

Colorado Model Office Project

**EVALUATION OF
LOCATE ENHANCEMENTS ON THE
AUTOMATED CHILD SUPPORT
ENFORCEMENT SYSTEM**

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INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter of 1996, a number of procedures designed to help county child support workers manage system-generated locate response information were initiated on Colorado's Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES). ACSES has significantly increased the location resources available to counties. A 1995 analysis of child support enforcement interventions indicated that ACSES generates over 300,000 locate responses per year from interfaces with resources which include the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Worker's Compensation, Unemployment Compensation, Department of Motor Vehicles, (DMV), the IRS, and the Federal Parent Locator Services (FPLS). On the other hand, much of the information is outdated and repetitive, leaving county workers with the difficult job of reviewing an extremely high volume of unusable locate responses. As a result, state and county child support administrators report that county technicians tend to only review locate responses for the cases they are working at the time.

The location of an absent parent is essential to successful child support enforcement activities. Establishment of paternity and court-ordered child support depends on locating and legally serving an absent parent. The bulk of child support collected by county actions results from wage assignments generated after an absent parent is located and employment status is determined. Any impediments to successful location activity handicaps the county workers' ability to generate child support collections, the bottom line for child support enforcement. In December 1995, absent parents in more than 98,000 cases in Colorado were not located – 53% of the caseload.

State child support enforcement staff are optimistic that the new enhancements can result in increased county worker efficiency and productivity by : (1) alerting workers to the number of locate responses to be worked; (2) eliminating outdated and repetitive locate information; (3) assigning cases with an initiating interstate action to a non-locate status; (4) allowing technicians to more easily generate important post office and employer for out of state cases.

This report presents an evaluation of the new locate procedures. It is based on interviews with county child support staff and the responses of county administrators, supervisors, and legal technicians throughout the state to an on-line survey. A total of 160 county child support workers completed the survey. Fifteen individuals participated in the in-depth interviews.

The survey contained five questions regarding the impact of the locate enhancements on caseloads. Child support personnel were asked if the interventions had increased the efficiency of their locate work by reducing the number of locate responses to review and by simplifying the document generation process.

In telephone and face-to-face interviews, technicians were asked to assess: the amount of time spent on locate activities; awareness of the procedures; the impact of the procedures on workload, savings in time; the ease of the new procedures in using the SPLS function, post office and employer verification documents; reductions in locate responses; simplification of locate work; and suggestions for improvement.

The following describes the location enhancements initiated on ACSES. Then we present the reactions of child support technicians.

DESCRIPTION OF LOCATE ENHANCEMENTS

As a result of coordinated efforts by the State Division of Child Support Enforcement (CSE), a task force of county child support workers, and the Model Office Project (MOP) Steering Committee, four locate enhancements were implemented on ACSES in an effort to improve the efficiency and productivity of county child support enforcement workers.

1. *Deletion of locate responses on ACSES over three years old if there is more current absent parent residence or employment information.* The goal of this procedure is to eliminate outdated and repetitive locate responses and thereby reduce the number of responses county technicians must review. Another goal is to increase the availability of ACSES file space which is unnecessarily consumed by dated locate material.

The first system-wide deletion of location information over three years old for cases with more current information resulted in the elimination of 57,726 outdated location responses. There were, however, 302,000 location responses remaining in the ACSES system for disposition. With this large volume of remaining responses, it remains a question whether technicians will see much difference in their workload, at least initially.

2. *Display on each technician's log-on screen a count of locate responses received and the number of responses that need review and disposition.* The goal of this enhancement is to remind county technicians when they log-on to ACSES that they have outstanding location work. CSE staff expect that this daily visual reminder will motivate county staff to work their locates more frequently and on a more regular basis. Prior to the establishment of the log-on display, a detailed list of locate responses for technicians was available on ACSES, but access to the information required technicians to move to a specific "locate request and response" screen. Many technicians do not routinely check this information and their unworked responses accumulate rapidly. Consequently, a technician might have hundreds of unworked locate responses. Response overload combined with very large caseload responsibilities often results in technicians reviewing only locate information for the specific cases they are working.

3. Provide "user friendly" information for processing initiating interstate actions; move initiating interstate actions from ACSES category 3 (locate) to category 2 (enforce). Each child support case on ACSES is assigned a category that helps technicians manage their caseload. Categories tell technicians what action needs to be taken. Cases in category two have an existing court order for child support, and the absent parent is located but not paying support. Cases in category three also have an existing court order, but the absent parent is not located and is not paying support. ACSES automatically generates locate requests to available resources for cases in category three.

