

# ENHANCING SAFE ACCESS TO CHILD SUPPORT

## *IV-D Program Inventory and Planning Resource*

Many state, local, and tribal child support programs have implemented a range of policy and procedural safeguards to address concerns survivors of domestic violence (DV) have about seeking child support services. As these practices are implemented on a daily basis, they evolve with time, changes in personnel, feedback from stakeholders, and identification of gaps in knowledge or resources to respond effectively to survivor concerns.

Conducting an inventory of current program policies and practices provides a structured way for child support agencies to reflect on current efforts to create safe access to child support services and identify areas needing attention or improvement. For jurisdictions that are starting to develop DV policies and procedures, the inventory can help guide and focus stakeholder resources and attention and identify actionable, incremental steps to reach long-term goals of increased survivor safety.

**First Steps:** Some child support agencies have ongoing, active collaborations with local, regional, or state DV experts and can call upon those partners to participate in conducting (and customizing) the attached program inventory. In those jurisdictions where a formal partnership is yet to be developed, establishing this collaboration is a critical first step in the process to enhance safe access to child support services and encourage survivors to seek services in the first place.

**Establishing DV Partnerships:** Identify and invite local and state DV coalitions, providers, and experts to participate in an ongoing partnership to enhance safe access to child support services. Staff in the Division of Program Innovation at OCSE, the Family Violence Prevention Services Program in the Administration for Children and Families, and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence can help identify programs and experts in your jurisdiction (contact information is provided below). The invitation to this meeting sets the stage for beginning or enhancing the child support agency's long-term commitment to:

- assess current practices,
- identify policy and procedures that need to be revised or newly developed,
- build capacity of the program to provide safe and effective child support services to survivors,
- create clear avenues for receiving and responding to feedback from victims and DV advocates on agency practices, and
- connect child support's efforts to secure financial and emotional support for children to the economic justice work of the DV community.

The first meeting needs to include DV and child support agency leadership as well as any program-level staff that will ultimately take a lead role in ongoing implementation. The participation of the IV-D Director, chief legal/policy director, operations director, or comparable executive staff will help reflect the serious commitment being made. It's also helpful to have field office management and training department staff represented as background for the ongoing work in which they will be involved.

Prior to this first meeting, identify an agency "lead" for the collaboration to function as the point of contact for ongoing communication and to facilitate meetings, prepare materials, and ensure follow-up on action items. The project lead needs to be recognized as an agency leader and have adequate decision-making authority.

The format for the first meeting should allow IV-D leadership to express their goals/hopes for a long-term collaboration and to hear from DV advocates about the child support issues facing survivors.

*It is critical that IV-D leadership and meeting attendees recognize that, just like child support workers are not experts on domestic violence programs and services, most DV advocates have limited knowledge of the IV-D child support program and much of the information they have comes from what has been portrayed to them by survivors. Providing a brief "primer" or overview of the IV-D program and processes either before the first meeting or as part of the first meeting may be helpful to establish a baseline understanding of program requirements and functions. It may also be helpful for the DV leadership to provide the child support staff with a brief "primer" on DV and DV program services.*

While a neutral/outside facilitator might be helpful for this first meeting, it is not necessary as long as the meeting facilitator is not entrenched in promoting or defending current practices. A key goal should be to determine what actions/changes are most urgently needed from the DV leadership perspective and develop concrete action steps.

A sample agenda might include:

- Introductions with some sharing of why safe access to child support is important to the attendees
- Background/purpose of establishing an ongoing collaboration (IV-D director)
- Child support/DV overviews (if needed)
- Identification of the "big/urgent issues" from an advocates' perspective
- Develop a set of action items/tasks – assigning responsibility for completion
- Discussion of constraining/limiting factors
- Identify additional stakeholders needed/desired
- Establish a timeline and next steps, including regular meetings (it can be helpful to alternate meeting location - DV coalition/program office and child support offices)
- Identify how feedback from child support staff, DV staff, and survivors will be collected as policy and program actions are implemented

The following inventory is one resource that could be used by child support staff and DV advocates to identify areas where practice or policy needs to be changed or new procedures or services developed. It should not take priority over urgent issues identified by DV leadership, but may help establish a common understanding of “where we’re at currently.”

