

Colorado Model Office Project

STATE ENFORCEMENT UNIT LOCATION INTERVENTION

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes the Location Intervention at the State Child Support Enforcement Unit (SEU). It was initiated as part of the Model Office Project. We begin with a brief overview of the intervention. We next describe the research methods and data sources we used to evaluate the intervention. In subsequent sections of the report, we present the major findings and the conclusions.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION

Location activities in Colorado are handled by county child support workers in combination with other duties pertaining to establishment and enforcement. It rarely stands alone as a specialized function. As part of the Location Intervention of the Model Office Project, the State Child Support Enforcement Unit (SEU) retained an experienced location specialist at the state level to help the counties meet a variety of locate goals. It was hypothesized that a state-level specialist might utilize a variety of location methods not commonly used by county-level child support workers and that his exclusive focus on the location task would also have positive benefits. The procedure developed for this intervention was as follows.

1. In each Model Office Project County (Denver, Mesa, Archuleta) a specific number of cases in Category 3 were randomly assigned to the SEU for location assistance. The ACSES system was updated to let the technician know that this case has been assigned to the SEU.
2. Files were prepared for each case randomly selected for SEU intervention. They contained basic records such as a copy of the absent parent address screen and a copy of the absent parent employer screen.
3. Based on the information available for the absent parent, the SEU investigator determined the actions to be taken. For example, if there was no verified address or employer, or if the absent parent information was more than six months old, the SEU investigator:

Accesses the credit report screens and verified the address.

Contacted the county assessor's offices for ownership of property verification.

Entered the information onto the locate screens.

Pursued other assets through other locate resources as indicated.

If the absent parent employer screens showed a verified employer, the SEU investigator:

Determined if an active income assignment was in place with the employer.

Contacted the employer to determine the status of the case.

Removed wage assignments that were no longer relevant and updated ACSES.

Pursued new employment information.

Checked for additional assets.

If the case was out-of-state, the SEU investigator determined what actions to take based upon the age of the latest information in ACSES. If the information was older than six months, the investigator:

Consulted credit bureau reports

Verified the address

Updated ACSES

Generated an update to be sent to the responding state.

Consulted with the enforcing county about any cases in which the verified address was different from the address previously shown on ACSES.

If the out-of-state case contained address information verified within the last six months the investigator did not pursue assets but provided the responding state with the verified information.

If the out-of-state cases did not contain verified employer data, the investigator pursued employment information and provided new information to the responding state. If the new employment data was verified, the investigator worked with the county technician to determine how to proceed.

In general, following the locate work, the investigator conferred with the county about the most appropriate action to take and updated all information in the ACSES system.

EVALUATING THE INTERVENTION

To assess the impact of this intervention, we examined 606 cases worked by the SEU investigator. This includes 307 cases from Denver, 194 from Mesa and 105 from Archuleta. At the time they were assigned to the SEU, all of these cases were believed to be in Category 3. Indeed, our analysis shows that the cases had been in Category 3 for an average of 37.7 months, with half the cases in Category 3 for 26.0 months or longer. The average months in Category 3 was not significantly different in Denver and Mesa: 30.9 months vs 30.1 months. In Archuleta, cases had been in category 3 for a significantly shorter length of time with the average at 26.5 months.

