Promoting Family-Centering Child Support Policies for Parents with Incarceration Histories in Minnesota:

A Report on the Assessment of the Minnesota Child Support Program

Submitted to:
the State of Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families

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Executive Summary

Within the health and human services field, agencies and officials are increasingly interested in prioritizing families' needs. Agencies are seeking family-centered approaches to guide the design, delivery, and assessment of programs as a central strategy to enhance families' well-being, strengthen family relationships, and boost families' engagement in programs (Berger & Font, 2015; Park et al., 2018; Rosinsky et al., 2022). As part of this wave of interest, the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (MN DCYF) launched an initiative in 2024 to assess its current child support services and develop recommendations that center families in the state's child support program.

Child Trends partnered with MN DCYF to conduct an assessment to answer the following question:

In Minnesota, how do child support policies incorporate family-centered approaches in modifying child support orders and managing arrears for parents who are currently or were recently incarcerated? How are parents engaged in the process and informed about their child support options during and after incarceration?

This executive summary provides an overview of MN DCYF's core areas of interest and the methods used to conduct the assessment, a review of the assessment's key findings, and the implications for Minnesota's work to improve child support services.

Assessing family-centered child support policies

Specifically, our assessment aimed to analyze two facets of how Minnesota's child support policies interact with parents who are (or have recently been) incarcerated: 1) how these policies and interactions are described "on the books" (i.e., in statute or regulatory language) and 2) how they are implemented "on the ground" (i.e., in practice). We explored whether and how these policies present opportunities or barriers to engagement in child support programs and how they affect individual well-being and family relationships—the priority outcomes of interest for any family-centered assessment.

The assessment drew upon three sources of data:

- A document review of child support policy in Minnesota
- Focus groups with parents
- Individual/small group interviews with child support program administrators

Key findings

Several policies and supports are available to parents who have been ordered to pay child support and are currently incarcerated. In 2021, Minnesota instituted a statewide policy for a streamlined (i.e., expedited) child support order modification process for all parents who have a significant change in circumstance, including incarceration for at least 180 days, across all counties. This change recognizes that child well-being suffers when child support debt and arrears increase. It also reflects research showing that debt accumulated while a parent is unable to earn

consistent income (i.e., during long-term incarceration, regardless of individual circumstance or type of crime the parent was convicted of) may negatively affect child outcomes (Nepomnyaschy et. al., 2021). This policy shift aimed to reduce the accumulation of child support arrears while a parent is unable to earn consistent income to meet child support order obligations. Arrears Management and Prevention Policy provides further guidance for helping parents manage arrears, including during periods of incarceration. Several administrators emphasized that allowing a brief transition period allows parents who have been incarcerated to secure stable housing, meet basic needs, and obtain employment, all of which ultimately promote their ability to provide support to their children and reduce likelihood of recidivism. Some counties make the zero-order modification a permanent order, other counties have a 90-day transition period before requesting a modification, and still others wait for notification of employment through electronic data systems or other sources. All counties also mentioned that, for a small portion of cases during incarceration, the parent who is incarcerated might prefer not to have their order modified to zero and continue paying child support while earning a small amount of income in jail or prison—or, in rarer cases, if they have financial assets. Some counties neither encourage nor allow this practice, while others allow it but highlight administrative complications in processing such requests. All counties felt they had a consistent process and standard policy for requesting public assistance arrears forgiveness for parents who are incarcerated.

All counties highlighted that they are unable to forgive non-public arrears and need approval from the other parent. Counties described offering support to parents to facilitate conversations about forgiveness and serve as the bridge between the parent owing support and the parent receiving it. Administrators emphasized their focus on reducing debt and financial burden for parents who have been incarcerated and taking a family-centered approach.

Importantly, parents who were or may become incarcerated are likely not aware of their options in terms of modified child support orders, arrears management and prevention strategies, the suppression of driver's license suspensions, and other policies in place to respond to parents' changing circumstances and inability to pay child support during incarceration. Ongoing efforts to inform and educate parents are needed.

Balancing family-centered decision making with standardized child support policy implementation is a common practice when determining order modification and arrears management requests. Counties use differing approaches to making decisions in complex child support cases. Most counties generally rely on their county attorneys and reference recent case law when making decisions about "grey area" cases. Some administrators noted that counties that implement policy strictly or inflexibly might face challenges in making family-centered child support decisions for parents who have been incarcerated. Counties also described using county-specific manuals to train case workers and apply policy consistently, and to fill gaps in state policies that leave a great deal of discretion.

All counties who participated in this assessment emphasized the importance of professional collaboration and team decision making to support families, along with considering the perspectives of both parents and children when making changes and requests. These collaborations occur at multiple levels, including between child support workers and supervisors, between child support staff and county attorneys, and between county administrators to compare practices and strategies. Counties highlighted the usefulness of two case management/coordination-focused programs in facilitating cross-system communication and coordination and advocated for their expansion. This balancing act of using a family-centered

approach with standard policy guidelines was a consistent theme across all counties and applied to multiple areas of the child support program, including order modification and arrears management.

Parents are often not involved in order modification or decision-making processes of their arrears. County administrators shared that parents are not typically involved in the order modification process, given its streamlined nature and the fact that conditions are set for a notice of hearing 90 days after. Although parents can initiate an order modification review request per the written policy, parents are not typically notified of the actions that take place within this process, unless they complete the full modification process and financial information is requested. Parents mostly receive information from the court order, unless they are in contact with a worker who provides more detailed information.

The Department of Corrections Liaison program is also helpful in facilitating information sharing between parents who are incarcerated and child support workers. One county administrator described receiving feedback from some parents that they were unhappy about their orders being modified to zero without their knowledge or input. While administrators acknowledge that partnering and communicating with both parents is ideal during order modification and arrears forgiveness, logistical challenges to partnership can delay timely policy implementation.

Antiquated data systems have inhibited family-centered decision making. Several administrators commented on antiquated data systems posing challenges to setting arrears during incarceration and to processing post-incarceration order modification requests. Specific data system challenges include difficulty navigating database information to confirm incarceration status, an inability to obtain parent contact information, and unknown employment status for parents. Administrators remarked that newer staff especially can find it challenging to track down accurate information about parents who are (or have recently been) incarcerated to better inform the child support process. These challenges are most salient in counties when there are old non-public assistance debts and missing or unclear information about the case, such as past orders, reviews, or incarceration history. In these cases, the parent is still financially burdened by the debt but the worker cannot forgive it.

Current federal regulations may inhibit or conflict with state legislation and family-centered decision making. Under the 1986 federal Bradley Amendment, child support orders cannot be set to zero retroactively, even when a parent's incarceration of at least 180 days is confirmed after the incarceration period has ended. All administrators mentioned that – due to these federal regulations – even if a parent's 180-day incarceration is verified only after their release, the order still cannot be retroactively modified. This means the goals of the zero order modification policy at the state level cannot be fully realized due to the limitations of current federal law; federal law supersedes state policy in this context. Although zero order modifications for longer periods of incarceration can be expedited, they still require a formal request to be submitted by the child support program. If a parent's incarceration status is unknown, the parent may continue accruing child support obligations during their incarceration.

Bolstering cross-system partnerships would improve case information sharing and family-centered decision-making. Several administrators thought that stronger partnerships between the child support program and probation/parole could help overcome communication gaps and facilitate delivery of information to parents about child support policies and procedures after their release (e.g., including a check-in with the child support worker on the list of probation/parole

terms). More routine relationships between child support workers and probation/parole staff, via shared trainings or work groups, might help professionals obtain more accurate information on cases and make better decisions around setting orders and when to move cases forward for modification. Administrators also identified a gap in connections with community-based organizations that might be interfacing with parents on their caseloads post-release.

Fathers that participated in this assessment also emphasized strategies that would be bolstered by cross-systems and cross-agency partnerships. For example, partnerships to connect parents paying support with employment resources or referrals to other community supports.

Implications for child support policy and practice in Minnesota

Four implications for Minnesota's policy and practice emerged from the assessment:

1. **The Minnesota child support program has made significant progress in centering families affected by parent incarceration**. Specifically, Minnesota implemented streamlined child support order modifications, signaling opportunities for arrears management, and reducing enforcement actions post-release that are negatively associated with child well-being outcomes.
2. **Modernizing Minnesota's data systems and formalizing opportunities for cross-system partnership, communication, and training would improve informed and timely decision-making by child support programs**. Automated systems that better track and respond to changes in status due to incarceration would also be valuable.
3. **Child support programs can improve post-release outcomes and family stability** by establishing statewide minimum transition periods for resetting orders and implementing enforcement actions.
4. **Existing programs that facilitate communication and information sharing between child support programs and parents who are incarcerated (such as the Department of Corrections Liaison Program and the Re-entry Assistance Program, or RAP), are the main vehicle of communication between parents and county child support programs.** Increasing positions for these programs and extending reach to county jails would enable further cross-system partnership and parent engagement in the child support program.

Introduction

The Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (hereafter, MN DCYF) launched an exploratory, family-centered assessment of its child support program in the summer of 2024. This assessment is part of a federally funded project designed to examine and analyze child support services and develop recommendations that promote family centering within state child support programs.

