



**OCSS** OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES  
**BIENNIAL REPORT**  
**2016–2017**



Department of  
Social Services  
Human Resources Administration  
Department of Homeless Services

Office of Child  
Support Services



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**We changed our name from the Office of Child Support Enforcement to the Office of Child Support Services to make it clear what defines us: service.**

**Services for mothers.**

**Services for fathers.**

**Services for guardians.**

**All of these, ultimately, to benefit children.**

# FROM OCSE TO OCSS: A SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT OUR NEW NAME

On Monday, November 20, 2017, the New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) officially became the New York City Office of Child Support Services (OCSS). This change has been in the works for some time, and we are grateful to everyone who made it possible, particularly Department of Social Services Commissioner Steven Banks and Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Child Support Services with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Eileen M. Stack.

We changed our name to make it clear what defines us: service. Services for mothers. Services for fathers. Services for guardians. All of these services, ultimately, to benefit children.

Some of the most important of these services involve our enforcement mechanisms: facilitating the withholding of wages and other actions to obtain child support payments, all undertaken in accordance with the law and mindful of legal protections for noncustodial parents.

At the same time, we also offer a whole range of other services. Some of these help establish a child support order: interviewing and locating parents, preparing and mailing documents for hearings, and so on. Others help clients and the court manage those orders: preparing account statements, connecting parents to employment, assisting in the process of modifying orders or reducing debts, or simply taking the time to explain the child support process to an individual parent—all things that OCSS staff do day in and day out, in person, on the phone, or through the mail.

It is the combination of these services—not simply the ones that fall narrowly under the category of enforcement—that have brought our program its greatest successes, whether those are defined as the \$3 billion in child support that we collected in the last four years or the nearly \$100 million in government-owned child support debt that we have reduced.

By itself, a new name would make no difference to the people who matter most here: the families we serve. What prompted the change in the name was the change in the program—our sense that the time when we were merely an enforcement program had begun to pass in at least 2002, when we created our Support Through Employment Program (STEP).

In the fifteen years since, we have added ever more services tailored to noncustodial parents while also increasing the number of services for custodial parents and guardians. We are a more expansive, holistic program and we needed a name that conveyed that accurately.

We hope our new name encourages more clients to come to our offices to seek services and an even higher level of engagement among our many partners in other government agencies and community-based organizations.

Our name will serve as a reminder to us all day, every day, that all of our work is toward one end: serving New York City parents, guardians, and children.



Photo for illustration purposes. Persons appearing are models.



# MESSAGE FROM THE OCSS EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER



Reducing poverty, recognizing the importance of having both parents involved in a child's life, and improving existing services to meet our clients' changing needs—these are our overriding concerns in the New York City Office of Child Support Services (OCSS).

Reducing poverty comes first. Under the leadership of Mayor Bill de Blasio, Department of

Social Services (DSS) Commissioner Steven Banks, Human Resources Administration (HRA) Administrator Grace C. Bonilla, and HRA Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick, we in OCSS, like our colleagues elsewhere in the Agency, give the fight against poverty everything we have.

An average of 185,000 children under the age of 21, the majority of them in low-income households, were on OCSS cases that received a payment in 2016 and 2017. In each of those years, custodial parents or guardians received more than \$700 million that we collected on behalf of those children. For many of the families we serve, that child support makes all the difference—providing crucial income that can reduce sometimes severe financial stress and create lasting positive outcomes for both children and parents.

When financial need is threatening to push families from their homes, we work closely with our colleagues in HRA's Homelessness Prevention Administration (HPA) to address the clients' child support needs. In the last two years, that work has included both helping custodial families secure child support orders and expanding access for HPA staff to our Child Support Snapshot system, which provides up-to-date information about a noncustodial parent's child support case (only, of course, once the noncustodial parent has agreed it can be seen). The kind of timely, actionable information that the Snapshot provides can make a difference for noncustodial parents in a wide range of circumstances but especially when they're facing homelessness.

HRA administers other vital support programs for New Yorkers, including Cash Assistance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid. In 2016, as part of our ongoing partnerships with these programs, we worked with the Family Independence Administration on a special outreach effort that led to nearly 900 additional custodial parents complying with child support and getting their full Cash Assistance benefits. At the same time, we provided the SNAP

program with information about child support payments made by noncustodial parents in order to give a more accurate picture of their expenses and thus potentially increase their benefits.

Helping noncustodial parents reduce or avoid debt has long been a priority at OCSS. We are proud that our various debt-reduction programs have eliminated a combined total of roughly \$100 million in debt owed to DSS and are committed to finding new ways to increase the number of people participating in those programs, which often provide clear benefits to custodial and noncustodial parents alike. Take, for example, our time-limited debt-reduction program called Pay It Off. In 2016 and 2017, the program reduced a combined total of more than \$6.4 million in debts for approximately 1,100 non-custodial parents and at the same time distributed to custodial parents over \$600,000 of the roughly \$3 million we collected through Pay It Off in those two years.

This is our approach in everything we do: finding ways our program can benefit custodial parents and noncustodial parents because we recognize that children benefit from a positive, nurturing connection to both parents.

Research has also repeatedly suggested that parents and children benefit from their association with formal child support arrangements. Mothers who receive child support are more likely to find work and work at higher quality jobs. Similarly, fathers who pay child support are more likely to engage with their children.

The benefits for children can be even greater and seemingly more long lasting. In addition to better educational and behavioral outcomes for children, recent research suggests that receiving child support income can also reduce child maltreatment.

This important finding reinforces the well-established connection between economic hardship and children's risk of maltreatment, and it has increased the momentum on our ongoing partnerships with the New York City Administration for Children's Services.

Looking to the coming year, I know that we have even more new ideas and approaches to serving New Yorkers in need. We hope that you stay in touch with us about this work during this next year and beyond.

We are grateful, as always, for your interest in our program.

**Frances Pardus-abbadessa**  
Executive Deputy Commissioner  
New York City HRA Office of Child Support Services

# MISSION, SERVICES, AND VALUES

## Our Mission

OCSS puts children first by helping parents provide for the economic and social well-being, health, and stability of their children.

## Our Services

OCSS offers child support services to all custodial and noncustodial parents, as well as guardians and caretakers, regardless of income or immigration status. Our services include:

- assistance with locating noncustodial parents
- establishing legal fatherhood
- establishing child support and medical support orders
- collecting and distributing child support payments
- modifying and enforcing child support orders
- helping noncustodial parents manage their orders through programs to reduce debt, align orders to current income, and, when needed, connect them to employment

## Our Values

We believe every encounter with our program should reflect these values:

- **Respect:** the right to be treated with dignity and have your voice heard and concerns addressed
- **Fairness:** the need to be transparent and unbiased when making decisions
- **Clarity:** the need to make processes and criteria for judgment clear and comprehensible
- **Helpfulness:** the recognition that assisting people is at the heart of our work



# A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE CHILD SUPPORT PROCESS IN NEW YORK CITY

## Opening a Case

Child support cases start with the custodial parent—the person living with and taking day-to-day care of the child at the center of the case. Custodial parents can be mothers, fathers, or guardians. Custodial parents applying for or receiving Cash Assistance open their child support cases in our Borough Offices. All other custodial parents come to our Family Court offices.