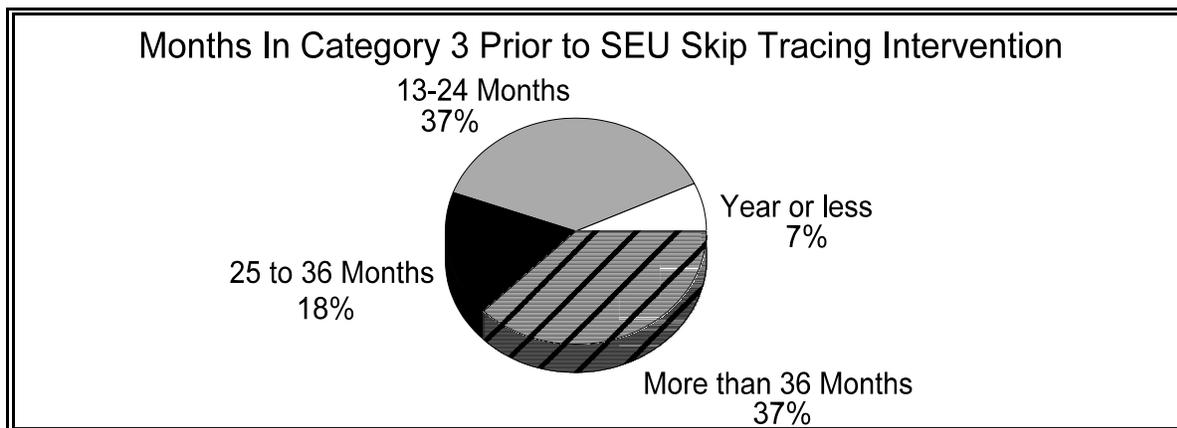


Figure 1

Most commonly cases were classified AF (40%), meaning that arrearages were due to the state. Another 24 percent were BC cases, which are former AFDC cases with arrearages due to the state and current child support due to the client. Approximately 17 percent were current AFDC cases.

For each case, the SEU investigator completed a brief data collection form (see Appendix A). This form:

Provided information about the sources consulted.

Documented what location determinations were made in the case related to property, residence, employment, social security number or other relevant facts.

Noted the nature of requests to the county.

Documented actions known to be taken as a result of the investigation.

Approximately, 7-9 months following the investigation, ACSES records were consulted on each case to determine whether the case had moved from Category 3 and its current status.

SOURCES CONSULTED

Table 1 indicates the sources consulted in the course of the SEU investigation. The two sources most commonly consulted were the Post Office and the Credit Bureau. Over 80 percent of the cases involved these types of checks.

Approximately 60 percent of the cases involved a check of the County Assessor's Office and an equal number involved a Department of Motor Vehicle check.

In closer to 20-30 percent of the cases, the SEU Skip Tracing Investigator spoke to the obligor, contacted the custodial parent, or consulted property files.

Table 1 Sources Consulted in Investigation (Total of 606 Cases)	
Spoke to obligor	18%
Spoke to custodial parent	20%
Obligor's bank	0%
Credit bureau	82%
Contacted federal court	0%
Post Office	83%
Property files	29%
Obligor's employer	10%
County Clerk's Office	3%
County Assessor's Office	60%
Department of Motor Vehicles	59%
Department of Labor	0%
Department of Corrections	5%
Other	1%

LOCATE DETERMINATIONS

It was expected that the investigation would lead to new information about the obligor's: residence; employment; property ownership; or social security number. Alternately, the investigation might confirm that the information on these items found in the ACSES system was already correct. Before we consider the success of the intervention with respect to each of these types of information, we should note that the investigation sometimes turned up unexpected information.

In nine percent of all cases, the investigator discovered that the case was inappropriately classified as a Category 3. In 86 percent of these cases the SEU investigator notified the technician of the problem along with a request to move the case to the appropriate category. In approximately 10 percent of the cases, the SEU investigator requested that the county technician close the case.

In two percent of the cases the investigator discovered that the obligor was deceased. In one percent of the cases the custodial parent reported receiving payments directly from the obligor.

Thus, for slightly more than 10 percent of the cases, the intervention led to “clean-up” activities that succeeded in removing the case from Category 3.

Case was inappropriately assigned to Category 3	9%
Absent parent is deceased	2%
Absent parent is paying custodian directly	1%
Other	1%

In the vast majority of all cases, the SEU investigation confirmed that the social security number shown on ACSES was correct. Only about two percent showed a different number and in one percent of all cases, no social security number could be located.

