



INSTITUTE *for*
RESEARCH *on*
POVERTY

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

2020–2022 Child Support Policy Research Agreement:
Task 12

Child Support Agencies as Connectors

Lisa Klein Vogel

Samina Hossain

Institute for Research on Poverty

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Institute for Research on Poverty Webinar (Virtual)

January 11, 2023

Acknowledgements

- Funded by the Child Support Policy Research Agreement with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
- Thank you to...
 - Wisconsin DCF and BCS
 - Principal Investigator Judi Bartfeld
 - IRP colleagues Nasitta Keita, Molly Costanzo, James Spartz, and Dawn Duren
- An extra special thanks to...
 - The [county child support leaders and staff](#) who participated in this research

Any views expressed here are ours alone and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institution

Background (1)

- Child support is an important resource for many families
 - But most CPs (54%) do not receive full payments
- For many NCPs, inability to pay impedes compliance
- Traditional enforcement tools can be ineffective when NCPs lack financial resources
- Recent efforts focus on alternatives, aimed at improving earning NCP capacity and addressing barriers to work

Background (2)

- Wisconsin is a leader in innovation, adaptation
 - SPSK and CSPED; ELEVATE; Children First; W-2 liaison
 - Small-scale qualitative studies identify shifting approaches
- Prior work indicates new approaches involve challenges, including:
 - Building and sustaining collaborations (especially given “silos”)
 - Preparing, and making space for, staff to work in new ways
- Much remains to be learned about:
 - How CSAs perceive their role in helping NCPs address barriers
 - Current practices, resources, and constraints **across WI CSAs**
 - Guidance and information that could help

(A Subset of Our) Research Questions

1. What **barriers** to work and paying do WI child support agencies observe among NCPs?
2. What do leaders see as **the agency's role** in addressing barriers?
3. To what **types** of services do agencies connect NCPs? What services could help, but **aren't available**?
4. What factors **impede** collaboration?
5. What information and resources could **support** local efforts?

Design

- **Phase 1**
 - **Sample:** Directors and frontline staff (n=15); 5 counties selected for variation in region, size, service offerings
 - **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews (video, 60-90 minutes); December 2021 to February 2022
 - **Analysis:** Thematic analysis (NVivo12)
- **Phase 2**
 - **Sample:** Directors from all Wisconsin county CSAs (RR = 86%)
 - **Data Collection:** Qualtrics survey (55 questions); April-May 2022
 - **Analysis:** Descriptive statistics, checks for differences by county size (Stata 16)

Findings

- **Perceptions of employment barriers**
- The child support agency's role
- Service connections and gaps
- Collaboration challenges
- Supporting local efforts

NCPs experience a broad array of barriers to work

Factors that directors perceive make it “very” or “extremely” hard for NCPs to find and keep work:



Employment barriers are often complex, inter-related

- Barriers and related service needs vary across NCPs

“They may get that job, but then again, they may only have it for a day because they might get angry and walk out out the job. They might not show up for work or their car didn't work, so then they couldn't get to work, and then they lost their job. There are so many different reasons why somebody might not keep that job... every case is so different from the next one. So, it just depends upon the payer.” – Director