CSE personnel determined that cases with initiating interstate actions logically do not belong in category 3 because: (a) an initiating interstate action is generated only for cases with a verified address or employer; and (b) locate activity for initiating interstate cases is the responsibility of the responding state, making it unnecessary for Colorado to generate location requests. Moving interstate cases to category 2 results in a more accurate description of interstate case actions and reduces the number of useless locate responses generated from Colorado sources.

In November 1996, ACSES was programmed to identify child support cases in category 3 with interstate actions initiated by a Colorado county. Initiating cases with either a verified residence or employer address that matched the state listed on the interstate action were reassigned to category 2. Cases that require additional locate work by Colorado technicians to determine whether the absent parent lives out of state were kept in category 3. As a result of this procedure, 2,315 of the 5,300 interstate cases that were identified were moved from category 3 to category 2. A report listing the interstate cases reassigned to category 2 was distributed to county child support staff for their information.

It is expected that this procedure will save county technicians valuable time by reducing the number of location requests they must review. Additionally, Colorado county technicians will not be held responsible for meeting federal time frames for follow-up enforcement actions required for initiating interstate cases in category 2. In the future,

county technicians will process requests for interstate actions through the Interstate Network at the state level. At that point interstate cases will automatically be changed from category 3 to category 2 before the request for interstate action is forwarded to another state.

CSE staff generated a second report identifying active initiating interstate actions with neither a verified residence or employer address for the absent parent. It was distributed to case workers for follow-up locate work.

4. Generate post office and employer verification letters from locate functions on ACSES. A new ACSES function allows technicians to readily generate State Parent Locator Service (SPLS) requests if the absent parent's last known address was out-of-state. Technicians can also generate post office verification and employer verification requests if the last known address was in Colorado or out of state. The documents can be generated directly from the obligor's current address or employer screens when a city, state and zip code are displayed or through the locate functions. CSE staff believe that the easy access to document generation will encourage increased routine usage of these important locate verification documents.

COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT STAFF REACTIONS TO LOCATE ENHANCEMENTS

Early reaction to the locate enhancements by county child support technicians is generally favorable. While some child support workers feel the new procedures have had little or no impact on their work, a majority of those interviewed were enthusiastic. They agree that locate work is easier and more efficient. As one Denver County technician reports:

It's most definitely helpful. We get a lot of good information from everyone. It's better than it used to be. I do locates more because it's easier and that has made it easier for me to handle my workload.

Results from the on-line survey substantiate the reactions obtained from the interviews. Seventy-one percent of those responding to the survey indicate that the locate interventions have had a significant impact on their caseload by improving the utility of the ACSES locate functions and increasing the ability of legal technicians to initiate subsequent case actions. One respondent commented that:

I've been away from child support for one and one-half years, and maybe it doesn't seem like it to you who have been toiling away during that time, but I think you all have made great strides since I've been gone. I'm really delighted at the refinements.

Much of the locate work for establishment and enforcement teams is handled by technician specialists whose primary responsibility is to review and dispose of locate response information. These specialists, for the most part, do not have their own caseloads. Some technicians, however, prefer to handle their locate work personally. One technician reports that she won't let anyone else do it for her.

My success depends on good locate work. I do it every morning for about fifteen minutes...Haven't found anyone to do a good enough job. Consistency in locate simplifies the process.

County technicians report becoming aware of the locate enhancements from a number of sources. The majority say that they received E-mail messages from the state agency about the new functions including instructions for usage. Technicians give the state good marks for the detailed E-mail instructions.

We get E-mail from the state about the new functions...I've been playing with it myself...E-mail is good. You can follow step-by-step. I do use the functions more routinely.

Some technicians are unsure of how they first learned about the new procedures. Others report hearing the information from their supervisor or in a training session. A few say that they sort of "stumbled onto the changes" while they were working on the system.

New things pop up on the screen as you are working. I didn't have any training...it's not that hard of a function.

In the next section of this report, we present technician reactions to the four locate enhancements that were initiated.

1. *Log-On Screen Displays.* County administrators and staff are generally pleased with the display of the number of locate responses received and unworked on the log-on screen. While a few technicians have reservations about the usefulness of the on-line count, and some others weren't aware of the addition, most of them find the information useful. As one technician who performs her own locate work put it:

I think the log-on display is wonderful. I look at it each day. It motivates me to clear out the responses. I clear responses twice a week in order to keep the caseload going and to keep locates from getting out of control.