## Establishing Paternity

While often done outside of the child support process, establishing legal fatherhood (paternity) is required before establishing a child support order. It also grants important rights to both fathers and children. By establishing paternity, fathers gain the ability to seek court-ordered visitation or custody and to be consulted in legal proceedings related to the child, among other rights. Children gain a broad spectrum of legal rights as well, especially around inheritance and access to potential Social Security and military benefits through the father.

## Establishing Orders

In New York State, child support orders are set by the Family Court as a percentage of the parents' income. The court also considers whether the custodial parent or the noncustodial parent should provide medical support and cover education and childcare costs.

## Collecting and Distributing Support

Custodial parents not currently receiving Cash Assistance—about 85% of our current caseload—receive all of the money we collect on their behalf. Our Cash Assistance clients get up to \$100 of current support collected for one child or up to \$200 for two or more children, the remainder going to reimburse the Department of Social Services (DSS) for Cash Assistance payments.

## Enforcing Orders and Assisting in Requests to Modify Them

For noncustodial parents, the keys to success in the child support program are engaging with the program from the beginning and having an order that fits their income and the needs of their child. But the needs of their children can change, as can noncustodial parents' income and ability to work. Modifying child support orders allows custodial and noncustodial parents to address these changes in a fair and equitable way. And when parents fail to pay their current support, OCSS and the courts have enforcement options to help ensure that the needs of the child are met.

**A more detailed overview of the child support process and the services of OCSS** is available online as a set of videos in English (<http://bit.ly/OCSSvideosEnglish>) and Spanish (<http://bit.ly/OCSSvideosSpanish>).





Photo for illustration purposes. Persons appearing are models.

# NEW YORK CITY CHILD SUPPORT BY THE NUMBERS

Key Performance Indicators	2015	2016	2017	2017 Performance vs 2015
<b>Total collections</b>	\$757 million	\$769 million	\$773 million	<b>+2%</b>
<b>Average collection across all cases</b>	\$6,263	\$6,422	\$6,535	<b>+4%</b>
<b>Percentage of overall caseload with paternity established</b>	80%	83%	84%	<b>+5%</b>
<b>Percentage of overall caseload with a child support order</b>	74%	79%	80%	<b>+8%</b>
<b>New orders</b>	19,120	19,484	16,672	<b>-13%</b>

Throughout this report, all data is for the given calendar year, unless otherwise specified.

2016 and 2017 NYC OCSS Performance in Context	2016	2017
<b>Number of child support cases</b>	355,000	344,000
<b>Number of cases with an order</b>	281,000	280,000
<b>Number of cases with an order and a collection</b>	170,000	166,000
<b>Number of children under 21 on overall caseload</b>	374,000	354,000
<b>Percentage of cases where a child is <i>currently</i> in receipt of Cash Assistance</b>	15%	15%
<b>Percentage of cases where a child was <i>formerly</i> in receipt of Cash Assistance</b>	41%	41%
<b>Percentage of cases where a child has <i>never</i> received Cash Assistance</b>	44%	44%
<b>Percentage of total collections retained by DSS to pay back Cash Assistance</b>	8%	8%
<b>Percentage of total collections going directly to families</b>	92%	92%

## Putting the Numbers Together: What It Means to Say 92% of Our Collections Go Directly to Families

As the charts above note, in 2016 OCSS collected \$769 million and in 2017, \$773 million. In both years, 92% of that total went directly to families. The remaining 8% was retained by the government to recover the costs associated with Cash Assistance.

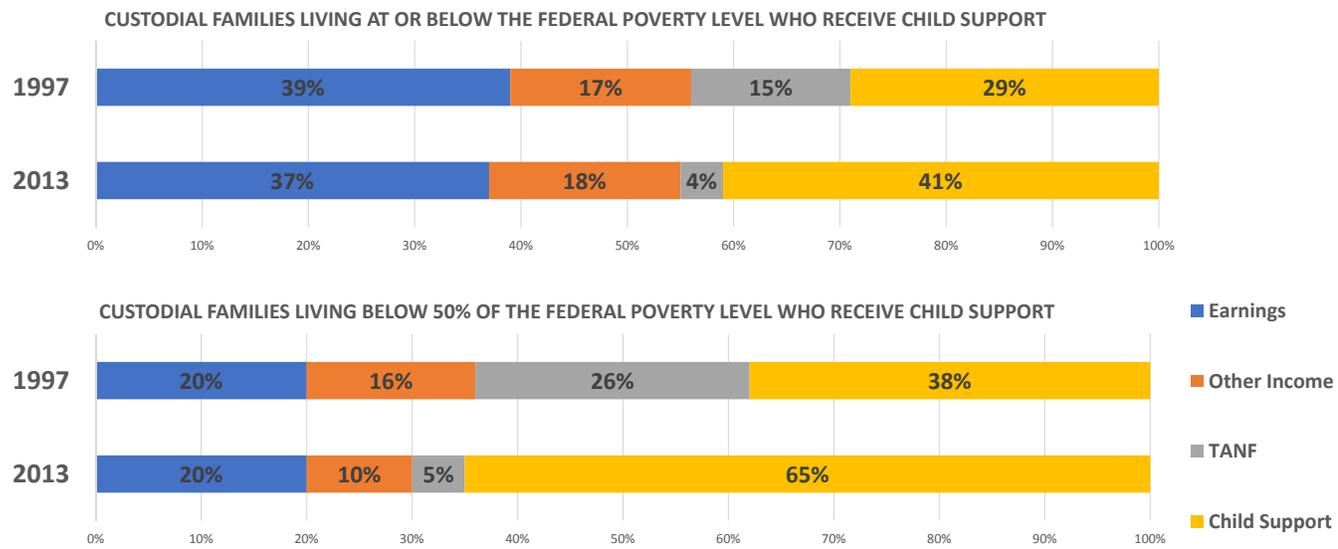
**This doesn't mean we keep 8% of every dollar we get.** Instead, it means that about \$61.8 million (or 8%) of that \$773 million in 2017 was collected on cases where the family had a child currently or formerly in receipt of Cash Assistance and that the specific payment on that case met regulatory criteria for being retained by the Department of Social Services.

The vast majority of the remaining \$711.2 million (or 92%) went to families who have never received Cash Assistance or those who used to receive it. These families received 100% of the money collected on their behalf (minus a federally mandated annual fee of \$25).

A much smaller part of that \$711.2 million went directly to families currently receiving Cash Assistance. In these cases, families are eligible to receive up to \$200 in current child support per month on top of their Cash Assistance benefits.

# LEVERAGING CHILD SUPPORT IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

## Nationwide, Low-income Families Increasingly Rely on Child Support



### The Role of Child Support in Reducing Child Poverty and Improving Outcomes for Children

The New York City child support program strives to be a two-generation anti-poverty program: getting children the financial support they need while also reducing the financial stress parents can experience when trying to provide for their child.