- Foundational barriers impede NCPs’ abilities to find and keep work

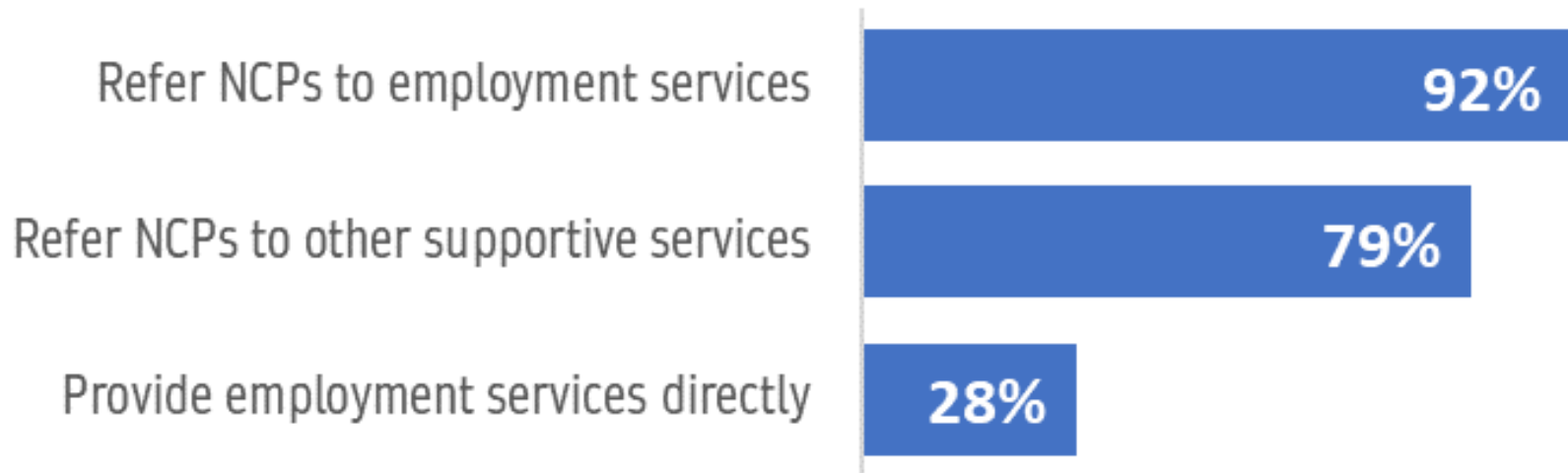
“If they have something like a drug addiction, they have to take care of that first. That's the biggest thing. They have to take care of that before they can try to maintain a job because it's not going to work.” – Case manager

Findings

- Perceptions of NCP barriers
- **The child support agency's role**
- Service connections and gaps
- Collaboration challenges
- Supporting local efforts

Director perspectives on the agency's role

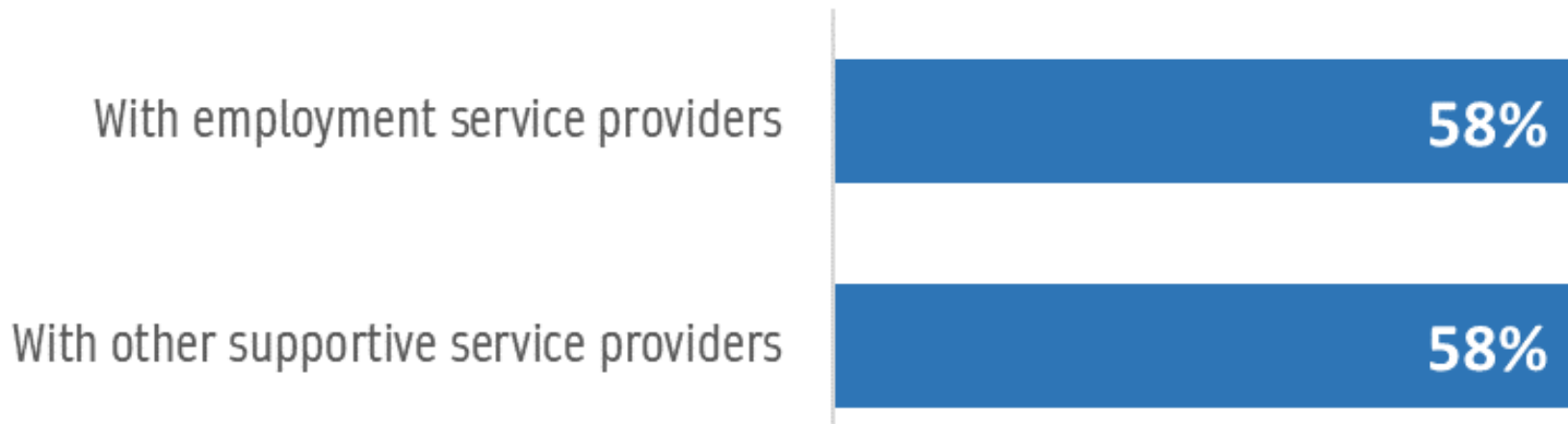
Child support agencies should be expected to...