With respect to efforts to locate the obligor’s residence, we find that in approximately 28 percent of all cases the SEU investigator concluded that the information found on ACSES was still correct. In another 33 percent of the cases, a new in-state residence was found. In 26 percent of all cases an out-of-state residence was located. A few cases fell into special categories: obligors who were homeless, incarcerated, in hospitals or rehabilitation centers. In only one percent of the cases was the SEU investigator unable to reach any conclusion about the obligor’s current residence.

Table 3 Outcome of Residence Locate Attempt	
Out-of-state	26%
Located new address in-state	33%
Discovered old ACSES address is still valid	28%
Incarcerated or half-way house	4%
Homeless	2%
Hospital or rehab center	1%
Other	1%
Could not locate residence	1%

In the vast majority of cases, the investigator was unable to locate any evidence that the obligor owned any property. In the few cases with property assets, the investigator generally reported that no follow-up action could be taken.

Table 4 Determinations Made Regarding Property	
Obligor owns no property	94%
Obligor owns property but could not follow-up	6%
Other	1%

Table 5 indicates that in nearly a quarter of all cases, the SEU investigator was able to locate information about a new employer and in 12 percent of the cases, the old employer information was verified. Another 40 percent of obligors were found to be unemployed and/or collecting AFDC, SSI or other benefits.

Table 5 Determinations Made Regarding Employment	
Old ACSES information is correct	12%
New employer information obtained	23%
Verified he is unemployed	36%
Self-employed	5%
Collecting workers' compensation	7%
Collecting AFDC, SSI, etc	5%
Other	4%

ACTIONS TAKEN IN THE CASES

Some information gained in the course of the investigation required follow-up action by the enforcing county. These follow-ups might be requests by the SEU investigator for the technician to take specific actions in a case or advisements about how to proceed. Not all cases required such follow-ups. In some cases the SEU investigator could update information on ACSES, but there was no action to be taken.

Table 6 indicates that the most common follow-up actions to be undertaken by the counties involved requests to initiate an interstate action, or to move the case into a new category.

Table 6 Requests Made to Counties	
File legal document	1%
Initiate judgment	1%
Obtain judgment transcript	0%
Proceed with garnishments	3%
Process interstate action	20%
Process wage withholding	2%
Process wage assignment	8%
Move to appropriate category	14%
Close case	5%
Negotiate with absent parent	2%
Other	1%

Table 7 shows the action taken in the case as an immediate result of the SEU investigation. The list reveals how difficult it is to take effective actions in many category 3 cases. Direct wage withholding could only be initiated in 1 percent of the cases. Negotiations with an absent parent were achieved in only 2 percent of the cases. In another 3 percent, it was possible to initiate a license suspension which may prompt obligors to start paying child support. Finally, in 12 percent of the cases, it was possible to initiate an interstate action.

More commonly, the investigator's actions resulted in the verification of employer information, but no enforcement actions. In a few cases, about two percent, it was decided that no action was reasonable and that it was not cost effective to pursue the obligor. Another two percent of the cases were described by the SEU investigator as worth pursuing, but were dropped by technicians either in the Colorado county or by the other state involved in the case. In 17 percent of the cases, information was sent to another state for possible action. In 11 percent of the cases, a license suspension was attempted but dropped usually because the obligor did not have a valid license. Finally, in 14 percent, the intervention resulted in a case closure.

Table 7 Actions/Case Outcome	
None, not practical (cost-effective) to pursue	2%
No follow through from Colorado county	1%
No follow through by other state	1%
Locate information sent to other state	17%
Direct wage withholding initiated	1%
Lien against property initiated	0%
Interstate action initiated	12%
Verified employer	55%
Verified residence	0%
Ongoing investigation	47%
Attempted action at DMV (none could be taken)	11%
Action taken at DMV	3%
Negotiated with absent parent	2%
Case closed	14%
Other	0%

THE IMPACT OF THE SEU INVESTIGATION

A review of ACSES approximately 7-9 months after the SEU investigation closed finds that during this time period about 37 percent of all the cases moved into Category 2 (at least temporarily) and 19 percent moved into Category 1 (again, at least temporarily).