There is evidence that the program already works this way. Nationwide, child support lifted an estimated 790,000 children out of poverty in 2015 alone—reducing the child poverty rate by approximately 7%.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside this, child support has long-term benefits that would seem to lead to breaking the cycle of poverty. Indeed, children in families that receive child support income have better cognitive and emotional outcomes and go farther educationally.

### Child Support in Low-Income Custodial Families

Child support payments allow custodial parents to pay for housing, buy food, and get other necessities their child requires. For custodial families living at or below the poverty level, these payments are especially important—and have only grown increasingly central in the decades after welfare reform.

Indeed, a recent analysis of national Census data (illustrated in the chart above) suggests that between 1997 and 2013, the average share of household income represented by child support rose from 29% to 41% for families living at or below the federal poverty level and receiving child support.

For families living below half of the federal poverty level and receiving child support, child support already represented, on average, 38% of their income in 1997. By 2013 that percentage had grown to 65%.<sup>2</sup>

### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Collected in New York City an average of \$447 million for cases with families currently or formerly receiving public benefits
  - \$412 million, on average, went to cases of families formerly receiving benefits
  - \$35 million, on average, went to cases for families currently receiving Cash Assistance
  - Combined, these two groups saw an increase of \$29 million in collections in 2017 over their collections in 2015 and \$58 million over their collections in 2013 (as shown in chart on page 11)
- Conducted a special outreach initiative to clients in HRA's Cash Assistance program whose benefits had been reduced for noncompliance with child support,

<sup>1</sup> Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, "The Child Support Program Is a Good Investment." *The Story behind the Numbers* (December 2016), p. 8. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/FedOCSEreport>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Child Support Program Is a Good Investment," pp. 6–7.

- offering each of them an appointment at an OCSS office and a chance to have their full benefits reinstated
- Through automation, sped up the process of reinstating those benefits and reduced the possibility of errors

### Low-Income Noncustodial Parents and Child Support Services

New York City and New York State have a number of provisions and programs in place to try to help keep child support manageable for low-income noncustodial parents while still getting their children the financial support they need.

In New York City we have long believed that we have a responsibility to do all we can to provide noncustodial parents access to jobs and training. This is why fifteen years ago we created our Support Through Employment Program (STEP), which continues to provide noncustodial parents on OCSS cases with access to the same employment services provided to HRA’s Cash Assistance clients.

#### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Processed a combined total of approximately 5,900 referrals to STEP, primarily from Support Magistrates in the Family Court, with a small number of noncustodial parents volunteering to participate
  - 68% of these 5,900 noncustodial parents found employment or began making child support payments after being referred to STEP
  - \$13.00 per hour was, by December 2017, the average wage for people placed into jobs by STEP

- \$2.5 million in child support was collected in 2016 from parents who were referred to STEP in that year alone and \$2.9 million in 2017, for a total of approximately \$5.4 million
- \$101 million was collected in total in those years from all noncustodial parents who have ever been referred to STEP and still have a child support case
- Worked with other HRA programs to help people applying for and receiving SNAP. One 2016 change to our process flow was intended in part to increase noncustodial parents’ SNAP benefits by providing documentation of child support payments as an expense, while a targeted mailing in 2017 to approximately 1,400 SNAP recipients with high child support obligations highlighted our debt-reduction and order-modification programs

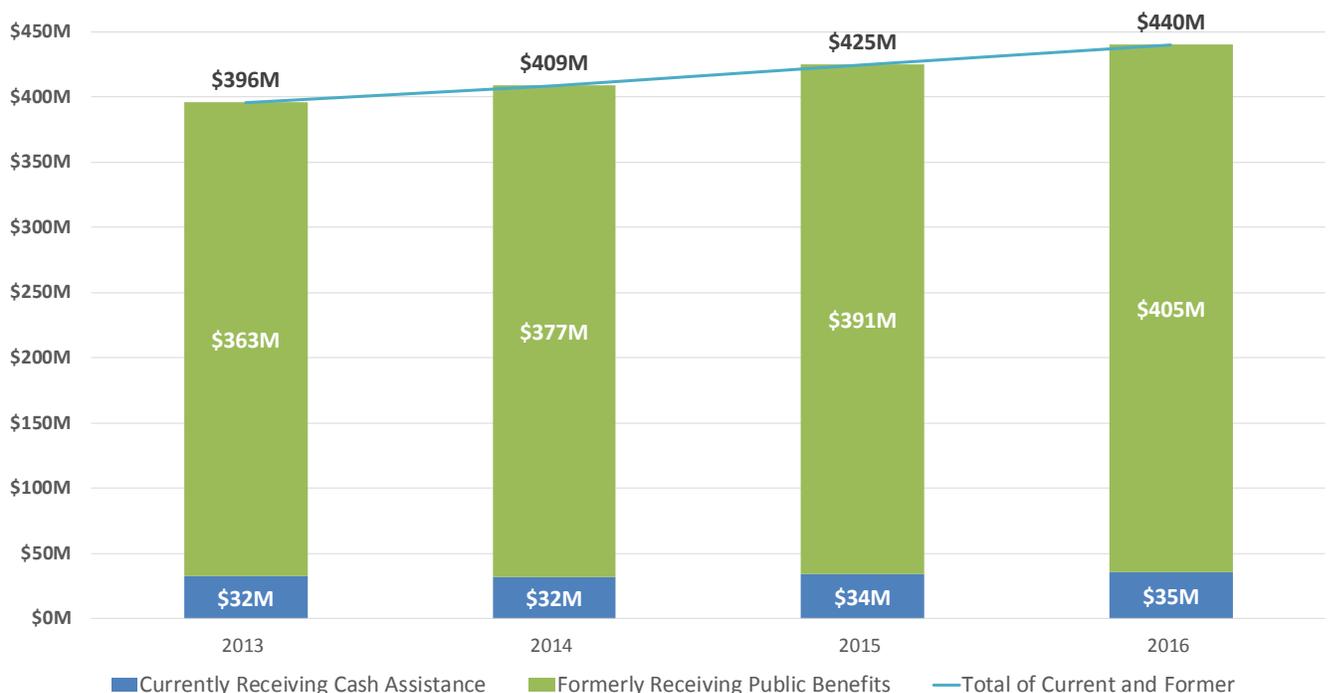
### Benefiting Both Parents to Benefit Children

Providing services that directly benefit both parents has long been a priority at OCSS, but in recent years we have made particularly rapid strides, with a special focus on low-income parents.

#### 2016 and 2017 New Initiatives

- In concert with the Family Courts, began in November 2017 to support the hearing of Cash Assistance cases outside of Manhattan Family Court. This change should reduce travel hardships for clients who live outside of Manhattan. All boroughs will be decentralized by 2019
- Disbursed a total of approximately \$290,000 in unclaimed child support funds to about 150 custodial and noncustodial parents receiving HRA benefits.

### Collections for Low-Income New York City Custodial Families, 2013–2017



# SUPPORTING CITYWIDE EFFORTS TO REDUCE HOMELESSNESS

## Prioritizing Custodial and Noncustodial Parents Residing in City Shelters

Closely related to our work to address poverty are our efforts, carried out in concert with our colleagues in the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), to help individuals and families avoid homelessness or, for those who have already become homeless, leave shelter and return to the community.