“We’re not going to be specialists in all areas. But we certainly can link people to specialists. As long as we can continue exposure, we can at least give our clients an option.” - Director

Growing collaborative relationships is key agency priority

Building or strengthening relationships is a “very” or “extremely” high priority:



“It’s really sad that... people in our community do not know that [the employment provider] is even there. Given all the resources they have, it’s a shame that they’re not being used by people who need those resources so badly.” – Caseworker

Findings

- Perceptions of NCP barriers
- The child support agency's role
- **Service connections and gaps**
- Collaboration challenges
- Supporting local efforts

Evolving expectations for connections to employment services

- **Upon learning an NCP loses their job:**
 - Caseworker decides what steps to take (56%)
 - CSA expects caseworkers to take specific steps (41%)
- **When expectations, some differences:**
 - Share info with NCP for NCP follow-up (85%)
 - Share info with employment provider; provider follows up (62%)
 - Include employment services in a court order (76%)

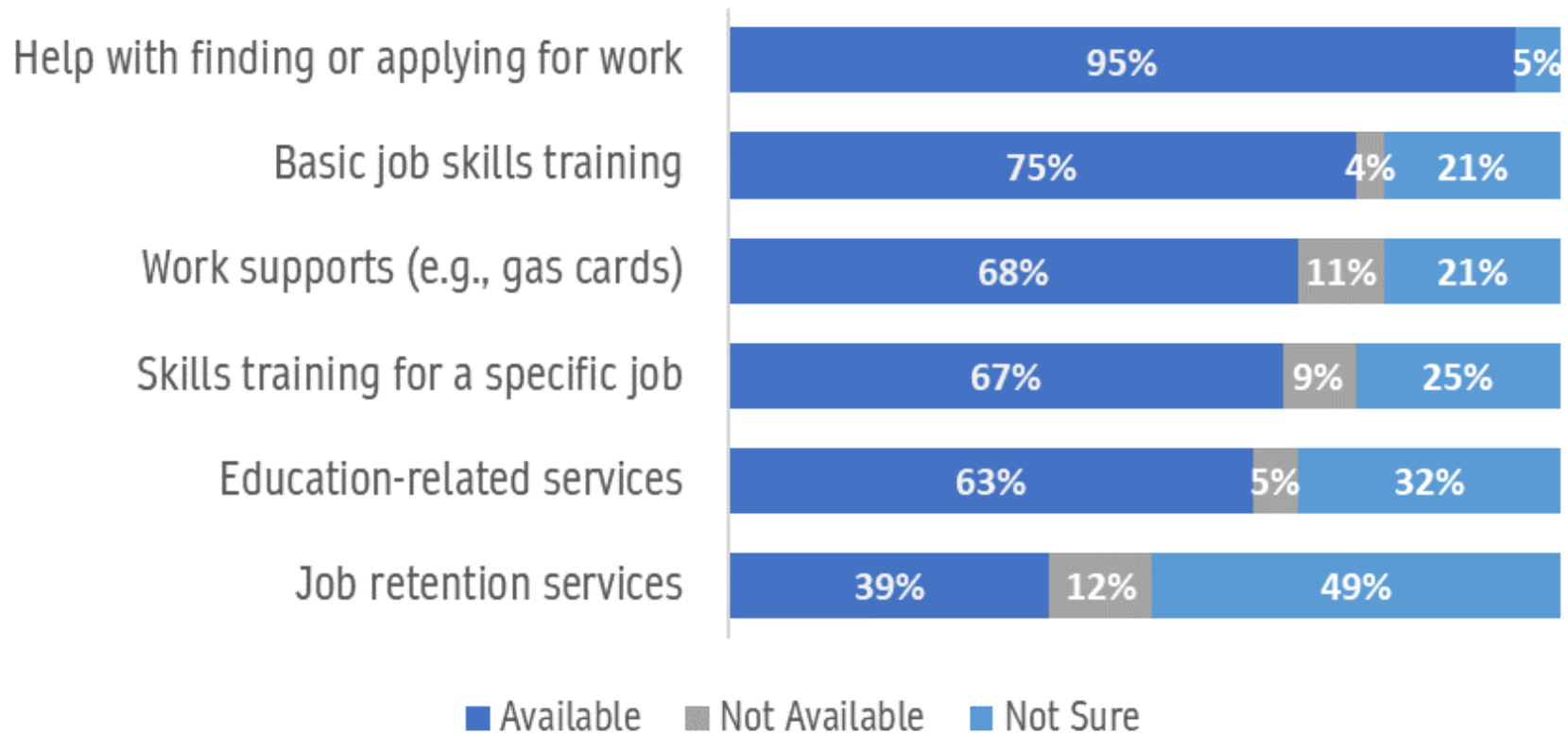
Overall positive view of employment partner relationship quality, service quality *



* With some expressions of uncertainty due to limited NCP feedback, challenges getting progress and outcome updates

