explain why that was?
- I'd like to understand your opinion of the child support program and whether your perspective has changed during the pandemic.
 - o What is your opinion of the child support program?
 - How has that changed since the pandemic began and why?
 - o At this point in the pandemic, what is the child support program currently doing to help you meet your needs that you'd like to see them continue?
 - o What is the program not doing but you'd like to see them do in the future to better meet your needs?

Conclusion

- Is there anything else about your experience with child support program responses to the pandemic that we haven't talked about yet that you think we should know for our study?

Gift card

Later today we will be sending you a \$30 virtual gift card to thank you for your participation. The email will also include any special instructions that you need to activate the gift card. I will use the email address that I used to contact you and arrange this interview. Does that email work okay for me to send the gift card or does anyone prefer that I send the gift card to a different email address?

[INTERVIEWER: COLLECT AND CONFIRM EMAIL ADDRESSES THAT WE HAVE ON FILE AND MAKE UPDATES AS NEEDED. SHORTLY AFTER THE INTERVIEW, SEND THE GIFT CARDS TO PARTICIPATING RESPONDENTS.]

Great, thank you. If you don't receive the email by the end of the day tomorrow, then please check your junk folder.

Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate all that you have shared.