In health and human services, centering the needs of families is a growing priority. A family-centered approach to program design, implementation, and evaluation gives priority to improving family well-being, relationships, and engagement (Berger & Font, 2015; Mas et al., 2019; Stormshak

et al., 2009). This approach requires shifting from an authority-centered structure (which features centralized decision-making with limited participant involvement) to approaches that directly incorporate family feedback and adapt policies and services to their needs (Moynihan et al., 2015; Van Veelen et al., 2018; Walter & Petr, 2000). A family-centered program assumes individual differences, striving to understand and adapt to unique behaviors and preferences (Epley et al., 2010; Pettoello-Mantovani et al., 2009). It ensures program participation burdens are proportional to available resources, setting reasonable expectations (Bell et al., 2023; Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021). Furthermore, family-centered programs prioritize transparent policies and practices, employing structured, evidence-based decision making to minimize bias and potential family alienation (Chen & Ganapati, 2023; Crepaz & Arikan, 2024; Daigneault & Macé, 2020; Ko & Moffitt, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023).

Historically, child support in the United States has not been a family-centered system. Enacted as Part D of Title IV of the Social Security Act of 1975 (hereafter referred to as Title IV-D), the U.S. child support system aimed to reduce government spending on families in poverty (Tollestrup, 2023)—a policy strategy known as "cost recovery." Initially, programs served only public assistance recipients, mandating families to cooperate and assign their rights to child support for recovery of benefit costs, and services expanded to voluntary participants during the 1980s. Later legislation strengthened enforcement tactics—including wage garnishment, tax refund intercepts, license suspension, and criminalization—to penalize and secure support from parents ordered to pay support. These involuntary measures and enforcement tactics have complicated various aspects of family life—including child and parent well-being and co-parenting relationships—especially for families with low incomes or who were facing other hardships impacting income earnings, such as current or recent incarceration. Child support programs across the country, including Minnesota, had historically been shaped by federal law and its tradition of this financially driven, enforcement-focused approach.

Motivated by broad public support for family centering, MN DCYF joined a federally-funded initiative project as a co-lead state, partnering with the child support programs in Michigan and California. This project includes state family-centered assessments, the implementation of a staff training tool, information system upgrades, family-centered assessment resources, and a consortium for knowledge sharing among participating state and Tribal child support programs. MN DCYF collaborated with Child Trends to develop and implement a family-centered assessment of its child support program to ultimately improve families' well-being and experiences within the program. Concurrently, Child Trends created a resource guide to both aid these state assessments and to later disseminate to the broader field.

About this Report

This report summarizes the process and findings of Minnesota's family-centered assessment, as guided by the conceptual model and analytic principles outlined in the resource guide developed for this project, *Family Centered Program Assessment: A Resource Guide for Child Support*

Programs (Chen & Vivrette, 2025). To conduct the assessment, key staff from MN DCYF and Child Trends met monthly to plan the assessment, and in partnership with MN DCYF, Child Trends executed the assessment.

This report begins with an understanding of the government level of the assessment (*Identifying Level of Policy and Practice*) and the context and timing of the assessment (*Understanding the Policy, Economic, and Demographic Context*), and how each of these factors play a role in shaping the assessment of family-centered policies and practices. Then the report describes five key activities conducted as part of the assessment, similar to those outlined in the resource guide, including:

- *Setting the Foundation:* This activity involves defining assessment purposes and scope, assembling an assessment team, and determining policy, practice, and outcomes of focus.
- *Identifying Family-Centered Considerations:* This activity involves identifying policy or practice for further exploration, interpreting findings from empirical analysis, and exploring the implications of unexpected findings.
- *Engaging Service Users and Communities:* This activity includes building intentional and authentic community partnerships, partnering with community and family member champions (e.g., parent/caregiver or community leaders in their neighborhoods), and approaching engagement as a long-term partnership.
- *Leveraging Data:* This activity involves proposing questions and objectives for data analysis, identifying the population of interest and sample, determining the type of data and methods for data collection.
- *Planning for Change:* Based on assessment findings, this activity determines the level and scope of change, fosters a family-centered environment locally, develops plans for ongoing monitoring and assessment, and specifies implementation details for the change.

The resource guide summarizes all relevant tasks for a comprehensive family-centered assessment for state programs to adapt based on their needs and priorities. The Minnesota family-centered assessment adapted tasks from the resource guide to fit MN DCYF's allocated resources, timeline, and priorities. For example, communities were engaged during data collection rather than during the problem identification or policy development activities. This aligns with the resource guide, which recognizes that community engagement in all assessment phases may not be feasible in some circumstances. Programs are encouraged to identify the phases where community engagement offers offer the greatest benefit, based on their resources and timeline.

Project Background

Identifying level of policy and practice

Program assessments may focus on federal, state, county, or municipal-level governments. The government level for this assessment was the state program level because MN DCYF is a co-lead state on the project, and its primary interest lies in evaluating the state child support program. However, as a county-administered child support program state, the assessment gathered feedback and insights from county child support program staff, focusing on how county implementation of child support policy and practice can inform state-level policymaking and programming decisions. While many state child support policies and practices are enacted or developed to comply with federal legislation and regulations, this assessment aims to identify opportunities within federal legal boundaries to promote strategies that center families in the state program.

Understanding the policy, economic, and demographic context

Policy context. Minnesota's child support program is county-administered, meaning that state statutes and policies apply to all counties, but the implementation of policies and practices, including any additional county-specific policies, may vary across counties. This approach recognizes that local systems and governments may benefit from flexibility in implementing policies and practices to meet the individual needs of families. However, this can lead to differences in how state policies are used and how they impact families, especially families of color and those with low incomes.

Over the past decade, Minnesota has focused child support program reforms specifically on parents who are or have previously been incarcerated, recognizing the numerous challenges and barriers this population faces transitioning from incarceration to community. These reforms are described below.

- In 2021, Minnesota instituted a statewide policy for a streamlined (i.e., expedited) child support order modification process for all parents who have a significant change in circumstance, including incarceration for at least 180 days, across all counties. This change recognizes that child well-being suffers from increased child support debt and arrears, and that accumulation of debt while a parent is unable to earn consistent income (i.e., during long-term incarceration, regardless of individual circumstance or type of crime the parent was convicted) may ultimately negatively affect child outcomes (Nepomnyaschy et. al., 2021). This policy shift aimed to reduce accumulation of child support arrears while a parent is unable to earn consistent income to meet child support order obligations. Arrears Management and Prevention Policy provides further guidance for helping parents manage arrears, including during periods of incarceration.
- In 2021-2022, Minnesota piloted an alternative approach to driver's license suspension for child support enforcement. The six-month pilot included 12 Minnesota counties and aimed

to improve communication between county child support workers and parents paying support at risk of having their driver's license suspended due to non-payment. The overall goal of the pilot was to reduce license suspensions and associated inconsistencies across counties in suspension decisions, and ultimately, to increase parent stability and compliance with child support orders. An outcomes evaluation of the pilot demonstrated that communication between child support workers and parents order to pay support increased during the pilot, driver's licenses suspensions dropped by 12 percent, and racial gaps in enforcement measures closed (Solmeyer et. al., 2024).

Broader economic and demographic context. Minnesota's population has grown modestly in recent years. While Minnesota's population is predominantly non-Hispanic White (80%), populations including Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color have grown more substantially in Minnesota compared to White population in Minnesota, which is projected to continue declining in coming years (Minnesota State Demographic Center, n.d.). Much of this growth is attributed to international immigration. Although Minnesota's overall poverty rates are significantly below those of the nation, poverty rates by race and ethnicity show persistent differences between racial groups. The poverty rate for Black/African American Minnesotans is 22.5% and for American Indian/Alaska Native Minnesotans is 29.3%, compared to 20.6% nationally for each group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

While Minnesota's crime and incarceration rates are below the national average, since the COVID-19 pandemic, they are rising faster than national rates. From 2021 to 2022, Minnesota's incarceration rate grew by eight percent compared to two percent nationally, an increase primarily attributed to higher admissions to state prisons. An estimated 1 out of 6 youth in Minnesota have an incarcerated or previously incarcerated parent, and most parents who are incarcerated in Minnesota lived with one of their minor children before their arrest. Over three-fourths of people released from a Minnesota prison in 2024 did so on supervised release or parole, reflecting current Minnesota laws that mandate most incarcerated individuals are eligible to serve the final third of their sentence on supervised release.

Like national trends, Black and African American Minnesotans are significantly overrepresented in the Minnesota state prison system, accounting for over 39% of the adult prison population. While the recent passage of the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act (MRRA) and other similar pieces of legislation are expected to reduce the amount of time incarcerated individuals serve in the state, these impacts are still being monitored.

Assessment Activity I: Setting the Foundation

Assembling an assessment team

MN DCYF established a project structure led by the Assistant Commissioner for the Family Well-being Administration of MN DCYF, who was responsible for major substantive decisions, publication reviews, and staffing delegation to support key project tasks (i.e. Child Support

Payment Specialist for child support policy extraction and summary; Department of Corrections Liaison to support parent recruitment), as well as a dedicated project manager within the Child Support Division of MN DCYF. MN DCYF also engaged a consulting firm, CGI, with expertise in child support policy to support project management, execution, and communication across all co-lead states. MN DCYF, CGI, and Child Trends held regular monthly calls, ad-hoc calls as needed, and ongoing email communication to plan and track project execution. The Child Support Payment Specialist provided support to Child Trends in extracting and summarizing child support policies for analysis.