In these ways OCSS contributes to Mayor de Blasio’s plan to address homelessness, first outlined in the 2017 report *Turning the Tide on Homelessness in New York City* ([nyc.gov/tide](http://nyc.gov/tide)).

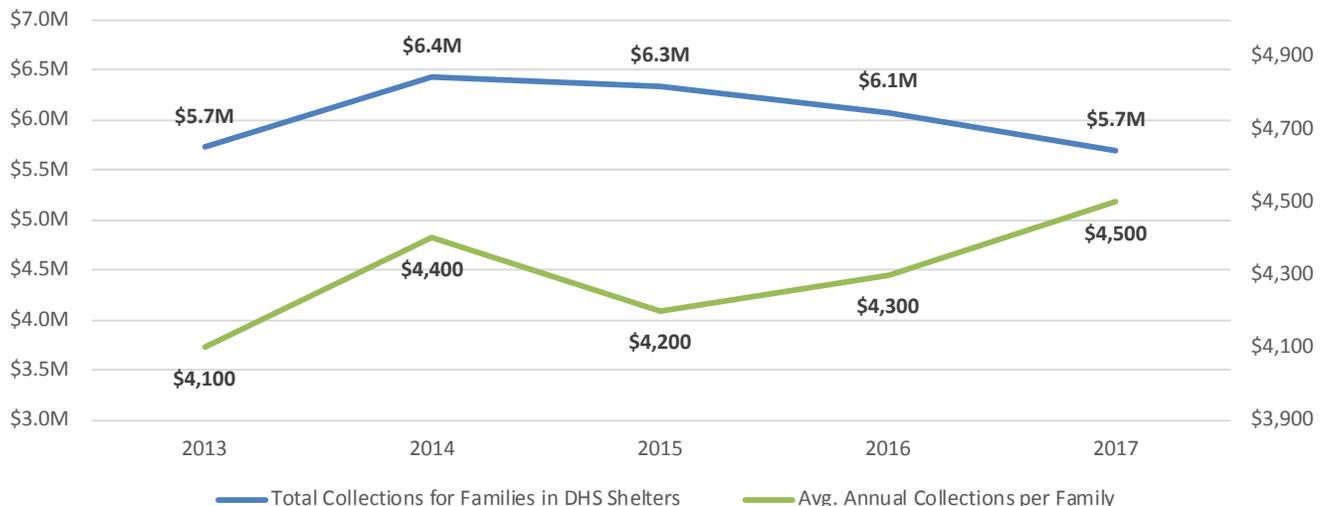
As in all of our work, we try to reach both custodial and noncustodial parents, hoping to contribute to the financial stability of both parents’ households and reduce their stress as much as possible.

### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Collected a combined total of \$11.8 million on behalf of an annual average of approximately 1,300 custodial families residing in a DHS shelter
  - The average annual collection over the two years was approximately \$4,400 per family (as shown in chart below)
- Eliminated approximately \$2.2 million in child support debt owed to DSS by a little under 500

- noncustodial parents currently in a DHS shelter
- Provided in-depth child support workshops to about 200 staff in DHS family shelters (where homeless custodial parents would normally reside) so they could help their clients make well-informed decisions about child support
  - Built on workshops offered the previous year to staff in DHS shelters for single adults, some portion of whom are noncustodial parents
- Identified over 500 parents in DHS shelters who were owed money that we had not been able to disburse to them for various reasons, most often because of changes to their address or other vital information. Clients in the Cash Assistance or SNAP program are similarly prioritized for these disbursements
- Initiated a labor-intensive effort to help noncustodial parents in DHS shelters apply for our Modify DSS Order program (described on page 15), so that these parents could bring their child support orders into alignment with their current incomes
- Expanded access to the Child Support Snapshot System (described on page 17) for HRA’s Homelessness Prevention Administration (HPA) and guided staff on how the system can help noncustodial parents

## Total Collections for Families in DHS Shelters and Average Collections per Family, 2013–2017



# EMPHASIZING FAIR PROCESSES AND LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR PARENTS

## Providing Procedural Justice to Our Clients

We believe all of the tens of thousands of one-on-one interactions we have with parents each year should reflect the values of respect, fairness, clarity, and helpfulness listed at the beginning of this report.

To help make that possible, we began in 2017 to train all of our staff who serve clients on an approach to service that in many ways mirrors those values: procedural justice.

These trainings reflect a conviction, shared by many in the national child support community, that procedural justice can be a powerful tool for communicating about child support processes. Research suggests it can also help people accept the end results of those processes—even if the outcome isn't the one they wanted.

There are essentially four key principles to procedural justice:

- **Understanding:** making sure that people understand the process they are involved in and how it works
- **Voice:** ensuring that people involved in a process have an opportunity to respond and that their specific response is heard by the people running the process
- **Impartiality:** taking care to work through a process in a way that gives everyone involved a fair chance
- **Respect:** the right to be treated with dignity

In many ways we already take this approach to serving clients.

Before an enforcement action becomes final, for example, we always give noncustodial parents the chance to object—providing them an opportunity to have their voices heard. Through our forms and in-person meetings with clients, we try to make sure clients understand how those enforcement actions work and what options they have. Staff in other areas then review those objections impartially and respond respectfully to the clients' points.

Training staff in procedural justice reinforces for everyone at OCSS the need to follow this macro-level process in every meeting with every person we serve.

## Highlighting the Legal Protections Available to Low-income Noncustodial Parents

New York State law provides a critical set of legal protections for low-income noncustodial parents. Indeed, OCSS's special programs to reduce and avoid debt (described on pages 14 and 15) build on many of the legal protections that New York State provides to those parents. Among those protections are:

- **Poverty orders** for noncustodial parents earning at or below the federal poverty level (\$12,060 for one person in 2017). These orders set parents' current child support obligations at \$25 per month and limit their debt to \$500
- **Minimum orders** of \$50 per month for noncustodial parents earning at or below the state's self-support reserve (\$16,281 in 2017)
- **Hardship exemptions** that keep a noncustodial parent's take-home pay from going below the self-support reserve by reducing the so-called add-on amount—that is, the additional amount garnished from a noncustodial parent's paycheck to reduce debt
- **Exemptions from certain enforcement actions** (including driver's license suspensions, professional license suspensions, and property liens) when noncustodial parents are receiving certain public benefits, such as Cash Assistance, or have low income
- **Modifications of child support orders**, which both noncustodial and custodial parents can file with the court when there has been a significant change in circumstances; under current New York State law, this applies to incarceration for orders made after October 13, 2010. See pages 14 and 15 for information about our order-modification services

We encourage all New Yorkers to keep these programs and provisions in mind when working with our program.

