

Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services **Procedural Justice Peer Learning Site Summary**

The Parental Accountability Court (PAC) program is a joint effort of the Georgia Department of Human Services' (DHS) Division of Child Support Services and Superior Court Judges to offer an alternative to incarceration and help chronic nonpayers of child support make regular payments. This program integrates key elements of procedural justice to engage parents, avoid the civil contempt process, and provide services to increase compliance with child support orders

Background Information

Georgia designed PAC as a voluntary program to serve parents at risk for incarceration due to nonpayment of child support. Caseworkers and court staff will refer parents to PAC if the customer is not compliant with the court order (e.g., no payment for 3-6 months). The state saw the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) pilot as an opportunity to increase engagement among potential and current PAC parents. Specifically, Georgia sought to (1) increase the percentage of parents referred to the program who enrolled and (2) to increase the percentage of enrolled parents who completed the program. The team focused on building tools PAC staff could use during their outreach efforts and during case planning.

Intervention Overview

The project intervention included three phases:

Phase 1 – Identification of eligible customers

Phase 2 – Training team members on procedural justice principles and strategies

Phase 3 – Incorporation of principles into outreach and customer engagement tools

DHS selected six judicial circuits to participate in the PJAC pilot. The circuits focused their efforts on two lists of parents: (1) those who were previously enrolled in the program but were removed due to non-compliance and (2) those who were offered enrollment but declined the invitation.

The team created several tools informed by the principles of procedural justice to assist case managers in the outreach and engagement efforts. The focus of these tools was to foster interactions with parents that demonstrated understanding of their specific case circumstances and to present PAC as a viable path toward increased compliance with their child support orders.

The process began with the development of a case assessment checklist. The case assessment focused on reviewing specific case information to provide PAC coordinators with a more nuanced understanding of the case history. This includes prior interactions the parent had with the child support program, payment histories, calculation of debt owed, and review of potential options for modifications or debt forgiveness. Coordinators used this assessment to inform their initial outreach efforts to parents, and it served to demonstrate to these parents the commitment to provide individualized services based on their specific circumstances.

The team also crafted scripts they could use to help guide the conversation with the customer. Using the principles of procedural justice, the script focuses on respect, understanding, and voice. An example is "What I hear you saying is..." or "What are specific things child support can do to help you?" The script was created to include principles and strategies for customer engagement. Additionally, the program informational letter was rewritten with these principles and mailed out. A specific revision included changing language to support neutrality and helpfulness principles.

The Georgia Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) Parental Accountability Court (PAC) may be able to help you resolve the barriers that are preventing you from paying child support for your children named below.

We are offering you an opportunity to determine if you qualify for the PAC program. We cannot move forward without speaking to you in person. We have scheduled a telephone appointment for you. During this call, we will explain how this program may help you.

Changed to:

Your case was recently identified for a program called the Parental Accountability Court (PAC). In the past you have been referred or enrolled in the PAC program. The program is a chance for you and I to work together to resolve your child support issues/concerns.

I have reviewed your case and would like an opportunity to provide this service again. You are still eligible for enrollment, and I would like to schedule a time to meet to discuss the program in more detail.

Once the case assessment was completed, team members used a variety of methods to attempt contact including:

- Phone Calls
- Text Messages (very successful)
- Mailing Letters

Results/Key Takeaways

During the pilot period, the team attempted to contact 516 parents. They successfully contacted 194 of these individuals, six of whom eventually enrolled in PAC. The team reported the assessment and script made them better prepared when talking to customers compared to their typical approaches. By preparing ahead of time with the assessment, staff can have more proactive conversations and promote a safe environment of trust. They did find that, while useful, the case assessment was a lengthy and labor-intensive process. Early in the pilot, the assessment was redesigned to reduce time involvement. Using scripted questioning encouraged two-way communication.

The team also reported that the contact resulted in customers inquiring about other issues, where we were able to improve customer services as well, which was viewed as a positive connection. Many parents used the outreach as an opportunity to raise

detailed questions about their cases, including how to make payments and the suitability of their order amount. Two areas of concern were of great significance and included the missed opportunities for early review and modification of orders, and the inability to either locate customers or receive return communication. These two areas will be discussed with the department leadership for potential areas of strategies to improve statewide services.

Thirty-seven percent of eligible customers did not return communication from the team. The team was very creative in their attempts by way of available resources such as Accurint, Department of Labor, and Work Number. When making contact by phone, the team would follow up with text messages to ensure the customer knew who was attempting contact. This resulted in successful return communication.

This pilot underscored the broader opportunity within the agency to apply the principles of procedural justice in staff's interactions with parents. The emphasis on hearing the parents' perspective and providing individualized attention to their cases resonated with the staff that implemented the pilot. Following the conclusion of the pilot, DHS provided training on the application of procedural justice principles to a broader swath of staff, including those in a customer call center and PAC staff in other judicial circuits. While the project provided less new enrollees than expected, the overall impact to the state's program will produce better informed customers and more intentional support for the children and families.