Based on MN DCYF's previous work and interest in child support policy for parents who have been incarcerated, as well as preliminary findings from the MN document review, Child Trends developed protocols for county staff interviews and parent focus groups, with input and feedback from MN DCYF and the MN Department of Human Services (DHS) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Child Trends conducted these interviews, analyzed the qualitative data, and developed this report with input from the full project team.

Defining assessment purposes and scope

MN DCYF leadership was interested in extending the work of the driver's licenses suspension pilot project to understand more broadly how child support order modifications and arrears management affect parents when they are incarcerated and transition out of incarceration, including the extent to which parents are included and engaged in child support processes. Given the inconsistencies across counties and individual discretion in applying policy highlighted in the driver's licenses suspension pilot, MN DCYF was interested in understanding how order modification and arrears management practices might similarly face challenges to family-centered implementation, particularly for Black and African American families. Through collaborative discussion, the assessment team decided to focus the assessment on the following questions:

In Minnesota, how do child support policies address family centering in child support order modification and arrears management strategies for parents who are or have recently been incarcerated? How are parents engaged in the process and informed about their child support options during and after incarceration?

The team believed that answers to these questions would have important implications for family-centering in the program. The family-centered assessment sought to understand how child support policies and practices pose barriers to these families' ability to access or engage in child support services.

Determining policy, practice, and outcomes of focus

Based on the key assessment theme identified, the team considered relevant policy areas that could differentially affect or were unique to parents who had been incarcerated and were concurrently ordered to pay support, such as the prevention and management of state arrears and

interventions addressing barriers to paying child support among families with low incomes during and after incarceration.

Eventually, the following policies emerged as top priority areas for examination within this assessment:

- Streamlined order modification policies and implementation during and after incarceration
- Arrears management and prevention policies, practices, and decision-making during and after incarceration
- Policies and practices around parent involvement in the child support program during incarceration and post-release.

The assessment aimed to analyze how these policies are described "on the books" and how they are implemented "on the ground." It explored whether and how these policies present opportunities or barriers to engagement in child support programs and successful transition from incarceration to community, and how they affect individual well-being and family relationships—the priority outcomes of interest for any family-centered assessment. Because parents who face incarceration—particularly long-term incarceration—are often economically disadvantaged and face numerous barriers to stable employment and income earnings, child support policy that disproportionately impacts them should be addressed. These policy areas provide the structures to either aggravate or ameliorate differential treatment of parents who have been incarcerated within Minnesota's child support program.

Assessment Activity II: Identifying Family-Centered Considerations

To assess family-centering in MN's child support policies, we reviewed policies on (1) child support order modifications and (2) arrears management and prevention policies. The aim of this review was to pinpoint policy and practice areas that could be improved to better reflect the perspectives, experiences, and well-being of parents with incarceration histories and their families. The information gathered also helped inform topics to explore through qualitative data.

Method: Policy documentation review

After the assessment team identified the main policy topics for the family-centered assessment (i.e. order modifications, arrears management, and parent involvement in the child support program during incarceration and post-release), the researchers then reviewed documentation on these policies. The primary goals of this review were: (1) to identify alignment with family-centering principles along with potential barriers to family-centering within each policy topic, based on the Guiding Principles for Family-Centered Assessment (see resource guide); and (2) to develop plans for focused interviews with parents and program administrators to solicit their perspectives, feedback, and experiences related to the polices and how they are implemented. A specialist from

MN DCYF supported Child Trends' researchers by orienting them to relevant documents and interpreting the language within those documents. Most of this support was offered via email or on individual calls.

Specifically, the researchers reviewed policy and procedural documents[b] and reviewed them against the following principles (see details in resource guide):

- **Principle 1: Prioritizing a family-centered over an authority-centered approach**: A family-centered assessment prioritizes family well-being, experiences, and perspectives in its analysis, contrasting with authority-centered approaches that emphasize cost, efficiency, or bureaucratic convenience.
- **Principle 2: Fostering child well-being within the context of family relationships**: A family-centered assessment identifies opportunities to promote holistic child well-being—including emotional, social, and economic—while also recognizing co-parenting relationships, parenting preferences, and capacity.
- **Principle 3: Promoting the assumption of individual differences**: To respect individual differences, a family-centered assessment identifies rigid policies that assume uniform behavior and highlights program strengths that allow for adaptable procedures based on family circumstances.
- **Principle 4: Ensuring responsibility and burden proportional to resources**: A family-centered assessment identifies and addresses burdens disproportionate to an individual's available resources, or unequal burdens given similar resource levels (e.g., high child support orders for low-income payors).
- **Principle 5: Identifying opportunities for transparent policy and practice**: A family-centered assessment identifies opportunities for family engagement through transparent policies and practices, clear communication, and streamlined procedures that allow families to understand and utilize services effectively.
- **Principle 6: Promoting structured and evidence-based decision-making processes**: A family-centered assessment identifies and addresses policies and practices prone to error, bias, or discrimination by emphasizing guided or structured decision-making to systematically consider family circumstances.

[b] The following sources were reviewed: Arrears Management and Prevention Policy Manuals; streamlined order modification process guidance document and flowchart; reentry guidance document; Minnesota's Child Support Laws: An Overview, House Research Department, November 2015; publicly available statutory language; written notes and policy interpretation guidance provided by the Child Support Payment Specialist on the assessment team.

Identifying policy or practice for further exploration

The findings from the documentation review are discussed in more detail below and summarized in Table 1. Inferences were primarily drawn from thematic, textual analysis based on the guiding principles.

Document Review Findings

Overall, MN policies show meaningful movement toward family-centered practice—including for parents with incarceration histories—through arrears management and prevention policies and streamlined zero-orders modification processes when ability to pay is absent. These policies recognize behavioral differences, ensure proportional burdens, and support structured decision-making. However, barriers remain. Child well-being is still mostly framed in financial terms (Principle 2), limited opportunities due to current federal law – the Bradley Amendment of 1986 – to retroactively modify orders contribute to disproportionate burdens (Principle 4), and extensive county discretion undermines transparency and consistency (Principles 5 and 6), despite standard procedures outlined at the state level.

Factors that contribute to variable and sometimes inconsistent implementation of **child support order modification policies** by county include differences in staff knowledge and training, volume of caseloads, and staff discretion. A streamlined process exists for cases where no income or assets are available, but modifications are not automatic, require court action, and cannot be applied retroactively. This means arrears often accumulate for parents during incarceration if they are not immediately aware of the opportunity to request a review and modification based on their change in circumstances. Arrears also accrue in the interim before a modification takes effect, including while a parent awaits sentencing or if a parent has a shorter period of incarceration, most often in jail versus prison. Although retroactive modifications are not possible, Child Support Officers are still required to conduct an arrears management and prevention policy review and apply an arrears management strategy when a parent meets the criteria for arrears management.

Importantly, the MN Department of Children, Youth, and Families and the Department of Corrections (DOC) have partnered to place dedicated staff in facilities, providing information and resources during intake and as part of parents' pre-release transition planning. A dedicated DOC liaison provides information and assistance to staff and incarcerated parents at all DOC facilities and at all stages of incarceration. This position is supported by the DOC Reentry Services Unit in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Human Services. The DOC also provides data on the intake and release dates of incarcerated people, which can be used to identify parents eligible for order modifications. However, child support staff have discretion in terms of the extent to which they review and use these data to initiate order modification requests.

Parents have an important responsibility as one of only three parties that can request a review of a child support order. Either parent may request a review in writing, by phone, or in person. IV-D agency staff may also initiate a review, or another state or Tribal IV-D agency can request a review. Once a review is requested, parents must provide all required information, including current

financial statements. Reviews can proceed without the requested financial information using the best available information. These procedures may place excessive burden on parents to understand and initiate the review request process if child support staff are not equally proactive and working in the best interest of the families.

The goal of MN's **Arrears Management and Prevention Policy** is to take a more proactive approach to the order modification and arrears management processes for parents with incarceration histories (among other qualifying criteria), although the actual implementation looks different across counties. The ideal time to initiate an arrears management strategy is when an order modification request is being considered to consider current orders and arrears simultaneously.

As noted, Minnesota's Arrears Management and Prevention Policy allows for relief when parents are incarcerated, including for periods shorter than 180 days. Family-centered strategies include individualized reviews, involving parents receiving support in decision-making, and opportunities to reduce state-owed arrears if non-monetary conditions are met. Examples of such conditions described in the policy documentation included participation in a fatherhood program or active job search reporting and job retention. The policy aims to prevent uncollectible debt and recognize parents' limited resources, but the use of discretionary language (e.g., "may" apply arrears relief) results in inconsistent application. Outcomes from these actions depend on variable county practices, possibly leading to inconsistencies in access and effectiveness. Guidance documents and forms do exist to support consistent implementation, but significant variation across counties persists.

Importantly, the Arrears Management and Prevention Policy allows for a range of factors beyond a payor's income to be considered when determining if a review should proceed. These factors take into account additional hardships that may contribute to a parents' inability to pay, including reentry barriers related to employment and housing, as well as short- and long-term health conditions.

Parents receiving support are explicitly involved in arrears management decisions and are generally supportive of relief efforts. The parent receiving payments has to agree to an Arrears Management strategy, and cannot be coerced or required to comply. Both parents are engaged during reentry planning.