## 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- 7,400 letters were sent in 2017 to noncustodial parents who, based on income information available in our system, appeared to have incomes below the self-support reserve but also had suspended driver's licenses. The letter explained what parents needed to do to have the child support suspension lifted from their licenses, possibly without the need to visit our offices. A similar mailing in 2016 went to 4,500 noncustodial parents whose driver's licenses had been suspended but who had since begun to make regular child support payments
- Assisted a major employer in modifying its payroll process to systematically apply federal Consumer Credit Protection Act (CCPA) limitations for employees whose wages are garnished for child support payments. This is critical because unless CCPA protections are applied rigorously, employees' paychecks could be garnished so heavily that they would be left with only minimal funds to support themselves

# HELPING PARENTS REDUCE AND AVOID CHILD SUPPORT DEBT

## Understanding Child Support Debt and Working toward Holistic Solutions

Debt from any source can have a negative effect on an individual's mental and physical health, but research suggests that it can also affect whole families. When that debt comes from unpaid child support, it can even undermine the primary goal of the program—getting children the financial support they need—by discouraging employment among noncustodial parents and causing them to disengage from their children's lives.

We have long had programs in place to help noncustodial parents reduce existing child support debt and avoid the accumulation of debt in the first place. But in the last two years we have pushed ourselves even harder to develop a holistic framework for addressing the consequence of child support debt for both custodial and noncustodial parents.

### 2016 and 2017 New Initiatives

- Made child support debt the subject of our biannual policy conference (described on page 19)
- By drawing on the expertise of local mediation providers, finalized a framework to allow custodial parents to, in a safe way, reduce uncollectable child support debt owed to them by noncustodial parents
- Redoubled efforts to provide Family Court Support Magistrates with information about noncustodial parents' wages whenever we can find it. Our goal is to have child support orders set in a way that aligns with parents' ability to pay. This is a reliable way to ensure that children get the regular financial support they need and parents avoid accumulating child support debt
- Partnered with the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs to train their Financial Empowerment Counselors on the child support program and provide Financial Empowerment Training to OCSS staff. This gave staff in both programs more tools to address problems with debt that their clients might be facing

## Preventing Debt by Simplifying the Process of Changing Child Support Orders

Child support orders reflect the particular point in time when they were made, showing what the child or children on the case needed and what the parents were earning and spending around that same time. As time passes, circumstances can change substantially, and when that happens, child support orders need to change with them. Yet parents seek changes to their orders less often than perhaps they should. This can, in turn, lead to custodial parents receiving less money than they need and noncustodial parents ending up in debt.

In 2016 we began to address this problem in our Customer Service office in Lower Manhattan by providing custodial and noncustodial parents with extra help filing petitions to change their child support orders.

Called "Filing Modifications Made Easy," the program:

- Assists parents with generating an order-modification petition using the Family Court's do-it-yourself tool
- Files the petition with the court
- Serves the other parent with the petition and summons

The parent filing the petition still needs to complete an income and expenses statement for the hearing itself, but we hope that providing assistance with filing and service will make the process less intimidating.

OCSS also brings a version of the program to New York City-area criminal justice facilities in order to help incarcerated non-custodial parents transition back to living in their communities.

## Ongoing Services to Reduce Debts and Make Orders Fit Parents' Current Income

By the end of 2017 the New York City child support program had eliminated nearly \$100 million in debt owed to the City's Department of Social Services (DSS).

Most of these debts were reduced through our Arrears Cap and Arrears Credit Programs. A third program, the Modify DSS Order program, supports parents' efforts to avoid accumulating debt by aligning their child support orders with their current income. Information about how to qualify for these programs is available online at <http://bit.ly/ManageYourSupport>.

- **Arrears Cap Program**  
Reduces to as little as \$500 any child support debt that parents accrued to the New York City DSS while earning at or below the federal poverty level (\$12,060 for one person in 2017). Parents can apply for Arrears Cap by visiting our Customer Service Walk-In Center in Lower Manhattan or by downloading the forms and returning them by mail:  
*English:* <http://bit.ly/ArrearsCreditApp>  
*Spanish:* <http://bit.ly/ArrearsCreditSpanish>
- **Arrears Credit Program**  
Reduces up to \$5,000 per year in child support debt owed to the New York City DSS when the participant pays his or her regular child support in full. Participants can remain in the program up to three years, for a total maximum reduction of \$15,000. As with our Arrears Cap program, applicants can submit Ar-

rears Credit Program forms in person or by mail:

*English:* <http://bit.ly/ArrearsCapApp>

*Spanish:* <http://bit.ly/ArrearsCapSpanish>

- **Forms for the Arrears Cap and Arrears Credit Programs** are also available in Arabic, Bengali, Traditional and Simplified Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Polish, Russian, and Urdu through individual language links on HRA's Immigrant Resources page (<http://bit.ly/HRAImmigrants>). They are also in our Child Support Snapshot tool. See page 17 for more information
- **Modify DSS Order (MDO) Program**  
Allows parents with incomes below the New York State self-support reserve (\$16,281 in 2017) and child support orders payable to the New York City DSS to have their order lowered to reflect their current income. To apply, parents should visit our Customer Service Walk-In Center. See inside back cover for address

#### 2016 and 2017 Performance

- **Arrears Cap Program:** Eliminated a combined total of approximately \$39 million in NYC DSS debt for some 4,800 noncustodial parents, bringing the cumulative total debt eliminated through this program, since its inception, to more than \$87 million
- **Arrears Credit Program:** Eliminated a combined total of approximately \$3.3 million in NYC DSS debt—more than \$3 million of that in 2017 alone—for a cumulative total of more than \$4.6 million in debt reduced since the program started
- **MDO Program:** Completed combined total of approximately 63 MDO applications, for a total of more than 400 since the program started. The average order for all MDO cases was reduced from \$302 to \$29—or an average of 91%

### A Key Reason to Lower Debts and Align Orders with Income: More Consistent Child Support

Our experience is that working with parents to reduce or eliminate government-owned child support debt, or to stave off the accumulation of more debt, often paves the way for them to begin paying their support more regularly.

For us this is further proof of our long-held conviction that parents want to support their children—they just sometimes need help doing so.

#### 2016 and 2017 Performance

- **Arrears Cap Program**  
As of December 2017, among all participants who had been a part of this program:
  - *3 months before:* 51% paid child support
  - *3 months after:* 52% paid child support
  - *9 months after:* 63% paid child support
- **MDO Program**  
As of December 2017, among all participants who had been a part of this program:

- *3 months before:* 36% paid child support
- *3 months after:* 45% paid child support
- *9 months after:* 59% paid child support

### Encouraging Employment by Reducing Debt

The success of our STEP program (described on page 11) reinforces our sense that noncustodial parents want to support their children but some simply need additional assistance to make that possible. Yet research suggests that carrying child support debt can, by itself, lead to noncustodial parents' working less in the formal economy and that this, in turn, can mean their children receive less child support.

As a step toward addressing this, in 2015 OCSS launched a pilot program that reduced STEP participants' DSS child support debt by up to \$3,500 for successfully meeting a series of milestones, ranging from attending their first STEP appointment (worth up to \$250 in arrears reduction) to staying employed for 90 days (worth up to \$1,250).