Survey respondents also give high marks to the log-on screen count. Forty-three percent report that the addition of the log-on screen display has a major effect on their awareness of the need to work locates responses. An additional 28 percent indicate a moderate or medium effect. Child support staff who completed the survey comment that they "really like this function" and that it "helps keep me from forgetting."

Another county worker who routinely clears locate responses for many technicians, thinks the individual log-on display for technicians is helpful because:

It helps the techs know that responses are there in case I'm gone. It's a good reminder especially for techs who don't have a locater. If I were a technician, the information would increase my locate work. It would prompt me to keep locate clear on a regular basis. Locate is a time-consuming job. If responses add up, it takes a long time to clear them all. It's better to do them on a regular basis. The log-on prompt helps techs be aware of the responses to be worked right at the start.

Some technicians report that the log-on prompt is not only an important reminder of the number of responses to be reviewed, but is also a means to monitor locater efficiency.

I can tell if the locate person is doing the work. I usually only have 10 or less responses on my screen...Locate used to involve a lot more busy work. Now a locate person does everyone's locates in the time I used to spend just on my locate responses. The system is much faster now, more efficient. If we can locate the

absent parent faster, the money comes in faster. It gives me more time to work enforcement actions such as wage assignments.

A few locate specialists feel that the on-line locate response display is not so useful to them because they must still access each technician's locate screen to get a count. One locator reported that the technicians on her team were confused by the log-on messages and it was necessary for her to explain that she is checking their responses.

County child support staff agree that it helps to be aware of unworked locate responses. While the enhancement may not have increased their locate activity, the on-line count information serves as "a friendly reminder...it lets me know where I stand."

2. Deletion of Old Locate Responses. Child support staff have more mixed reaction to the system deletion of locate response information more than three years old and where more current information is available. While most agree that, theoretically, deleting outdated and repetitive locate information is a good idea, many technicians and locate specialists report that this action has not affected their workload to any measurable degree. Some child support workers say that the system still contains too many outdated responses or that they haven't noticed any deletion activity. One child support staff member reports:

The amount of locate responses I delete is about the same. I throw away about 98 percent of the responses and keep 2 percent. We have a lot of repeats. The system automatically generates repeats. This is a problem. We keep up with our responses now and we have a low volume. But large counties or counties that don't keep up with responses spend a lot of time throwing away junk. I'd like to see them eliminate junk.

Still other technicians agree that while the idea of automatically deleting responses after a period of time is good, the procedure doesn't affect them because they work their locates regularly, and delete responses as soon as they are reviewed. Deleting old responses as they are worked helps clear technicians' caseloads and frees up workers' time to look at new locate information.

Other technicians and locate specialists are enthusiastic about the system-generated deletion of outdated responses.

It's great! It was time consuming to delete old responses. I could have 20 pages of responses on just one absent parent and they could be repeats of the same information.

It's easier with the old addresses gone..this gives me time to find good locate information. Sometimes I'd spend a whole day clearing old stuff off the screen...locates are more efficient now. It only takes about 30 minutes each day to delete old stuff and to generate post office and employer verification documents. Then I can help techs do other things.

Technicians also report that the automatic deletion of old information has resulted in better cooperation from employers because they get fewer duplicate requests. They agreed that employers don't like repeated requests for verification.

The survey results corroborate the ambivalence that workers have about this intervention. While 49 percent of those surveyed report that the system deletion of locate responses three years or older has a great or moderate impact on the number of responses that need to be reviewed, 33 percent say that this intervention has little or no workload impact. About 18 percent feel that this effort has some impact.

3. Moving Cases From Category 3 to Category 2. Technicians and locate specialist who work cases involving interstate actions also report mixed reactions about the workload impact of the reassignment of initiating interstate cases with a verified address or employer from ACSES category 3 to category 2. Survey results reveal that slightly less than half of those responding (44%) report that recategorizing initiating interstate cases has little or no effect on their workload. Conversely, 43 percent feel that the process has a major to moderate effect on reducing unnecessary locate response work.

Some of those who say they haven't noticed a workload impact are unfamiliar with the reports that list interstate cases that were recategorized or cases with interstate actions initiated without a verified residence or employer address. As one technician said:

There are about 20 different reports. But I am in training now and get frustrated with everything I have to learn.