Streamlined order modifications and arrears management strategies are two mechanisms that can shape how parents engage with the child support system during and after incarceration. Several additional practices exist that are responsive to parents' change in circumstances due to incarceration, although these policies are not all formalized at the state level, nor are they consistently followed across counties. For example, enforcement actions related to driver's license suspensions and credit bureau reporting are suppressed once the child support program becomes aware of incarceration. As another example, contempt of court actions cannot be initiated by a child support officer if a parent is incarcerated. Child support officers typically handle decisions about these other types of enforcement actions on a case-by-case basis, and whether and for how long the suppressions are in place varies by county and client.

Table 1. Alignment of child support policies/practices with family-centered principles for parents who have been incarcerated

Policy/practice	Alignment with family-centering principles	Barriers to alignment with family-centering principles
Order modification policies and practices		
State-level requirement for order review if any change in circumstances may make the current child support order unreasonable or unfair based on the statutory criteria.	Consistent procedures for agency staff make policies and procedures transparent **(Principle 6)**.	Policies are documented but vary by county. Heavy reliance on county discretion undermines consistency and increases risk of bias.
Order modification allowed when parent paying support is sentenced to serve more than 180 days in a correctional facility. If the court determines the parent paying support has no income, child support order is set to zero.	Ensures obligations are aligned with actual resources, preventing undue burden on the parent paying support **(Principle 4)**.	Considerable burden put on child support officers and agencies to initiate reviews. Antiquated data systems make the process for tracking the incarceration status, contact information, and other relevant details about parents cumbersome; and can lead to misinformation, missed cases, and delays; Retroactive order modifications are not allowed due to federal law so child support payments may continue to accumulate.
A streamlined review and modification process may be used when a parent ordered to pay support has no income or assets from which support can be paid, including circumstances due to incarceration.	Uses structured criteria and oversight to reduce bias and ensure consistency **(Principle 6)**.	Considerable burden put on child support officers, agencies, and parents to be proactive in reviewing client data and initiating reviews.
Parents paying support or parents receiving support can request a review through several mechanisms.	Clear and accessible procedures for families, improving transparency **(Principle 5)**.	Considerable burden put on parents to be aware of the policy and their role in initiating reviews.
Parents with incarceration histories who are paying support are encouraged to	Messaging from DOC frames engagement with child support	Limited communication and education for parents receiving support.

engage with child support during intake discussions so that the most appropriate orders can be set for them during incarceration (i.e., zero-order modifications).	as beneficial for parents and children **(Principle 1)**.	
Intentional coordination and communication between MN DCYF and DOC to inform and engage families affected by incarceration.	Proactive and collaborative approach to engaging families and tailoring supports to individual and family circumstances **(Principle 1)**.	Requires buy-in and unbiased and consistent adherence to polices across all partners.
Arrears management and prevention policies (AMPP) and practices		
Systematic approach to conducting an AMPP review, with shared manuals and process documentation.	Promotes structured and evidence-based decision-making processes **(Principle 6)**.	County discretion can result in inconsistent implementation of procedures and unequal treatment.
Arrears management strategies may be requested for periods of incarceration less than 180 days.	Allows for adjustments to arrears that are proportionate to an individual's available resources **(Principle 4)**.	Unclear process for identifying cases eligible for arrears management that varies by county.
Individualized review of client circumstances.	Accounts for varied family circumstances rather than assuming uniform ability to pay **(Principle 3)**.	Considerable burden put on child support officers, agencies, and parents to be proactive in reviewing client data and initiating reviews.
Parents receiving support can be involved in the development of arrears management strategies, with guidance on how to navigate the process without coercion.	Documented requirements for communicating with parents receiving support when considering arrears management for non-public assistance arrears that allows them to understand and contribute to decisions **(Principle 5)**.	Actual communication with parents receiving support is limited.
Opportunity to reduce Public Assistance arrears if non-monetary conditions are met such as participation in a fatherhood program, job search and retention, cooperation with order review and modification procedures.	Recognizes that supporting parent engagement and stability benefits children beyond financial support **(Principle 1)**.	Procedures and decisions remain mostly focused on income and ability to pay.
Policies and practices around parent involvement in the child support program during incarceration and post-release		

Enforcement actions related to driver's license suspensions and credit bureau reporting are suppressed once the child support program becomes aware of incarceration. For license suspensions, suppression extends six-months beyond a parents' release to support reentry. Contempt of court actions cannot be initiated by a child support officer if a parent is incarcerated.	Allows for adaptable procedures based on family circumstances **(Principle 3)**.	Interpretation and implementation of the credit bureau reporting suppression varies given county discretion in terms of how to interpret and implement this practice. Enforcement actions beyond driver's license suspension, credit bureau reporting, and contempt of court have no official policy in terms of modifications when a parent is incarcerated. Child support officers typically handle decisions about other enforcement actions on a case-by-case basis. Unclear documentation on the extent to which parents ordered to pay support are made aware of the opportunity to suppress certain enforcement actions during and after incarceration.

Assessment Activity III: Engaging Service Users and Communities

After completing the policy documentation review, the assessment team convened to discuss community engagement strategies. This involved determining audiences, goals, objectives, processes, and desired outcomes. The policy documentation outlines instructions for streamlined order modification for those incarcerated for 180 days or longer, as well as factors to consider when determining arrears management strategies and enforcement remedies, but it does not detail how policies are implemented on the ground or how parents experience or perceive the implementation from a user's viewpoint. The documentation review also identified key areas that could impact family-centering for further exploration through amended or new policies and procedures. These initial findings informed the assessment team's development of community engagement plans.

The assessment primarily engaged communities during the data collection phase. We conducted multiple outreach activities to engage communities, including holding multiple virtual sessions providing an overview of the project and requesting participation in the administrator focus groups and assistance with parent recruitment; collaborating with the DOC liaison to co-develop and disseminate parent recruitment materials; and collaborating with community organization leaders who interface with fatherhood groups for recruitment support.

Assessment Activity IV: Leveraging Data

Method: Parent focus group

We held one parent focus group to understand parents' experiences with order modification and arrears management processes. We attempted to initially recruit parents using IRB-approved flyers distributed to county child support points of contact, the DOC Laison, and the DOC Liaison's community contacts. Despite repeated follow-ups and reminders to share the recruitment flyer, the research team did not receive any referrals for participants or outreach from potential participants. The MN state lead for the assessment connected the research team to a fatherhood program director to assist with recruitment. The program director organized a group of eight men who had been involved in the child support program and had some arrest or incarceration history. A research team member attended a virtual meeting in the evening at a time convenient for the group to facilitate the session. The focus group was recorded in Teams for transcription and analysis. The program director coordinated the meeting invitation and communication with participants, which was critical to the successful implementation of the focus group. The research team member and program director held a planning call before conducting the focus group. All participants provided oral consent to participate in the research study and were compensated with a $50 gift card for participating.

Method: Administrator and DOC liaison staff interviews

Participant recruitment

To understand how order modification, arrears management and prevention policies, and other policies shaping parents' involvement with the child support system during and after incarceration are implemented for parents who have been incarcerated, the assessment team interviewed five child support supervisors/managers representing four counties in Minnesota, all of whom also participated in the driver's license suspension pilot. Administrators were all highly experienced, ranging from 12 to 32 years in supervisory positions in the Minnesota child support program.

The assessment team invited representatives from all 12 counties that participated in the driver's license suspension pilot to participate in interviews via emails from Child Trends researchers and from the DCYF Assistant Commissioner. The team also held two virtual webinars to provide an overview of the project and invite county administrators to participate. This approach was used recognizing that including representatives from all counties was out of scope for the assessment

timeline and resources, and that the assessment team wanted to gather a range of perspectives from both small and large counties serving varying populations.

In addition, we conducted an interview with a DOC Liaison program staff member to understand how child support information is communicated during and shortly after incarceration, and input the program has received through its interactions with parents who are incarcerated.

Protocol development and analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by Child Trends researchers and was designed for a 45-60 minute interview. MN DCYF staff on the assessment team reviewed and approved the protocol (see Appendix 2). The protocol was also reviewed and approved by the MN DHS IRB. Protocol topics included administrator background and experience, current implementation of order modification and arrears management and prevention policies and procedures, barriers and potential solutions facing parents who are incarcerated and are ordered to pay child support, and opportunities for cross-system partnerships. Administrators received the protocol in advance and provided informed consent to be interviewed. With permission, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis of interview themes. A senior researcher conducted all interviews with support from a notetaker.

Results: Parent focus group

Perceptions of Child Support Programs and Staff

All fathers who participated in the focus group expressed significant, deep-seeded negative perceptions of the child support program. Notably, some fathers were not currently involved in the child support program, while others had children as young as age 7. All had many years of experience interacting with child support programs in several counties in Minnesota. As fathers described their experiences over the course of the focus group, they became visibly upset and expressed anger over what they had encountered with the child support program. Key highlights of the areas of most frequent or highest concern were:

- Being treated as a "case" with an enforcement-focused lens rather than aligning with family-centered principles; not receiving credit or acknowledgement for adhering to child support orders for many years
- Being negatively impacted by previous and/or current laws and policies, including accrual of arrears during incarceration, delays in order modifications, and drivers license suspensions negatively impacting their employment opportunities
- Challenges navigating required documents and paperwork with limited supports offered

One father shared feeling "deflated" and "powerless" by the way he was treated by child support workers but acknowledged that much of this interaction is dictated by system and paperwork requirements.