Completed in November 2016, the program reduced more than \$435,000 in DSS debts and seemed to bring perceptible benefits to the noncustodial parents who received the incentives, including higher rates of reported employment 30 and 90 days after beginning a new position and higher rates of paying child support.

Based on this success, a slightly modified version of the program is being reintroduced in 2018.

### Pay It Off: Using Behavioral Economics to Bring the Benefits of Debt Reduction to More People

In 2016 and 2017 we gave noncustodial parents additional opportunities to reduce debts owed to the New York City DSS by once again offering our time-limited Pay It Off program.

As in versions offered in 2013 and 2014, these two iterations of Pay It Off gave parents \$2 in credit for every \$1 paid toward child support debt owed to the New York City DSS. To qualify, parents needed to make a minimum payment. In 2016 that minimum was \$1,000, and in 2017, \$500.

In 2017, as a behavioral nudge to encourage regular payments and longer term debt relief, we gave Pay It Off participants who elected to sign up for our Arrears Credit Program (described on page 14) an additional reduction in their arrears of 10% of their payment amount. A participant who paid \$1,000 toward their arrears and also signed up for the Arrears Credit Program thus received a total of \$2,100 in debt reduction: \$1,000 for the payment, \$1,000 for the match, and \$100 for signing up for the program. Participants who then make the necessary child support payments can receive up to \$15,000 in additional debt-reduction over three years.

To get the word out to our clients, we made our communications simpler and clearer and tried building awareness of the program through targeted promotions.

In place of a single mailing containing only a generic flyer, we mailed potentially eligible clients a revised flyer and a personalized letter laying out in greater detail how Pay It Off could benefit the recipient's particular case.

In 2016 we also placed ads in the Spanish and English editions of *NYCHA Journal*, which is delivered to some 400,000 residents of New York City Housing Authority properties. For 2017 we shifted to social media advertising, prioritizing distribution by the 25 zip codes with the highest number of potentially eligible noncustodial parents.

Both years broke records and generated a strong and generally positive response on social media.

Traditional media helped spread the word as well. New York City's borough-based News 12 reported on the program in 2016 and 2017, while in 2017 local Telemundo station WNJU gave its viewers a particularly close look at the program through a Spanish-language interview with HRA's Administrator, Grace C. Bonilla.

**2016 and 2017 Performance**

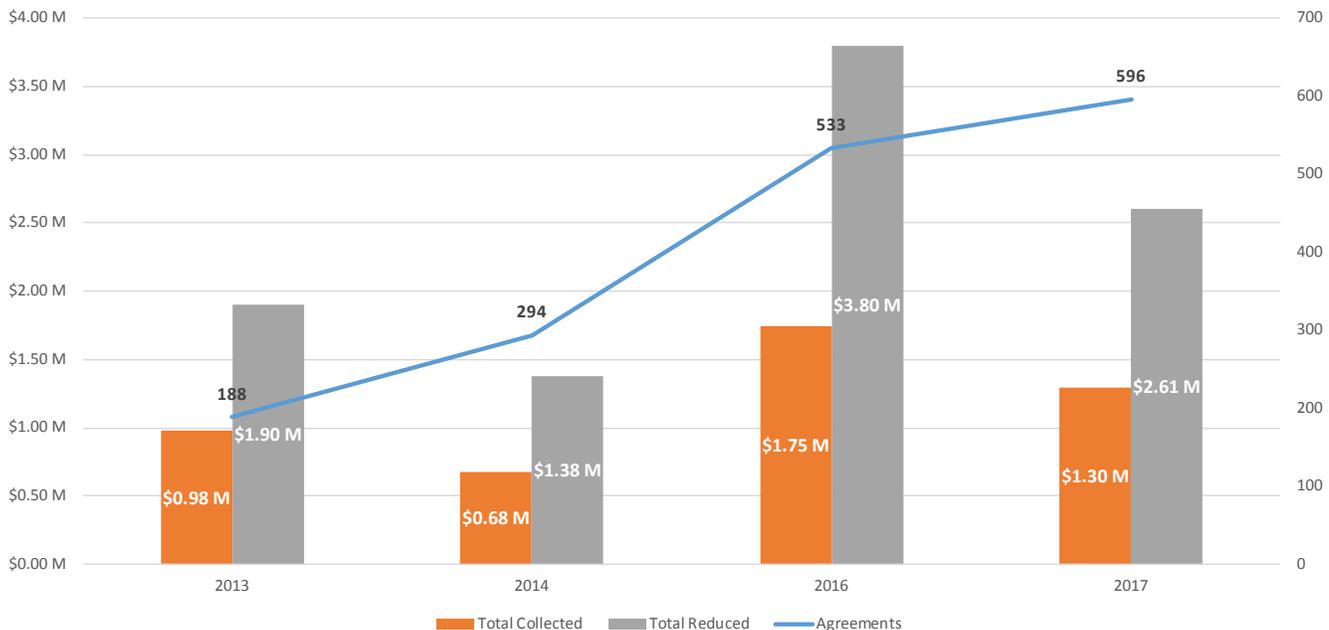
- Eliminated a combined total of more than \$6.4 million in NYC child support debt for more than 1,100 noncustodial parents
  - The combined total debt reduced from these two years, as well as the combined total number of agreements signed, essentially doubled the totals of the 2013 and 2014 iterations of the program combined
- Approximately 300 parents in 2017 signed up to participate in the Arrears Credit pro-



A sample of a social media advertisement for Pay It Off in 2017. Users saw the ad about 400,000 times over the course of four weeks.

- gram, resulting in additional debt reductions of approximately \$43,000
- Approximately 350 noncustodial parents were able to close their child support cases as a result of their participation in the program
- Custodial parents received more than \$600,000 in Pay It Off payments over these two years. This is the result of federal rules that generally require custodial parents be first in line to receive any payments on a given child support case. Nonetheless, noncustodial parents still receive reductions in their government-owned child support debt

**Collection and Debt-Reduction Amounts and Agreements in Pay It Off**



# IMPROVING SERVICES AND MEETING CLIENTS WHERE THEY ARE

## Focusing on Small Details That Can Have a Big Effect on Outcomes

Having 355,000 cases on our caseload and offices in eleven locations across New York City requires us to track many details about our processes and their effects on our clients' cases. As often as possible, we take a hard look at these in an effort to find efficiencies and improve our clients' short- and long-term experiences with the program.

### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Completed a comprehensive set of changes to streamline the application process in our four Borough Offices, which serve custodial parents referred by the Cash Assistance program.
- Launched robocalls for custodial parents to remind them of their Borough Office appointments and, ultimately, increase the number of clients that keep their child support appointments—and with that to help us establish more child support orders for parents in the Cash Assistance program. Though still too early to assess its impact, approximately 80% of the robocalls have been answered
- Improved processes related to how we work with employers across the city, primarily around the withholding of wages. As issues with a given employer come to light, we look to see whether they suggest some larger systemic problem with that employer or with some aspect of the overall process. That can mean, for example, helping employers fine tune their mailroom procedures so that wage withholding orders, a fundamental part of the modern child support program, make it to the right department

## Bringing Information and Services into the Community

In recent years we at OCSS have put extra energy into finding ways to make it easier for the parents we work with to get the services they need closer to home. That was what spurred us in 2015 to begin offering certain services for noncustodial parents in our Family Court locations, and it has continued to inform our work in 2016—with a special emphasis this year on getting a richer array of information about our services directly to parents and the organizations that serve them.

### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Launched a monthly series of free workshops, through our Strong Families Studio, to help families and community partners understand child support and other parenting-related topics. Initially offered

in our Customer Service Walk-In Center in Lower Manhattan, Strong Families Studio workshops moved in 2017 into community locations served by HRA's Jobs Plus program. Workshop topics have ranged from general overviews of the child support program to information about nutrition, child development, and the City's Growing Up NYC program.

- Provided learning opportunities for Preventive Services Directors within the City's Administration for Children's Services that gave them information on topics ranging from the program's requirements, its role in reducing child poverty, and how clients receiving Cash Assistance can address child support sanctions. In sessions across all five boroughs, Preventive Services Directors also learned about research suggesting that receiving child support income can reduce child maltreatment
- Enhanced our Child Support Snapshot to offer additional information about our programs and services. First made available online in 2015, the Snapshot provides our governmental and community-based partners with detailed information about the financial status of a noncustodial parent's child support case—provided the parent first gives his or her consent
  - We enhanced the system to allow users to upload the consent forms that noncustodial parents sign to allow access to their information. To ensure compliance, a tracking component was added that alerts us and Snapshot users of overdue waivers. Approximately 3,500 waivers were generated in 2017
  - To support existing users and offer a hands-on demonstration to organizations considering using the Snapshot, we also hosted an information session attended by approximately 100 people. Participants also offered feedback on the system and suggestions for further enhancements
  - While continuing to summarize critical information about an individual child support case and offering concrete ideas for next steps, the Snapshot has expanded to also make it a one-stop location for important child support informational materials, including flyers, brochures, forms, videos, and other helpful resources
  - See the last page of this report to learn how to sign up to be a Child Support Snapshot user
- Added information to the Agency's widely lauded ACCESS HRA portal to direct custodial and noncustodial parents to child support information.

Users can also retrieve forms and documents and learn about some of the services OCSS provides

- Through the Child Support Specialists in HRA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach, addressed a combined total over 2016 and 2017 of about 68,000 people at slightly less than 2,000 separate presentations, workshops, fairs, and other events at social services agencies, schools, hospitals, and community- and faith-based organizations across the five boroughs. These presentations are often followed by one-on-one conversations about individual child support cases
- Hosted a Paternity Briefing in collaboration with the Greater New York Hospital Association and the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. The more than 90 birth registrars and other hospital staff in attendance discussed best practices for ensuring that legal fatherhood is formally established for New York City children
- Reached a combined total of about 11,000 New York City youth in 2016 and 2017 through our teen pregnancy prevention program, No Kidding: Straight Talk from Teen Parents. The program connects peer educators, who were teen parents themselves, to teens in schools, community-based organizations, and correctional facilities to emphasize the importance of waiting to have children until they are older, in a committed relationship, and emotionally and financially prepared for the responsibility
- Provided services to incarcerated parents to help them avoid accumulating child support debt. Our long-standing partnerships with City, State, and federal criminal justice-related agencies include weekly visits to Rikers Island, as well as regular visits to the Edgecombe Residential Treatment Facility, the Queensboro Correctional Facility, the Metropolitan Correctional Center, the Metropolitan Detention Center, and (by video conference) facilities under the control of the Northeast Region of the US Bureau of Prisons

## Recognizing Both Parents

Being fair and neutral in how we administer child support orders has always been—and always will be—a core value at OCSS. In recent years we have worked to reinforce this important and long-standing attitude to demonstrate, through a variety of efforts, how much we value the fathers and mothers connected to our program. Many other initiatives within OCSS embody this value. A few other notable ones are listed below.

### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Distributed a combined total of 70,000 copies of the OCSS 2016 and 2017/2018 *My Sticker Calendar* in all of our offices, as well as our Outreach services and HRA's Office of Emergency and Intervention Services
  - Beginning in 2017, the calendar changed from a 12-month calendar to a 16-month calendar in

order to better match the school year and allow the calendar to be distributed during August, which is also Child Support Awareness Month

- The calendar lets children choose from hundreds of colorful stickers to mark an upcoming event or activity. The goal is to help children moving between multiple households have a feeling of ownership over their lives
- The artwork for the calendar was done by children on the OCSS caseload
- Joined other City agencies in distributing materials and connecting with mothers and fathers at a series of NYC Baby Showers organized by the City's Children's Cabinet
- Recognized August as National Child Support Awareness Month by:
  - Handing out 1,500 gift cards for free ice cream for children of the custodial parents visiting our Borough Offices and Family Courts location
  - Providing approximately 200 tickets for free admission to the City's zoos and aquariums for noncustodial parents who complied with the STEP program and their children
  - Distributing 200 book bags in Customer Service Walk-In Center for children ranging in ages from 5 to 17. The book bags were filled with books donated by Scholastic, as well as pencils, piggy banks and other educational materials
- Gave away several thousand children's books to mothers, fathers, and guardians visiting our Customer Service Walk-In Center, Borough Offices, and Family Court locations to promote literacy among the children on our caseload and reinforce that the program is about putting children first

## Expanding Our Parent Support Program

The Parent Support Program connects noncustodial parents, typically with low incomes, to employment, mediation, education, and other services designed to address barriers preventing them from paying child support. Drawing on the combined experience of OCSS, the Family Court, and the nonprofit Center for Court Innovation (CCI), the program expects participants to attend frequent compliance hearings, gain and maintain employment, and make child support payments. Participants graduate after six months of regular payments. Initially offered only in Brooklyn, the program was, by the end of 2017, ready to serve parents in the Bronx. We plan to expand the program into Manhattan soon.

### 2016 and 2017 Performance and New Initiatives

- Received a combined total of about 170 referrals
- 249 parents have graduated from the program
- \$13.00 per hour was, by December 2017, the average wage for people the program placed into employment
- \$88,000 in child support was collected in 2016 from parents who were referred to the Parent Support Program in that year alone and \$80,000 in 2017

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES

## Supporting the Training of Social Workers on the Importance of Fathers

In 2017 we completed work with the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College to develop a pathbreaking new curriculum on fatherhood.

Separated into eight distinct modules that can be taught in sequence or as standalone sessions, the curriculum draws on recent research in the field to give current and future social workers a better understanding of the roles that fathers play in their children's lives. Our hope is that the curriculum will help build a better set of social supports for fathers and, ultimately, strengthen families, resulting in better outcomes for children in New York City and across the country.

The curriculum also makes an innovative use of a technique called digital stories, which use images and sound to tell the real stories of New York City-area fathers. Written and spoken by the fathers themselves, the stories broaden and deepen the curriculum, infusing it with a complexity that empirical research by itself cannot capture.