The 606 SEU investigation cases made an average of 1.2 category moves during this 7-9 month period. Thus, of the 606 cases classified as Category 3 at the start of the investigation, only 56 percent were still Category 3 cases at follow-up.

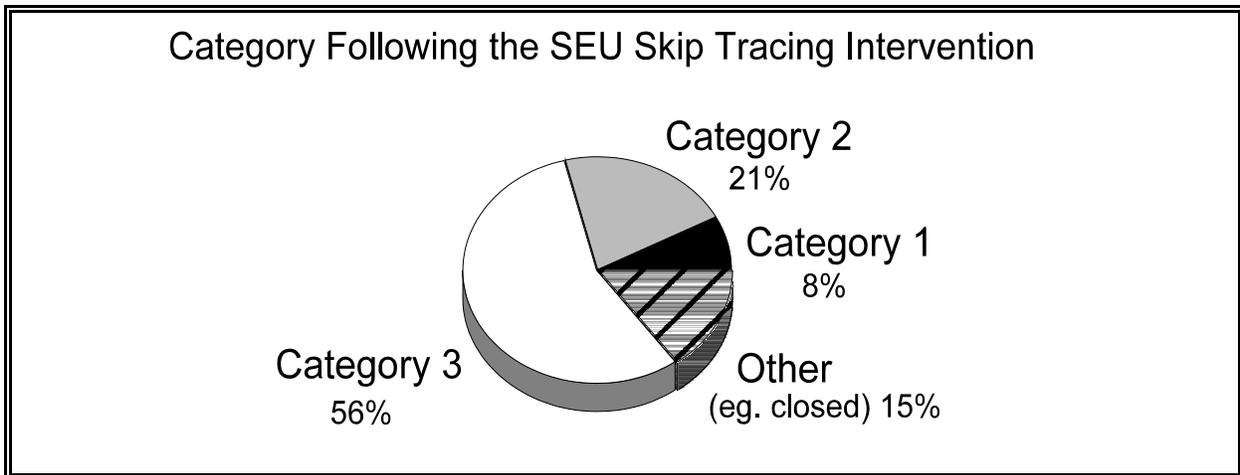


Figure 2

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the SEU location intervention led to a significant number of Category 3 cases moving out of this designation. This suggests that a concerted locate effort will produce results. The SEU investigator notes that many of the cases he worked had apparently not been the subject of such concerted efforts, at least not recently. He says:

A majority of the cases I worked on had addresses that were more than one year old. It was obvious that many of the cases had not been looked at in quite some time.

Nearly 20 percent of the cases not only moved out of Category 3, they progressed all the way to Category 1, indicating full payment. However, in more than half of these cases, the move to Category 1 was only temporary. Clearly locating and enforcing are ongoing challenges in these cases. A one-time effort will produce extremely limited results. The SEU investigator observes:

People who have been in Category 3 for a long time are truly a special breed...These people know they owe child support and it is the last thing they are concerned about.

However, the investigator was able to offer a number of recommendations about ways to enhance ongoing locate efforts. He suggests:

The [locate] answer, for the most part, lies with the recipient applicant...this individual will most likely have the information needed to track down the AP, even if they do not know it. The RA will possibly even know exactly where the AP is — someone just needs to ask.

He also recommends that the state work with the Department of Corrections to run matches against the DOC data base, and expresses optimism about the potential benefits of the New Hire Reporting and the recently acquired, computerized access to birth records at the Department of Vital Records.

With the development of the automated child support enforcement system (ACSES), location work came to be viewed as a mechanical process. It ceased to be a specialized function and child support technicians were instructed to do locate work in conjunction with their other enforcement and establishment duties. The process of locating obligors, however, remains vital to effective child support work. Like the intervention dealing with the privatization of location work, this Model Office Project intervention suggests that good locate work takes concerted and persistent efforts by child support workers regardless of their state, county or private standing. Child support agencies should review their staffing arrangements to ensure that location is receiving the attention that it requires, and develop incentives and monitoring schemes to help sustain worker commitment and productivity.