

Santa Barbara County Parenting Court

Overview – An initiative led by Santa Barbara County DCSS in collaboration with the Superior Court and partner agencies to help parents overcome barriers to paying support.

Challenge - Santa Barbara County Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) is responsible for enforcing child support orders. We utilize a variety of enforcement mechanisms but for some long-term delinquent cases where traditional enforcement mechanisms have not succeeded, DCSS will file a request that the obligor be held in contempt of court. A finding of contempt of court can lead to jail time. Our internal analysis showed that contempt proceedings rarely result in long-term increased compliance with the child support order. However, we did find that the contempt process was a powerful tool for bringing people to court who had otherwise ignored their child support obligation and refused to communicate with us. Our challenge was to reform the contempt process to make it more likely to produce long lasting positive results in the form of the obligor paying their monthly child support obligation.

Solution - We learned that the 7th Judicial Circuit Court in Clay County, Missouri operates a Parenting Court that connects child support obligors with services designed to help them address their barriers to paying support. In 2020 we reached out to then Court Commissioner (now Judge) Stephen Foley. He readily embraced the idea and from there we convened meetings with Commissioner Foley, the Court Family Law Facilitator, the Public Defender's Office, Workforce Development Board and Family Service Agency (a local non-profit that supports families with a wide variety of programs, including the Dedicated Dads program that helps build parenting skills). All of these partner agencies provide supports and services that can address the needs of the participants. In our version of Parenting Court which is similar to, but differs in some key aspects from the Clay County program, participants attend twelve (12) Parenting Court sessions. The Court Commissioner utilizes this time to assist child support Obligor in connecting with community resources to address their barriers to paying support, gives them specific directions on utilizing community resources and uses their gravitas as a judicial officer to encourage positive steps and hold obligors accountable.

Innovation - This is the first Parenting Court in Santa Barbara County and, as far as we are aware, it is the first in California. The innovation in this program is pairing a person who is motivated to accept help,

with professionals from a variety of different disciplines, all in one location. While all of these resources already exist in the community, most participants did not utilize them because they are overwhelmed by their life circumstances and ignoring the reality of their child support (and usually other) obligations. Parents are at a crossroads by the time they choose to enter Parenting Court; they know that they face potential incarceration for not supporting their children so they are motivated to take the steps necessary to succeed. Then, having the friendly faces of the service providers in court with them each month helps them actually utilize the services. Potential roadblocks like completing paperwork and turning it in to the right place, calling the right person and showing up at the right place are either eliminated because they get the help on the spot, or can be addressed quickly at the next Parenting Court session. This helps create positive momentum towards overcoming their barriers to paying child support.

Results – Parenting Court started in September of 2023. Referrals from the contempt calendar gradually came in and participants started to identify their barriers and commenced programs to help them address those barriers. We currently have seventeen (17) active participants in Parenting Court. By September we will have six (6) graduates of the program. We have seen participants learn parenting skills and reconnect with their children, gain job skills and experience, obtain appropriately sized child support orders and increase their payments. The graduates have shown increased engagement and are willing to communicate with us, even when they cannot make their full monthly payment. Participants have expressed deep, heartfelt appreciation for the opportunities the program provides. Based on the success of Parenting Court, we are in discussions with the Superior Court to expand it to a second courthouse.

Replicability - This program could be replicated and promoted as a best practice to any Local Child Support Agency that currently maintains a contempt calendar.

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Additional Materials - [Parenting Court Guidelines](#).