This tool can be reviewed as a template with additional elements added at the first meeting. Then assign a team of child support and DV experts to complete it and report back to a leadership team of child support and DV program executive staff. Reporting back to the leadership team on needs identified, actions taken, and feedback from child support staff, DV advocates, and victims is essential for promoting accountability and maintaining the momentum for organizational change.

For information on additional DV resources, state and local DV program contact information, or additional guidance and support using this program inventory, please contact:

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### **Inventory of current policies and practices to promote safe access to child support services**

#### **a) Screening for and promoting disclosure of domestic violence**

- i. What is the current approach to identifying domestic/family violence issues for parents?
- ii. Are there any questions on applications or intake documents related to domestic violence? Do staff ask questions about safety to promote verbal disclosure, or only provide opportunities for written disclosure?
- iii. Are those questions focused on specific behaviors (e.g. “have you ever been injured by the other parent,” instead of “are you a victim of domestic violence”)?
- iv. Are questions about DV asked in a safe and secure place? Are parents given the opportunity to answer questions about DV away from their children and the other party?
- v. How do mandatory laws related to reporting child abuse apply and how are parents informed about those?
- vi. Is there context given for the reasons behind asking questions about DV and how information will be used (e.g. would they have any reason not to feel safe giving information about the other parent in court)? Do parents know how the answer to family violence questions might influence their case?
- vii. Does the child support agency have an electronic interface with the protective order registry? Or with a criminal justice database to match cases with protective orders or criminal domestic violence charges? How will child support staff deal with parents who have a protective order against them?
- viii. Is information about steps to make pursuing child support safely distributed to all parties at multiple points in the child support process? Do appointment notices/court reminders include information about safety?
- ix. Are easy-to-understand forms provided to parents for documentation of DV? Have parents provided feedback on those forms and their ease of use?
- x. Do staff have guidance and protocol for follow-up screening interactions cause staff to have concerns but there was no disclosure of domestic violence?
- xi. Has staff completed training on the dynamics of family violence and how to promote disclosure and respond effectively?
- xii. Are there posters and brochures displayed in child support offices about safe access to child support? Information on the child support website?
- xiii. Do all staff with parent contact know about local DV resources and how to make referrals to those resources? What about referrals for services for perpetrators?

- xiv. Do staff have clear guidelines/plans of action for how to respond to different types of disclosure, e.g. immediate crisis, children's safety, address confidentiality needs?
- xv. Are there other stakeholders that impact this process? (e.g., what are the screening processes at "sister" agencies?) Does the agency determining good cause need to be consulted?
- xvi. Are there resources to address the custodial parent's concerns for child custody, visitation and exchanges? How are these shared?

### Action planning for this section:

- What needs attention?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan for this section?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing needed improvements for screening and disclosure?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?

### b) Family Violence Indicator (FVI) policy and procedures

- i. What is the purpose of the FVI?
- ii. How do parents learn about the FVI?
- iii. What steps must a parent take for an FVI to be placed on their case? Documents required?
- iv. Who does the FVI flag (victim, child of victim, other party to case)?
- v. What information is shared with person flagged with the FVI as to its impact?
- vi. How and when is the FVI designation reviewed?
- vii. What steps must be taken for the FVI to be removed?
- viii. Are there other stakeholders in this process (e.g. do judges have a stake? other agencies?) and who are they?

### Action planning for this section:

- What needs attention from this section of the inventory?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan for this section?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing needed improvements for the FVI?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed for this section?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?