But some uncertainty around employment partner service offerings

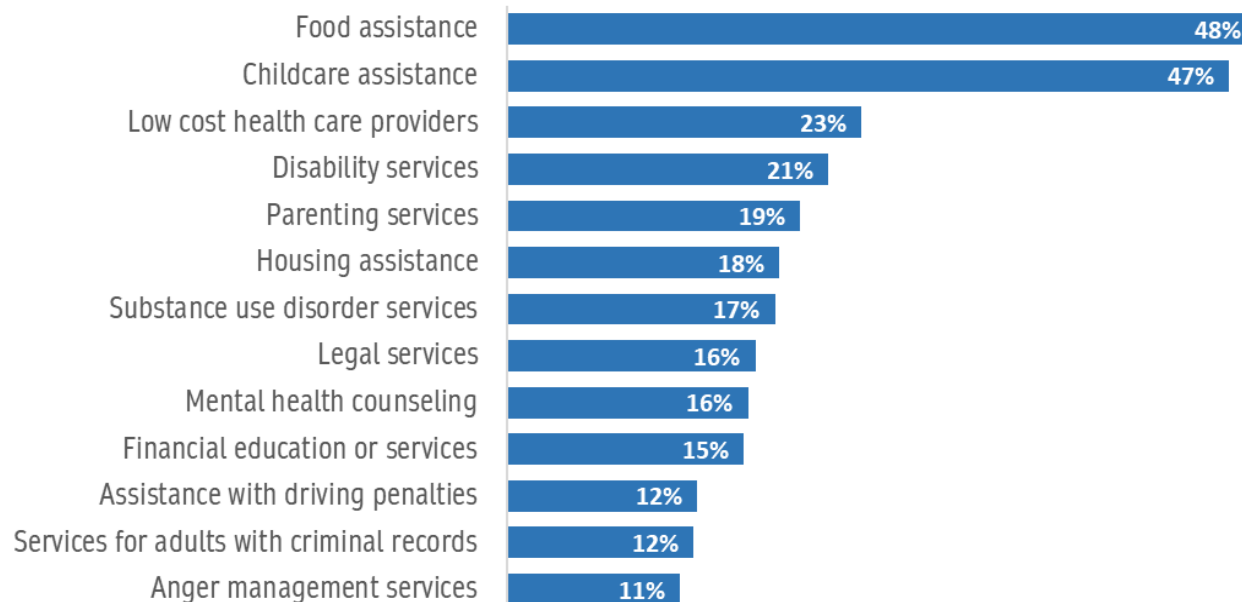
Primary referral partner offers the following services:



Less connections, weaker relationships with other supportive services

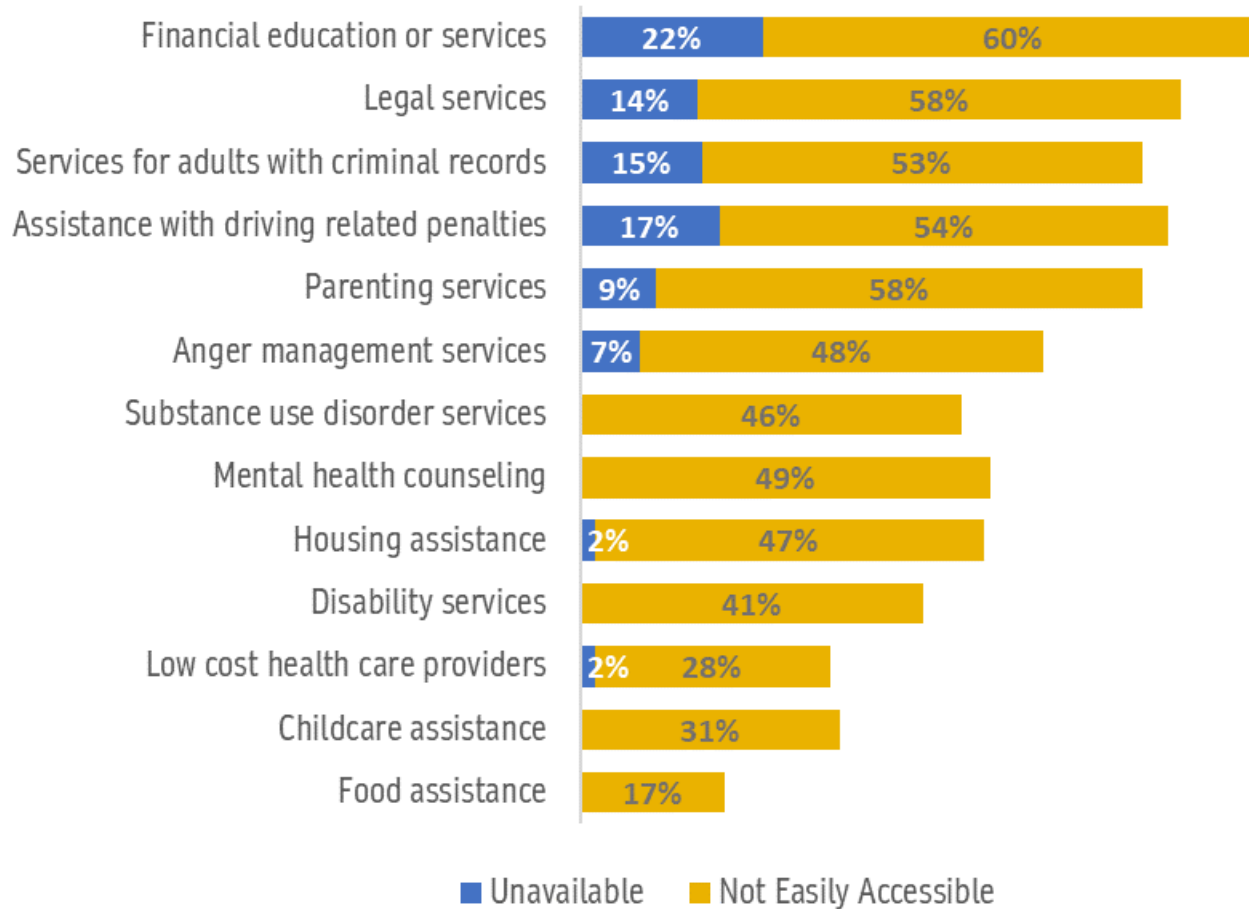
- **If another supportive service needs is identified:**
 - CSA expects caseworkers to make a referral (25%)
 - Caseworker is “very” or “extremely” likely to refer (26%)