## Families Forward: Preparing Noncustodial Parents for Long-lasting Careers

In 2017 we completed planning for Families Forward, a nationwide demonstration project that will test the impact of providing targeted occupational skills training, financial counseling and child support guidance to noncustodial parents. The result of a partnership among the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the education and social policy research organization MDRC, the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the City University of New York (CUNY), and local employment services providers, Families Forward offers parents the chance to choose career tracks that include commercial driving, construction, hotel hospitality, IT support, and woodworking. Program recruitment begins in early 2018 and goes through June 2019.

## Understanding Child Support Debt

In September 2017 OCSS hosted its biennial Policy Conference—this time on the subject of child support debt and its effect on families. Approximately 65 organizations and government agencies were represented among the 180 attendees.

The event began with remarks from New York City Department of Social Services Commissioner Steven Banks, New York City Human Resource Administration (HRA) Administrator Grace C. Bonilla, and HRA Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick. Former

Commissioner of the Office of Child Support Enforcement Vicki Turetsky gave an overview of the rich array of research showing the negative effects of debt on parents and families.

The event's keynote speaker was Joseph Jones Jr., the founder and CEO of the Center for Urban Families in Baltimore, which works to strengthen urban communities by helping fathers and families achieve stability and economic success.

Crucially, the conference also featured custodial and noncustodial parents discussing the impact that owing or being owed child support has played in their lives.

## Developing a Process to Better Serve Young Parents

Child support is uniquely positioned among social services to benefit both young mothers and young fathers, as well as their typically very young children. To do that in a way that is appropriate to the particular developmental strengths of young parents, we have partnered with the Youth Development Institute to design a new intake model for young parents seeking child support services. While that develops, we have already:

- Modified our existing Early Intervention Program to serve only noncustodial parents age 24 and under
- As a result, in 2016 and 2017, we reached out to a combined total of nearly 800 young noncustodial parents with new orders to welcome them into the program and provide them with any assistance they may need to pay their child support and avoid arrears
- Worked with the New York University Silver School of Social Work to bring in two social work students to conduct a needs assessment of young parents and offer additional guidance on our new youth model
- Mailed letters to approximately 2,200 young noncustodial parents with child support debt to advise them of our debt-reduction programs and how to access them through our Customer Service Walk-In Center or get information and assistance through selected community-based organizations

## Telling the Stories of OCSS Parents in Videos

We know from our own experience that the parents who receive child support services in New York City are committed to their children. To highlight that to communities across the city and even the country, we began in 2016 to create a series of videos with OCSS parents. The videos are scheduled for full public release in mid-2018.

# OUR PARTNERS

*We are grateful to all of our local, state, and federal partners (listed below) for their collaboration and support.*

*Integral to so much of our success, from establishing court orders to reducing child support debt, is our partnership with HRA's Office of Legal Affairs. We are also particularly grateful to the City's Law Department (also known as Corporation Counsel).*

*Not listed below are our many other essential partners in DSS, as well the community- and faith-based organizations throughout the city that in myriad ways support our efforts to help New York City families.*

Borough Presidents' Offices  
Center for Court Innovation  
Center for Economic Opportunity  
City University of New York  
District Attorneys' Offices of the City of New York  
Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs  
New York City Council Members  
NYC Administration for Children's Services  
NYC Comptroller's Office

NYC Department of Correction  
NYC Department of Education  
NYC Department of Finance, Sheriff's Office  
NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
NYC Department of Probation  
NYC Department of Youth and Community Development  
NYC Division of Consumer Affairs, Office of Financial Empowerment  
NYC Housing Authority  
NYC Office to Combat Domestic Violence  
NYC Office of the Mayor, Citywide Fatherhood Initiative  
NYC Police Department  
NYC Taxi and Limousine Commission  
NYS Assembly Members  
NYS Department of Taxation and Finance  
NYS Division of Child Support Services  
NYS Division of Parole  
NYS Office of Court Administration  
NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance  
NYS Senate Members  
US Attorney's Office  
US Department of Health and Human Services  
US Federal Bureau of Prisons



Photo for illustration purposes. Persons appearing are models.

# CONTACTS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

## Contact by Phone

### New York State Child Support Helpline

To speak to a representative  
8:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m., Monday–Friday  
888-208-4485  
TTY (Hearing Impaired): (866) 875-9975

### New York State Information Line

For automated information  
24 hours a day/7 days a week  
800-846-0773

## Contact in Person

### New York City OCSS Customer Service Walk-In Center

151 West Broadway, 4th floor  
(between Worth and Thomas Streets)  
New York, NY 10013  
8:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m., Monday–Friday (walk-in)

## Correspondence by Mail

### New York City Office of Child Support Services

P.O. Box 830  
Canal Street Station  
New York, NY 10013

## Individual Payments by Mail

### NYS Child Support Processing Center

P.O. Box 15363  
Albany, NY 12212-5363

## To Sign up for the Child Support Snapshot

If you are part of a New York City social service nonprofit or a government agency that serves parents and would like to have access to our Child Support Snapshot system (described on page 17), please email us at [ocssinfo@dfa.state.ny.us](mailto:ocssinfo@dfa.state.ny.us) and we will begin the sign-up process right away.

## On the Internet

### OCSS/New York City Office of Child Support Services

[www.nyc.gov/hra/ocss](http://www.nyc.gov/hra/ocss)

For materials from OCSS and other HRA programs in languages other than English, visit <http://bit.ly/HRAImmigrants> or go directly to HRA's pages in each of the following languages:

<b>Spanish</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRASpanishResources">http://bit.ly/HRASpanishResources</a>
<b>Arabic</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRAArabicResources">http://bit.ly/HRAArabicResources</a>
<b>Bengali</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRABengaliResources">http://bit.ly/HRABengaliResources</a>
<b>French</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRAFrenchResources">http://bit.ly/HRAFrenchResources</a>
<b>Haitian Creole</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRAHaitianCreoleResources">http://bit.ly/HRAHaitianCreoleResources</a>
<b>Korean</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRAKoreanResources">http://bit.ly/HRAKoreanResources</a>
<b>Polish</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRAPolishResources">http://bit.ly/HRAPolishResources</a>
<b>Russian</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRARussianResources">http://bit.ly/HRARussianResources</a>
<b>Simplified Chinese</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRASimChineseResources">http://bit.ly/HRASimChineseResources</a>
<b>Traditional Chinese</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRATradChineseResources">http://bit.ly/HRATradChineseResources</a>
<b>Urdu</b>	<a href="http://bit.ly/HRAUrduResources">http://bit.ly/HRAUrduResources</a>

### New York State Child Support Services

View account information with your Social Security number and the PIN for your account  
[www.childsupport.ny.gov](http://www.childsupport.ny.gov)

## On Social Media (HRA)

### Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/nychra>

### Twitter

<https://twitter.com/nychra>

### YouTube

[www.youtube.com/hranyc](http://www.youtube.com/hranyc)

### Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/nychra/>

## Feedback on Our Annual Report

OCSS welcomes your comments on our annual report. Please email them to:  
[ocssinfo@dfa.state.ny.us](mailto:ocssinfo@dfa.state.ny.us)