> ***"It sometimes makes a dad or even a mom feel powerless because it's like talking to the so-called person of authority and they [just say] yeah, just go fill this paperwork***

out. It gives them this aura of [being] nonchalant, where they may not intentionally even try to be that way, but because of how [the system] is, they have to direct you the way they have to. That's kind of deflating depending on where you are in the process."

Another father similarly commented on feeling that his future outlook was poor and that he experiences ongoing stress associated with arrears that he can never pay off given his income.

"I'm making $10 an hour, you know? So it felt like you could never get ahead. You know, I'm already behind on child support, so I can't. There's no way I can ever get my license back. I'm making $10 an hour. I'm working a telemarketing job... so what do I have to look forward to? You know what I'm saying? Spend time with my kids on the weekends, which is cool, but I'm on the bus, you know? So I've been struggling forever."

In general, although some fathers in the group shared experiences from several years ago, others shared similar, more recent experiences. The group uniformly felt that very little had changed in child support in 20 years and reflected little hope that meaningful changes would be made. Many fathers had participated in similar focus groups or surveys in the past but felt that their participation did not translate to meaningful change in the system. Notably, the program director who organized the group shared that the men who participated in the group were leaders who had attended the program for many years; this is important context because, despite positive policy changes for the child support program in MN over the past decade (e.g., driver's license suspension pilot, zero order modification during incarceration), most of the fathers in the group had not heard about these changes.

"It sets you up. You ain't got nobody down there like, hey, you need help on the paperwork? I got you. No, I've been down there, sat there all day. Watch how they work. They're not with you. They're against you. So at the end of the day, I don't think child support can change nothing. You can't."

Perceived Stigma for Fathers involved in the Child Support Program

Most fathers reported several experiences with perceived stigma and unfair treatment by the child support program compared to women and mothers. They shared examples of being flagged for fraud during periods when their children were primarily living with them, having to submit multiple documents to prove their children were in their care, and being told directly by child support workers that they do not typically see fathers with primary custody. One father shared his recent experience having to jump through multiple hoops to get his child support modified and prove that his children were living with him.

"[This summer] my kids...moved back to Minnesota. So I tried to go to [my] County and get a case. My kids are in county schools, they left in [winter], they came back to me over the summer. I guess it red flagged, and they said that there was a case in [another state] for them. They asked for all the verifications, I got all the verifications to the county. They still put me on a fraud alert. Had the fraud people come out to my house, prove that the kids were there. They did all that and then still a few weeks ago sent me

> ***a letter saying I'm ineligible. Even a caseworker called in the middle of the summer and said we want to apologize to you. I'm looking at your case, and we usually don't get dads that are moving forward with this."***

Another father shared a similar experience with being stigmatized and reported being investigated for kidnapping his children. Similar to others in the group, he did not perceive that standards were equally applied to fathers and others involved in the child support program.

> ***"They did it to me the same way they did to him. I couldn't even get public assistance. And they were still trying to figure out, where's the mother? Why is she not in the kid's life? They literally went look for her to make sure that I wasn't kidnapping the kids. And then I got to come up with all this different paperwork to prove that I'm not kidnapping my kids. But when a mother goes through a situation like that, she don't have to do nothing. All she have to do is put the father's name on a piece of pa***per."

Awareness of Child Support Program Policy Changes

As noted above, information about child support program policy changes and improvements were largely unknown to fathers in the focus group. One father reported that he heard another father talking about zero order modification during his recent incarceration, but he was not certain that it was true. None of the fathers were aware of the DOC Liaison program, but it was unclear if any fathers had been incarcerated in prison after the initiation of the program. For these reasons, fathers were largely unable to share any experiences with order modification or arrears management during incarceration that was relevant to current policy. Some fathers did share that their county provided 30 days after incarceration before requiring weekly documentation of job applications and other paperwork for order modification after release.

Parent Recommendations for Program Improvements

Fathers generally struggled to offer solutions or recommendations for child support program improvement due to their perception that any recommendations or suggestions were unlikely to change the system.

One father recommended expanding arrears management strategies for forgiveness and limiting punitive enforcement measures such as driver's license suspension.

> ***"Get at a starting point where a dad has a chance. Because if you're $20,000 or $30,000 in the hole, when will you ever get your license back? If you can't, if you got a couple of felonies, how are you going to get a job? Not saying giving an excuse to them, but there's some things that when you have them, you can't overcome them to move forward."***

Some fathers also suggested that child support workers should take a more holistic, case management approach by offering employment resources or referrals to other community supports, rather than solely focusing on child support enforcement.

> ***"I think they should be an employment advocacy piece. Honestly, I think the caseworker should say [to the parent], you know what, how are you? I mean, I see you're paying this child support on time, but you know, I got a memo about Anoka County got industrial manufacturing jobs. Maybe you could see about this. I'll send you this information. It seems like they would be somebody that would be prone to receiving that information."***

A final recommendation made by multiple fathers was to increase public awareness and parent education about their rights and processes for order modification.

> ***"So my two cents is there needs to be more education and I don't know if that's in the prison systems and I know they can't do it for everybody, but for Minnesota, can they offer some type of education while they're in the system on how to make that phone call and have that order at least temporarily stopped while they are incarcerated?"***

When the facilitator shared information in response to the father's recommendation about the DOC Liaison program and zero order modification being initiated by the child support program, fathers strongly recommended that the DOC Liaison program should be expanded.

> ***"Based on what you just communicated, I feel you definitely need to put in writing: immediate priority that her division gets expanded immediately. It definitely should be more people advocating this to get this information out, because that's honestly probably the real reason why it's such a concern on our side, because she can only do so much as one person. And she's dealing with a prison system that's enlarging as we go. So I mean she get her caseload is naturally growing. Her caseload is growing more than what she her job is. I think advocating for her to get help is probably one of the easiest pieces of ingredients of the pie there probably is."***

Results: Administrator and DOC liaison staff interviews

There are several policies and supports available to parents who have been ordered to pay child support and are incarcerated.

As previously discussed, Minnesota uses a streamlined child support order modification process which was established in 2021. This process is implemented for all parents who are incarcerated for at least 180 days across all counties. However, zero-order modifications are not "automatic" and still require the child support program to request the modification. For individuals incarcerated in county jails for less than 180 days, order modifications may be requested pro se or are reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Administrators highlighted certain factors that alert staff that an order modification request may be warranted, such as serving multiple short sentences over a brief period of time, or when trial is delayed and bail is set to a high amount, or if a sentence has been issued and there is substantial time to process an order modification (e.g., if a parent is sentenced to 5 months in county jail). Some larger counties reported having staffing resources to assign dedicated teams that specialize in order modifications for incarcerated parents, including those who are serving shorter individual sentences in county jail. Smaller counties use a similar team-

based decision-making approach but may not have dedicated teams to special topics depending on staff size.

Once parents are released from incarceration, counties reported varying practices on resetting orders that had been modified to zero. Some counties make the zero-order modification a permanent order, other counties have a 90-day transition period after release before a modification from the zero order is initiated, while others wait for notification of employment through electronic data systems or other sources. One county described their use of a parent meeting the "three-fourths" income criteria (i.e., three-fourths above self-support reserve, which is 120% of the federal poverty line). Employment status changes are not proactively sent to counties or "flagged"; child support workers must review reports and look for a "match" between parents on their caseloads and employment records. As with all decisions requiring some level of discretion, all counties stated that they are in close consultation with their county attorneys and case law to inform their decisions around child support policy implementation.

All counties also mentioned that for a small portion of cases during incarceration, the parent who is incarcerated might prefer to not have their order modified to zero and continue paying child support while earning a small amount of income in jail or prison, or in rarer cases, if they have financial assets. Some counties do not encourage or allow this practice (i.e., primarily due to administrative burden and the complexity of sustaining child support order with quickly fluctuating income earnings), while others do allow it but highlighted administrative complications in processing these requests. Similarly, counties had varying practices for closing cases for parents with long sentences beyond a child's emancipation, with some moving to close the case and others requiring some level of coordination with the other parent to agree to close the case.

All counties felt that they had a consistent process and standard policy for requesting public assistance arrears forgiveness for parents who are incarcerated. For non-public arrears, all counties also highlighted that they are unable to forgive these arrears and need approval from the other parent. Counties described offering support to parents to facilitate conversations about forgiveness and serve as the bridge between the parent owing support and receiving support. Administrators emphasized their focus on reducing debt and financial burden for parents who have been incarcerated and taking a family-centered approach.

> ***"One of the things that I encourage my staff to do is not to look at arrears management too rigidly. So sometimes you would see somebody say we're going to forgive this year and then we charge for a little while and then we forgave again. You know, the off and on if people come out of incarceration and re-offend and go back into incarceration in a short time period. They probably really didn't have the ability to work or pay during that time period. So we try to look at the big picture instead of just these months and not these months, or this year but not this year. Try to look at the big picture and their overall history of being incarcerated."***

Balancing family-centered decision making with standardized child support policy implementation is a common practice when determining order modification and arrears management requests.