Perceptions of agency relationship strength with supportive service providers:



Service gaps in domains beyond employment, despite needs

Ease of NCP access to supportive services in agency's area:



Findings

- Perceptions of NCP barriers
- The child support agency's role
- Service connections and gaps
- **Collaboration challenges**
- Supporting local efforts

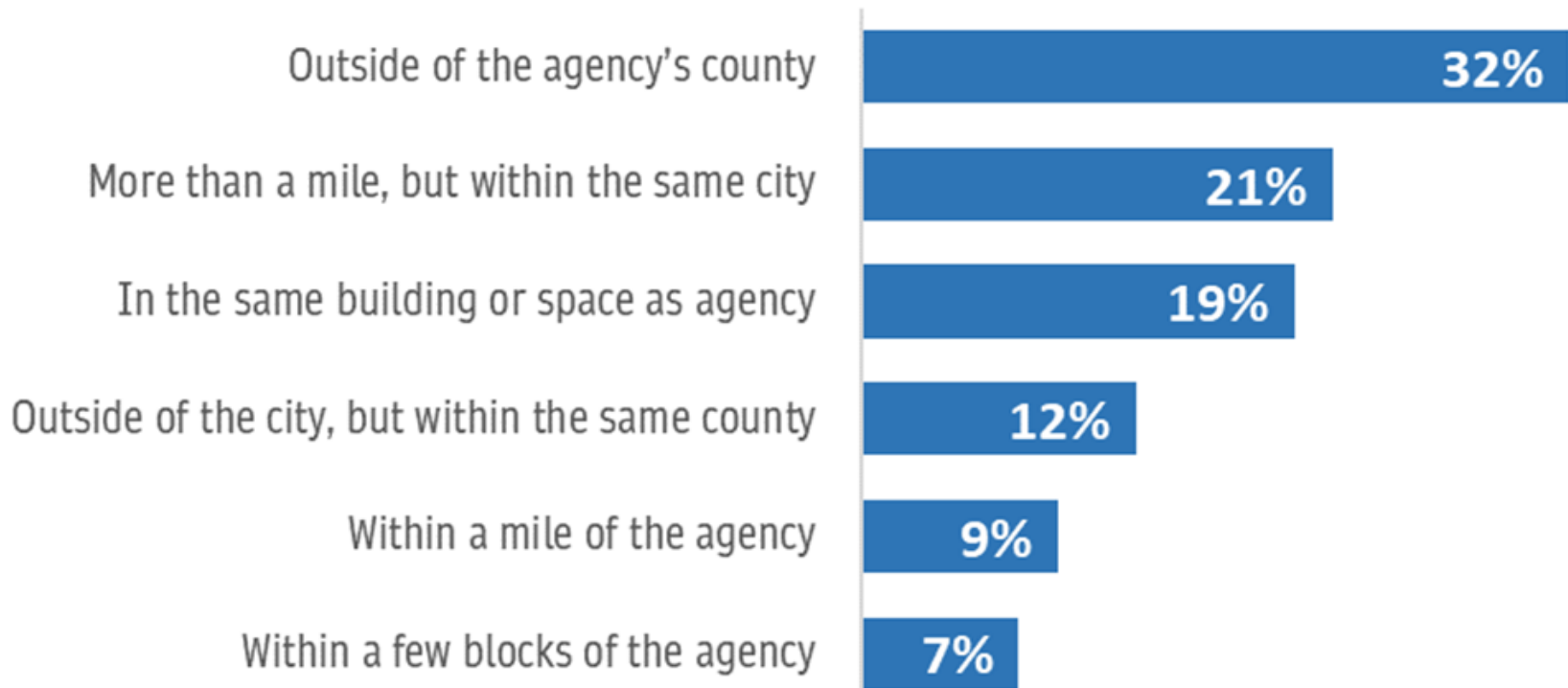
Lack of time, resources, information creates challenges