### **c) Specialized case management for cases with disclosure**

- i. Is the FVI the only flag to identify a case as a DV case on your automated system? How does a case flagged for DV show up on the system?
- ii. Are court/hearings files and docket lists specially marked to indicate which cases have DV?
- iii. Are DV cases assigned to specific or specialized caseworkers?
- iv. What kinds of adjustments are made when working on DV cases, (e.g., do staff contact the parent who has disclosed DV prior to sending notices to the other party)?
- v. What safety options are available to victims for in-office meetings?
- vi. Does staff proactively offer prevention strategies for victims as part of case management (e.g. telephonic hearings, safety informed enforcement actions, address confidentiality programs)?
- vii. What procedures are in place for responding to a victim who is receiving assistance and didn't claim good cause? Are second chances for good cause offered? Are there case processing deferrals available?
- viii. What protocols are in place to assess lethality and respond to high-risk situations?
- ix. Are there other stakeholders that need to be included in specialized case management (e.g. judicial officers and court staff, agency responsible for good cause determination, legal assistance for custody and visitation orders)?

#### **Action planning for this section:**

- What needs attention?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan for this section?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing needed improvements for specialized case management?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?

### **d) Safety procedures for court/hearings/in-office conferences**

- i. What safety options are offered to DV survivors at court/administrative hearings? Staggered entrance/exit? Escort in and out after court/hearings? Separate waiting areas? Presence of court security between parties?
- ii. Are DV survivors offered the opportunity to appear telephonically?
- iii. Must DV survivors appear at court on assistance cases?

- iv. Are advocates from local DV programs allowed to accompany victims? Are advocates encouraged to accompany victims in IV-D courts/administrative hearings?
- v. What training do child support judges/hearing officers have on DV?
- vi. What procedures are in place to ensure alleged perpetrators are treated fairly and given full due process?
- vii. If meetings are scheduled in child support offices, are both parents present and if so, are both made aware prior to the meeting that the other parent will be present and offered an opportunity to stagger meeting times?
- viii. What other stakeholders need to be involved in improving court/office safety (e.g. court security personnel, judges, hearing officers)?

### Action planning for this section:

- What needs attention from this?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing court and office safety for survivors?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?

### e) Training

- i. Do all child support staff with customer contact receive training on DV and child support? Who conducts that training? Is there a refresher course? Are these mandatory or optional trainings?
- ii. Is there additional training for legal staff on DV and trauma?
- iii. Does staff training include content on interacting with alleged batterers and how battering behavior might present in child support interactions?
- iv. Do child support outreach staff conduct training with DV advocates on the child support process to help advocates be navigators of the child support system for victims?
- v. Do all child support staff receive training on local DV resources and how to make referrals to those resources?
- vi. What other stakeholders need to be involved in DV training development and delivery (e.g., court administrative staff, legal aid providers, judicial training providers)?

### Action planning for this section:

- What needs attention from this section of the inventory?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan for this section?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing training development?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed for this section?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?

### f) Legal practice

- i. Is any specialized docket prep included for cases with DV (e.g., pre-court contact with parent to find out new information, discussion of what will happen in court and determine safety issues, reminder to bring documentation)?
- ii. Do child support staff attending court/administrative hearings know the impacts of trauma on DV victims and modify hearing practices to enable traumatized victims to offer testimony?
- iii. As representatives of the state, are legal teams aware of the state's goals for safe and workable orders?
- iv. Are legal staff trained on lethality assessments and are protocols in place to respond to high-risk situations?
- v. What other stakeholders need to be included to address safety informed legal practice in child support cases (e.g., policymakers to define state policy goals, family law bar, judiciary and court staff)?

### Action planning for this section:

- What needs attention from this?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing safety informed legal practice?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?

### g) Feedback and accountability

- i. Does the agency have a clearly described and widely communicated procedure for DV survivors and advocates to provide feedback on current practice as well as on new policies and procedures as they are implemented?
- ii. Is there a mechanism for elevating urgent safety/lethality feedback related to DV and child support actions so that it receives urgent attention?
- iii. Is there an opportunity for child support staff to provide feedback on policy/procedure changes and training?



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- iv. Is there clear agency policy on how customer feedback is reviewed and used for policy and procedural accountability?
- v. Does the child support agency participate in lethality reviews of DV homicides that occur within its jurisdiction/caseload?

### **Action planning for this section:**

- What needs attention from this?
- Who will take the lead on developing the action plan?
- Who else needs to be involved in addressing feedback and accountability?
- What is the timeframe for actions needed for this?
- Are there any urgent changes needed – and what are they?