> ***"There's a lot of grey area in policy everywhere, but child support is almost all grey. We have policies, but every situation is so unique, that these policies don't always cover it."***

Overall, a common theme that emerged across counties were the differing approaches to decision-making in complex child support cases, or what administrators referred to as "grey area" cases. Administrators reported that incarceration inherently creates complexities in applying child support policy consistently. All counties emphasized the importance of professional collaboration and team-based decision-making to support families and consider the perspective of both parents and the child when making changes and requests. These collaborations occur at multiple levels, including between child support workers and supervisors, between child support staff and county attorneys, and between county administrators to compare practices and strategies. One county also mentioned a wraparound case management model, the Re-entry Assistance Program (RAP), that was initiated with grant funding and was absorbed into county staffing. This program helps provide a seat at the table for child support for case discussion and facilitating cross-system coordination of communications. . The DOC Liaison program provides a similar type of coordination support to communicate requests or other information between parents who are incarcerated and the child support worker. This balancing act of using a family-centered approach with standard policy guidelines was a consistent theme across all counties and applied to multiple areas of the child support program, including order modification and arrears management.

> ***"When you ask what policies we have [for parents who are incarcerated], not everything is policy as written. There's got to be some that are case by case, as is the judicial system, it's case by case, and our attorney wants it to be that way. Our attorney doesn't want to just say everything is cookie cutter. My mantra as a lead worker was getting written training materials and policies in place in a small county where we haven't always had that and consistency. I want consistency. I don't want one person in one caseload to get something different than in my county. I really would love if we could be as consistent as we can statewide but also understanding that some counties have different challenges than other counties do."***

> ***"So I think we all would love to be consistent and try to you know, calibrate with each other, right? Like are we doing this or how are you doing that? We do that through [regional] supervisor groups. We just kind of ask each other, hey, what about this question? What do you do? My attorney is saying this, would your attorney say that? So I feel like just county to county consistency, there are ways to collaborate."***

From the statewide perspective of the DOC Liaison program, one area where there more variability between counties is on arrears management decisions. Some counties make more consistent

decisions based on length of sentence to forgive public assistance arrears, while others may not or may contact the DOC Liaison for additional case information on incarceration history. Some counties also have more consistent practices of reaching out to the parent receiving support to inquire about their willingness to forgive arrears during incarceration, particularly arrears that accumulated years prior.

Another area with more significant variability between counties is the time period after incarceration before orders are requested to be modified from zero. Providing adequate time to transition from incarceration to community was identified as an important factor in a parent's successful re-entry and risk for return to incarceration.

> ***"Oftentimes I see more of these cases. I have the same clients multiple times that I work with, and I can see what happened with their child support the last time they got out, and what county did what as far as reinstatement goes. All over the board, and it's a huge issue. I can see it as a whole picture. Especially when somebody comes back, I can see that. And a lot of these guys have multiple cases. So as multiple cases get reinstated, all of a sudden you're talking $1000 a month in child support, even though each case isn't that much, but they all get reinstated. And I can just see the fall off. I can see the panic. I can see the return to crime. I can see the return to that type of behavior. It is. It's all over the board. I don't know what the right answer with that is."***

Most counties generally rely on their county attorneys and referencing recent case law when making decisions about "grey area" cases. County attorneys are also well informed on how magistrates rule on cases and can take those factors into consideration when making recommendations. County and state manuals also provide structured guidance for making child support decisions. Administrators in one county stated that for their county, government policies and guidelines address about 90-95% of child support cases, while allowing counties to be flexible with the remaining 5-10%, and that this approach has worked well for them. They noted that counties that historically interpret policy in very strict or inflexible ways might face challenges in making informed child support decisions for parents who have been incarcerated. County administrators also described using county-specific manuals to train case workers and apply policy consistently, and to fill gaps in state policies that leave a great deal of discretion.

> ***"The state oftentimes will have policies that leave a lot of room just for discretion. So counties can kind of fill in the gap that. That's not unusual, but I really felt like the arrears management policy was too wide open and that it would leave some counties the ability not to do any arrears forgiveness at all. We almost always create our own policies to supplement state policies, and so we do have a policy that is both in an arrears management policy and also in a case closure policy that is a little more directive [in language] to forgive the arrears in these circumstances instead of 'you may consider' or you 'should' or something. It just says forgive the arrears in these circumstances."***

Parents are often not involved in order modification or arrears decision-making processes.

County administrators shared that parents are not typically involved in the order modification process, given the streamlined process and that conditions are set for a notice of hearing 90 days after. Parents are not typically even notified of anything in this process, unless a full modification takes place and a financial information request is sent. Administrators stated that this practice is more of a notification rather than a partnership. Parents mostly receive information from the court order, unless they have a case worker who provides more detailed information. One administrator highlighted that gaps in parent-child support communication came to light during their participation in the driver's license suspension pilot; many parents were unaware that their license was suspended when they were incarcerated and some parents were found to have violated the terms of their probation/parole when they were driving after release. Through the pilot program, they can suppress their driver's license suspension, allowing individuals to get back on their feet and reducing communication burdens about driver's license status.

> ***"Parents are not given a whole lot of information and so if they don't have prior incarceration experience or know someone, they likely wouldn't know that support would be set to zero when they open a child support case. That information just isn't out there."***

As described earlier, programs like RAP and the DOC Liaison program help to facilitate parent engagement, partnership, and communication. However, the DOC Liaison program, in particular, was recommended by administrators (and parents, as reported above) for expansion. When asked about an expanded liaison model, the program staff indicated expansion would allow for additional in-person interactions and education with parents; expansion to working with residential substance use treatment facilities; systems and relationship building with county agencies; and possibly expansion to county jail system. One county also facilitates a community engagement group in county correctional facilities to answer questions from parents who have child support cases.

One county administrator described receiving feedback from some parents who were incarcerated that they were unhappy about their orders being modified to zero without their knowledge or input. While administrators acknowledge that partnering and communicating with parents is ideal, their focus is on timely and streamlined modification and forgiveness.

Modernizing data systems and bolstering cross-system partnerships would improve case information sharing and family-centered decision-making. Several administrators commented on antiquated data systems posing challenges to setting arrears during incarceration as well as post-incarceration order modification requests. Arrears cannot be set to zero until incarceration status is confirmed, and even if incarceration is confirmed later, there is no option for retroactively forgiving support orders. Specific data system challenges include difficulty using interfaces to confirm incarceration status, inability to obtain parent contact information, and unknown employment status. For newer staff in particular, administrators stated it can be challenging to track down accurate information about parents who are or have recently been incarcerated to better inform the child support process. These challenges are particularly difficult in some counties

when old debts of non-public arrears are present, but there is inconsistent or missing information about the orders, reviews, incarceration history, or other related factors. In these cases, the parent is still financially burdened by the debt, but the worker cannot forgive it.

> ***"The biggest challenge is making sure that [parent paying support] is in communication with us. Like I said, when they get out, they have so many people to communicate with and try to get their lives back on track and then probably the last thing that you're thinking about is child support, which is why it's great that we get automated new hire reports. You know, if somebody gets a job, you know where they're working and then that will give us an address or phone number. Address and employment are things that we don't have. And trying to get that information from a parole officer isn't always the easiest thing."***

Several administrators thought that a stronger partnership between the child support program and probation/parole would be helpful to overcome communication gaps and to facilitate information delivery to parents about child support policies and procedures after release (e.g., including a check-in with the child support worker on the list of probation/parole terms). Having more routine relationships between child support workers and probation/parole through shared trainings or work groups might also help in obtaining more accurate information on the case and better decision-making around setting orders and when to move cases forward for modification. In addition to RAP and the DOC Liaison programs, administrators also identified a gap in connections with community-based organizations who might be interfacing with parents on their caseloads post-release. Administrators said there is a need to identify more community partners for post-incarceration support to help with basic needs, general support, and stabilization, or to leverage existing partnerships (e.g. fatherhood organizations) to focus more specifically on incarceration. One county said they specifically hired a staff member to help support cross-system partnerships, but more support is needed.

Assessment Activity V: Planning for Change

Reviewing key findings

Minnesota's child support policies for parents who have been incarcerated have made several gains in aligning with family-centered principles over the past decade, but there are numerous opportunities for enhancing family-centering further in Minnesota's child support program policies. The assessment team met to review preliminary themes and results from the policy documentation review and administrator interviews, discussing implications of findings and recommendations for future policy change. Below, we discuss each of these high-level recommendations in detail.

Determining the level and scope of change

1. **The Minnesota child support program has made significant progress in centering families affected by parent incarceration**. Specifically, Minnesota implemented

streamlined child support order modifications and driver's license suspension transition periods, signaling opportunities for arrears management, and reducing enforcement actions post-release that are negatively associated with child well-being outcomes. Pilot outcomes evaluation findings for these efforts show positive trends for associations with positive outcomes. More robust quantitative and qualitative analyses of the implementation and impact of these policy changes on process and outcomes, including economic and family stability, child support program administrative workflows, parent engagement and relationships with the child support program and related systems, will facilitate continued quality improvement, policy reform, and systems change. Future policy reforms, such as establishing a statewide post-release transition period for arrears collection, should be informed by evaluation and assessment of previous policy reform. In addition, making ongoing efforts to engage parents receiving support in addition to parents paying support in these efforts. Both parents can play an important role in decisions about order modifications and arrears management, and actively engaging both parents may improve family buy-in and trust in the child support system.