Factors that have challenged collaborative efforts with other service providers “a lot” or “a very great deal”:



Location matters for collaboration and accessibility

In relation to agency, primary referral partner is:



Findings

- Perceptions of NCP barriers
- The child support agency's role
- Service connections and gaps
- Collaboration challenges
- **Supporting local efforts**

Agencies identified strategies for supporting local efforts

- Training and resources **for staff**
 - Adequate staff capacity to facilitate intensive approaches
 - Centralized, searchable resources
 - Training and TA on collaboration, new service approaches
- Tools for dynamic information exchange **with partners**
 - Secure, user-friendly database(s) for all stakeholders
 - Streamlined referral processes
- Expanded employment and supportive services **for NCPs**, including expanded infrastructure

Summary

- Agencies value a “connector” role, representing a key opportunity
- This study provides insight into current practices and potential opportunities
- Study also highlights challenges for collaborating with supportive service providers
 - Operational constraints (high caseloads, funding restrictions)
 - Disconnect between NCP needs and available assistance
 - Difficulties navigating the landscape of providers

Limitations

- Survey limited to director perspectives
 - Not frontline staff
 - Not service providers
 - Not NCPs
- Possible systematic bias of non-respondents
- Small sample size limited subgroup analysis
- Findings are descriptive

Potential Implications

- Resources for additional staffing could expand capacity
- Agencies could benefit from help learning about local options (e.g., resource mapping, searchable databases)
- Training and technical assistance could help prepare staff; facilitate consistency
- Opportunities for knowledge-sharing could help make CSAs comfortable working in new ways
- Expanded service offerings could help provide options
 - Rural and small counties face unique challenges that require investments in services, infrastructure

Questions?

Thank you!

Lisa Klein Vogel can be reached at the
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Institute for Research on Poverty
lmklein@wisc.edu

CSAs perceive NCP willingness to engage as a significant challenge

“There’s a bit of **pride** because it is hard for people to ask for help. We stress that we’ll be as accommodating as possible... It can still be difficult. Part of that might be busyness, but also a sense of **pride**.”

“Some people are **angry** with us because we’re making them do something they don’t want to... They want to have their freedom, and we are pretty much infringing on it.”

“The ones that don’t follow through on [services] have a negative viewpoint. It’s not necessarily their fault. Maybe they’ve had **bad luck in the past**...they have that attitude already, like, ‘Why bother’ or ‘I’ve applied at every job in town, and nobody wants me, so, just throw me in jail.’”

“I hear quite often, ‘I have a **background**. The only jobs I can get pay a little, and you guys **take up to 60%** of that.’ They feel it’s not worth their time if they’re not going to have money to even live off. And sometimes that job might bump them from getting certain **benefits**.”

“[Staff] hear from NCPs, ‘You probably think I’m a **bad person**...’ I think a lot of people think, ‘I’m not calling my case-worker because they’re taking me to court, and they think I’m a bad parent.’”

“They see these services as an **extension of the CSA**, not as a separate body. I think they see anything in their contempt paperwork as all child support... ‘They’re coming after me.’”

Employment services options vary across counties