Another technician said she was too busy to become familiar with these reports.

I'm not familiar with these reports. I probably have a message about it on my desk, but it's not ringing a bell. I average 60-80 messages a week, so I print mail messages. I haven't had time to read all of them.

Other technicians and locaters who work interstate cases praise the automatic category changes and report a positive impact on their workload. They feel that this process eliminates time wasted sending out local address or employer verifications if the absent parent is known to be in another state. Additionally, they say that they don't worry about being out of compliance with federal time frames for actions related to category 2 cases because interstate cases are not covered by these regulations.

A supervisor feels that the report identifying interstate initiating cases which have neither a verified residence or employer address is a useful tool to help identify cases that might have "fallen through the cracks" and need locate work.

It's hard finding time to work these cases. They push for actions, but if technicians work these reports, that creates more work....but it helps productivity....helps move cases along.

One locater is concerned that technicians are sometimes unfairly criticized for not taking action on an interstate case. She cited a situation where an action was filed, but the absent parent skipped town and the case had to be returned to a locate status.

4. Generation of post office and employer verification letters. Most technicians report increased usage of State Parent Locater Services (SPLS), and post office and employer verification documents. They credit the increased use of these functions to the easy generation of the documents on-line from locate screens or from absent parent address and employer information screens.

More than three-fourths of those surveyed report that this intervention has a major or moderate impact on reducing the amount of time required to generate post office and employer verification letters. Additionally, 55 percent of respondents say that the intervention definitely affects their ability to quickly generate SPLS requests. Child support enforcement staff say that these new procedures are a "great idea - major help," and they "love it, it's great!"

Enforcement technicians note that while employment verifications are easy to generate on-line, they prefer to verify employer information by telephone or fax. If the employer is in another state, they call that state to initiate a wage assignment.

I do use the SPLS function more routinely, especially if someone calls and has a clue that the absent parent is out of state. Since its easier to do the SPLS, we do it more often. The new function cuts down on time to send an SPLS request. It's just so quick. Just takes two or three keystrokes to enter. If a client calls for an in-state report I can do the work while I'm talking on the phone to the client. Then I can tell her that I've made the status request. I can act on the request right away.

A number of technicians and locate specialists report that while the enhancements may decrease the time spent working locate responses, they don't actually decrease a technician's workload. Less time spent on locate work frees up time for different tasks. Verifying more locate responses results in more work doing wage assignments or establishing orders. Although working more locates is time consuming, it is productive work. If technicians don't have locate information, they can't be successful.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING LOCATE WORK

While these improvements are valued by workers, there are clearly ways to make the location process even more effective. One is to increase the number of printers available for document generation. A technician who performs the locate work for interstate cases said that if she utilizes the new easy access to document generation, she must pick up the forms from a printer that is another building. If she uses the old method of document generation, the forms are available from a printer in her work area.

We won't use the new enhancement in this area. There is no impact on workload because no one is using it.

Another technician agreed that locate work would be faster if there was better access to printers. He estimated that 200 to 300 people are using two or three printers.

Technicians also suggested that the state expand the range of sources consulted for location on ACSES. While they appreciate having on-line access to resources such as DOLE and the Department of Vital Statistics, they would like to have interface capability with resources such as the state's penal system and with Colorado student loan information.

CONCLUSIONS

A large percentage of locate work is performed by technician specialists whose primary responsibility is to review and process locate response information. However, some county child support legal technicians prefer to personally manage their locate work. Thus, the new location enhancements affect location specialists as well as many technicians who do establishment and enforcement work.

Whether they are specialists or not, nearly all county workers interviewed have positive reactions to the locate enhancements recently implemented, and report that the locate process is easier, more effective and less stressful than it used to be. Child support enforcement personnel who responded to the on-line survey confirm this assessment with 71 percent reporting that the MOP locate interventions have had a major to moderate effect on improving the utility of the locate functions. Since the enhancements were implemented, the number of locater responses recorded on ACSES has dropped dramatically. On December 21, 1995, there were 398,373 locate responses; on March 17, 1997, there were 174,292. State personnel attribute this 56 percent decline to the enhancements described in this report.

In the future, county child support staff would like to build on these enhancements with additional improvements. In particular, they would like to have on-line access to new location resources such as the state penal system and student loan information. They also report a need for more printers in order to take full advantage of the enhanced document generation capacities of ACSES.