2. **Modernizing Minnesota's data systems and formalizing opportunities for cross-system partnership, communication, and training would improve informed and timely decision-making by child support programs**. Automated systems that better track and respond to changes in status due to incarceration would also be valuable. Child support administrators and program staff were clear that timely and family-centered child support decision-making is reliant on having accurate case information. Administrators felt that establishing regular, proactive opportunities to build relationships between probation/parole and child support staff (e.g., through shared trainings, collaboration workflows, dedicated systems building staff) would greatly enhance informed child support decision-making. In addition, conducting a review with input from child support staff of current data system challenges and potential improvements would improve information availability and processes.

3. **Child support programs can improve post-release outcomes and family stability** by establishing statewide minimum transition periods for resetting orders and implementing enforcement actions. Administrators identified that establishing the statewide transition timeline for driver's license suspension post-release led to significant positive changes for parents in re-entry. These changes are likely to benefit parents receiving support as well as those paying support to the extent that they help reduce recidivism, result in parents' ability to resume paying child support, and contribute to greater family stability. Some administrators also recommended that a similar approach could be taken for arrears collection timelines after release, as well as more proactive efforts to share arrears collection timelines with parents who return to employment. Specific considerations, such as amount of time served, could also inform the uniform transition timeline for arrears.

Given the wide variability in current county practices for post-release arrears, this is likely vulnerable to misalignment with family-centered child support principles.

From a parent perspective, family stability could be enhanced by treating parents paying support with more respect and understanding of their individual circumstances and differences and connecting parents to a more holistic set of services and supports.

4. **Existing programs that facilitate communication and information sharing between child support programs and parents who are incarcerated (such as the DOC Liaison Program and RAP), are the main vehicle of communication between parents and county child support programs.** Increasing positions for these programs and extending reach to county jails would enable further cross-system partnership and parent engagement in the child support program. Staff from these programs identified that additional resources, staffing, and support would enable them to conduct in-person coordination and relationship-building with parents who are incarcerated and to support their engagement in the child support program. It would also enable them to serve as "dot connectors" between the various systems that interface with parents in the child support program and potentially facilitate (with county support) communication between parents to support decision-making, including orders and arrears forgiveness.

   Multiple fathers who contributed to this assessment also emphasized the need for increased public awareness and parent education about their rights and processes for order modification, and supported the recommendation to expand the DOC Liaison Program.

Developing plans for ongoing monitoring and assessment

Future quantitative data analysis and workgroup sessions with qualitative feedback loops may be conducted to examine how order modification and arrears management decisions are being made and tracked across counties. Following the structure of the driver's license suspension pilot project, Minnesota may consider investing in and conducting rapid cycle evaluations or small tests of change when implementing new policies or procedures, such as child support order abatement or longer, standardized post-release time periods before zero-order modifications may be revisited. While quantitative data indicators on order adherence are important for understanding the impact of such policy changes, qualitative feedback and engagement with child support workers and families is equally as important to understanding how policy changes are impacting systems and families. As a process evaluation activity, Minnesota might also consider formalizing opportunities for collaboration and information between child support program staff statewide, for providing cross-system training between child support, court, and corrections staff, and professional development incentives for national conference participation with other states. Given the challenges in recruiting parent participants for the current assessment, it will also be important to

identify trusted, “on the ground” community representatives to engage with parents who have been incarcerated, build trust, and seek their input and feedback on child support policy change.

Concluding the Assessment

This report summarizes an exploratory, family-centered assessment of the Minnesota child support program, conducted in summer 2024. As a co-lead state in a federal project, Minnesota partnered with organizations like Child Trends to examine child support services and develop recommendations for improved access and fairness. The assessment specifically analyzed how Minnesota’s order modification and arrears management approaches impact family centering for IV-D child support services, with a focus on parents who have been incarcerated.

Administrator and DOC Liaison staff interviews revealed several advancements in child support policies and practices for parents who have been incarcerated in Minnesota over the past decade. Staff advocated for modernized data system infrastructure and stronger partnerships between the child support program and related systems (e.g., corrections, probation/parole) to facilitate positive child support outcomes. Staff also highlighted the importance of balancing standardized policies with family-centered flexibility to achieve family-centered outcomes but also reflected that team decision-making and opportunities to collaborate across counties and with other states at conferences and interactive sessions or workgroups is critical to quality improvement. Key areas for examining cross-county consistencies included enhancing consistency in arrears forgiveness practices, outreach to parents receiving support, and standard transition periods after incarceration before modifying orders from zero.

The parent focus group highlighted that, despite recent program improvements, many fathers involved in the child support system who have been incarcerated have significant negative perceptions of child support programs. These negative perceptions emanate from experiences of perceived stigma against fathers, onerous paperwork and related requirements to demonstrate custody arrangements, and a focus on enforcement rather than family-centered service delivery. These negative experiences made it challenging for fathers to identify solutions that they felt would actually be pursued and implemented. The recommendations they did have included enhancing referrals to employment and other resources by the child support program, expanding the DOC Liaison program and similar education and public awareness opportunities, and generally reducing punitive enforcement measures such as driver’s license suspension and expanding consistent arrears management and forgiveness strategies to help parents move forward.

By advancing towards family centering through modernized data systems, cross-system partnership and communication, and shared learning opportunities, Minnesota’s child support program can continue to improve. Specifically, the program could enhance communication and information sharing, modernize data infrastructure, and further streamline post-incarceration order modification processes. The program could expand existing supports such as the DOC Liaison program to help inform parents and related systems (e.g., probation and parole, judges) to understand the impacts of child support orders and arrears and optimize their decisions. Further

steps might include incorporating child support items onto probation/parole instructions, creating formalized communication channels and shared training opportunities between the child support program, courts, and probation/parole, and conducting an upgrade of data systems with end user input to enhance “real time” information sharing on parents involved in the child support program during and after incarceration. By addressing these challenges, Minnesota can further strengthen its family-centered child support policies, better supporting the well-being of parents who have been incarcerated and their children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Parent focus group protocol

Introduction/Verbal Consent

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. I'm [the facilitator's name] and this is [co-facilitator], and we are from Child Trends, a national research organization focused on improving the lives of children and youth. We are working with the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Family Services and the Child Support Liaison Program at the Department of Corrections to understand how you view the child support program and what aspects of the program can be strengthened to better meet families' needs and serve families fairly.

You were asked to participate in this focus group because you all told us that you had a child support order while being incarcerated in Minnesota. You have an important perspective on the child support program and we want to learn from your experiences and hear your ideas for what is working and what could be improved in the future.

We will meet for about an hour today. We will ask questions about your views on the child support program, its rules and policies, and any challenges or supports you may have experienced. As you respond to our questions, we might ask follow-up questions to make sure we understand your perspectives accurately. But because we have limited time, we also might move the conversation along to make sure we cover all the topics.

Before we get started, we would like to share some of the ground rules for the focus group:

- There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone here comes from different backgrounds and may have different experiences or opinions. We want to hear all the perspectives that you may bring to the conversation. If there is an opinion that you disagree with, we ask that you allow people to share their opinions fully and be respectful of any differences.
- We understand that you may not have an opinion about a particular question or that it may be difficult to share your experiences. Please know that you do not have to respond to every question. You can also choose to leave the group at any time if you no longer want to participate. Your decision on participating will not affect any services you receive or impact you in any way.
- While holding these groups virtually makes it convenient for everyone, it can also make it a little more challenging to "read the room". We ask that if you are comfortable, you leave your camera on as much as possible during the group. This

helps us to interact better and see each other's non-verbal communication. If you are unable to turn your camera on, that is also okay.

- We ask that you do not share what you hear today outside this group. It is also important to know that we cannot guarantee that something you share in the group will not be repeated by someone else. If you have questions or if there are things you would like to share privately with us, we will be available to meet with anyone who would like to speak further. Please feel free to reach out to us directly after this group.

Does anyone have any questions about the study or what we've discussed so far?

To make sure we accurately capture what you share, we will be taking notes. We also like to record the session to make sure our notes are correct or to review anything we may miss in the notes during the discussion. We will only use the recording to make sure we have captured everyone's feedback accurately. We will not share the recording with anyone outside of the research team, will store the recordings in a secure, password protected folder, and we will destroy the recording once our notes are finalized. To ensure that no one can be identified, we will remove any information from our reports that could identify you, such as your name or the name of specific programs. If you share anything that you do not want to be included in our reports, please let us know so we can mark it in our notes. You should also know that your comments will not be shared with your county child support office and will not affect your eligibility for any government services or benefits. We will summarize your feedback with the feedback we get from all other participants. Our report will include themes and quotes that cannot be tied to an individual. The goal of these reports is to inform Minnesota's child support policies and practices.

Before we start the focus group, we need to confirm that you agree to participate in the study and to be recorded. Does anyone have any questions?

I will go around individually and ask each person to come off mute or type in the chat:

1) Do you agree to participate in this study?
2) Do you agree to be recorded?

Finally, we have confirmed that everyone participating today has provided their preferred contact information for receiving the gift card. If your contact information has changed, please let us know after we end the focus group. If you have any questions about the study or your participation, please contact the lead study investigator, Yiyu Chen, at ychen@childtrends.org or 240-223-9275.

Do you have any questions before I begin?

Let's begin.

Background Questions

First, we would like to know a little bit about you and your children. Could you each tell us:

- Your first name and county?
- How many children you have?
- How long you have been involved with the child support system as a parent?

Transition: Child Support Services

Thank you for sharing. For the next set of questions, we are going to focus on child support policies for parents who are incarcerated.

First, we want to start with your experience with the child support system in general.

1. **What has your experience with the child support system been like?**
    a. **How do you access the information you need to know how to navigate the system and child support rules?**
    b. **What parts work well?**
    c. **What parts are challenging?**
        i. **PROMPT: Paperwork requirements?**

2. **Have you ever felt that you were treated differently by your county or state child support office based on your incarceration history?**
    a. **Do you feel that parents who have been incarcerated are treated fairly by the child support system?**

3. Have you ever found it difficult to pay child support -- For example, due to the circumstances of your job, your health, needs of your other children or dependents?
    a. If it was difficult to pay child support, did you reach out to the Office of Child Support or your child support case worker for help? How did they respond (e.g., connect to resources, review case)? Did you try anything else or were you offered any other support?

4. Have you had a major change in your life (or your child's life) that made you feel that your order was no longer appropriate (too low or too high)?
    a. When that happened, did you know you might be able to request a review of your order?
    b. PROMPT: Did you consider sending a request to review and modify your order?

c. PROMPT: Did you experience any challenges in working with the Office of Child Support to review and modify your order?

5. Is your order more than three years old?
    a. If so, have you been notified that the Office of Child Support may conduct a three-year review of your order?
    b. PROMPT: Did you consider sending a request to review and modify your order?
    c. PROMPT: Did you experience any challenges in working with the Office of Child Support to review and modify your order?

Order Modification during Incarceration

6. **Thinking back to when you began your incarceration, did you receive any information about your options for changing the amount of child support you owed while you were incarcerated?**
    a. **If yes, how did you receive this information (flyer, case worker, word of mouth)**
    b. **If yes, what information did you receive? How much time passed before you received this information?**
    c. **Have you ever worked with or heard about the Child Support Liaison service through the Department of Corrections?**

7. **In Minnesota, any parent who is ordered to pay child support and is incarcerated for more than 180 days qualifies for a "streamlined" (or quicker) review of their child support order to owe $0 until after incarceration ends.**
    a. **Were you aware of this policy?**
        i. **If yes, where did you hear about the policy?**

8. **In Minnesota, any parent who is incarcerated, regardless of how long, may request a review of their child support order based on a change in circumstance.**
    a. **Were you aware of this policy?**
        i. **If yes, where did you hear about the policy?**

9. **Did you request a modification of child support orders at any time during your incarceration?**
    a. **Can you describe the modification process?**
    b. **Did you experience any challenges or receive any supports for requesting the modification?**
    c. **Was your modification request granted?**

i. **How did this modification affect you?**
ii. **How did this modification affect the parent receiving support?**

10. **Do you feel your child support order was handled fairly while you were incarcerated? Why or why not?**

Arrears Management during and after Incarceration

Now I want to talk about your experiences with "back pay" or getting behind on child support payments. Sometimes the Office of Child Support calls this "arrears." In Minnesota, the child support office may use strategies to reduce the amount of back pay you owe depending on how much you owe, how much time has passed, and other circumstances, including incarceration. Almost everyone at some point has fallen on hard times. We want to understand how parents get help when they fall behind on child support payments.

11. **Have you ever fallen behind on your child support payments before?**
    a. **If so, did you receive any information or notifications from the child support agency about being behind?**
        i. **PROMPT: Have you ever received information or support to help with having your back pay reduced?**
            1. **Was anything like this offered to you during or shortly after incarceration? If so, were these supports helpful to you?**
        ii. **PROMPT: Has the child support office ever used or notified you about their intent to use enforcement methods to collect back pay, such as suspending your driver's license, reporting you to credit bureaus?**
            1. **Did the child support office notify you about any of these enforcement strategies around the time of your incarceration or when you transitioned out of jail/prison?**
            2. **How do you feel about this enforcement measure? How did this impact your life?**
            3. **What do you think the child support office could have done differently in that enforcement process?**

12. **When you transitioned out of incarceration to the community or supervised release, was any information or support offered to you about child support?**
    a. **PROMPT: If your order had been modified to $0, did your order get modified again after your incarceration?**

    i. **Were your income or circumstances taken into account (e.g., if you were looking for work)**
b. **PROMPT: Were you notified about attempts to collect back pay after your incarceration?**
    i. **If so, how soon after your incarceration were you notified?**
    ii. **Did you feel this was enough transition time to modify or enforce the child support order?**

13. **Do you have any other recommendations for improving the child support program for parents who have been incarcerated?**

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to share with us your experiences with the child support program. Our research team at Child Trends will contact you to send you a gift card to thank you for your participation in this focus group. We will stay on the line for a few minutes to speak with anyone who has questions or suggestions for us. We hope you enjoy the rest of your day.

Appendix 2. Administrator interview protocol

Introduction/Verbal Consent

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. I'm _____, and I am from Child Trends, a national research organization focused on improving the lives of children and youth. We are working with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and the Child Support Liaison Program at the Department of Corrections to understand how you view the child support program and what aspects of the program can be strengthened to better meet families' needs and serve families fairly.

You were asked to participate in this focus group because of your knowledge of policies and practices in Minnesota that affect child support orders and enforcement. For this project, we are particularly interested in how child support policies affect parents who have been ordered to pay support and have been incarcerated. You have an important perspective on the child support program and we want to learn from your experiences and hear your ideas for what is working and what could be improved in the future.

We will meet for about 30-45 minutes today. We will ask questions about your views on the child support program, its rules and policies, any challenges or strengths you have observed in your role, and your recommendations for the future. As you respond to our questions, we might ask follow-up questions to make sure we understand your perspective accurately. But because we have limited time, we also might move the conversation along to make sure we cover all the topics.

Before we get started, we would like to share a few reminders:

- There may be questions that are not relevant to your role or that you would prefer not to answer. This is okay, and you can ask to skip any question at any time.
- You may end the interview at any time and withdraw your participation.
- We will not identify you in any reports we draft as part of our equity assessment, but we may include illustrative quotes that we will not attribute to any individual. However, given the unique nature of certain roles, it may be possible to attribute a point to something you may have said. If there is anything that you share that you would prefer not to appear in our report, please let us know.
- Your decision to participate today will not affect your job or any benefits you receive.

Does you have any questions about the study or what we've discussed so far?

To make sure we accurately capture what you share, we will be taking notes. We also like to record the session to make sure our notes are correct or to review anything we may miss in the notes during the discussion. We will only use the recording to make sure we have captured your feedback accurately. We will not share the recording with anyone outside of the research team, will store the recordings in a secure, password protected folder, and we will destroy the recording once our notes are finalized. If you have any questions about the study or your participation, please contact the lead study investigator at [CONTACT].

Before we start the focus group, we need to confirm that you agree to participate in the study and to be recorded? [Obtain a verbal YES and document in the notes].
Do you have any questions before I begin?
Let's begin.

Background Questions

First, we would like to know a little bit about you. Could you tell us:

- Your first name and professional role, and how long you've served in that role?
- How your work is connected to the child support system, the department of corrections, or both?

Child Support Services

Thank you for sharing. For the next set of questions, we are going to focus on child support policies for parents who are incarcerated.

1. What policies, supports, or services are available to parents who have been ordered to pay child support and are incarcerated? We are interested in the transition into and out of incarceration.
    a. PROMPT: Order modification supports?
    b. PROMPT: Arrears management supports?

2. In your experience, do you think that incarcerated parents are well informed about their child support status and order modification/arrears management options available to them?
    a. What more could be done to help increase parental awareness of child support policies while incarcerated?

3. From our review of Minnesota policy, we understand that Minnesota has some child support policy strategies to support parents who are incarcerated, such as automatic streamlined modification for parents incarcerated >180 days and arrears management guidance. From your perspective, how consistently would you say these policies and supports are implemented with parents?
    a. PROMPT: what differences have you noticed (e.g., rural vs urban, employment status, race, other factors)?
    b. How can the office of child support encourage a fair and consistent process for order modification and arrears management?

4. Overall, what would you say are the biggest challenges facing parents WHILE they are incarcerated and are ordered to pay child support?

a. What ideas do you have for overcoming those challenges? PROMPT: policy solutions, practice solutions, limiting individual discretion?

5. Overall, what would you say are the biggest challenges facing parents AFTER they are released from commitment and are ordered to pay child support?
    a. What ideas do you have for overcoming those challenges? PROMPT: policy solutions, practice solutions, limiting individual discretion?

6. Have you noticed or heard about any strategies that have been particularly effective in supporting parents manage their child support orders? These could include policy changes or other direct supports.
    a. PROMPT: Effective strategies for incarcerated parents, specifically?

7. What key partners or organizations are currently at the table to improve child support policy in Minnesota?
    a. Are any focused specifically on incarcerated parents?
    b. Are there any partners missing from the table that you would like to see join?

8. If you had a magic wand, what are one or two things you would do to improve the child support system for parents who have been incarcerated?
    a. What might get in the way of making this wish a reality?

9. Do you have any other information or recommendations to share with us today?

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to share with your experiences with us. If you have any further questions about the study, feel free to reach out to us at any time.