

Child Support and Domestic Violence Tips for Supervised Visitation Centers

Programs providing supervised visitation and/or safe exchange services have been increasingly collaborating with the court and legal system to provide a more holistic response to domestic violence cases. The following are some tips for supervised visitation programs to help support survivors navigating the child support process.

Why increasing safer access to child support is so important for survivors of domestic violence

Economic insecurity plagues many domestic violence survivors, long after they have separated from their abusive partners. Lack of financial resources undermines survivors' ability to leave and begin a new life. In many cases, survivors have a hard time achieving financial independence after enduring economic abuse by partners who have sabotaged their jobs, encumbered them with debt, or ruined their credit scores.

In addition to jeopardizing the safety of survivors and their children, economic insecurity may lead to additional adverse outcomes, including poor health and housing instability.

For survivors with children, child support can help them to achieve financial stability and independence. For those with income below the poverty level, child support represents nearly half of custodial parents' income. Unfortunately, obtaining a child support order and subsequent enforcement may be fraught with difficulty. At best, the child support system is complex and confusing. At worst, it requires survivors to take steps that endanger them and their children.

The following tips highlight how supervised visitation centers can participate in coordinated community response efforts to ensure domestic violence survivors receive the support they need

to make informed, voluntary decisions about whether to pursue child support, and to make the process safe and effective for those survivors who choose to pursue it.

1. Learn about your community and court's child support system and available protections for victims
 - Collaborate and participate in meetings with other organizations involved in the child support system, including the child support agency, the court, legal services providers, and victim advocacy organizations. Obtain information about the child support system and share your perspectives about clients' experience with the system.
 - A good way to learn about the existence and work of local domestic violence collaborations (sometimes called coordinated community response or CCR) is to approach the local domestic violence advocacy organization(s). CCRs and similar collaborative teams usually include such programs and use a shared leadership model.
 - *Alternatively, your state or territorial domestic violence coalition may have information about local teams; for a list of coalitions, see <https://nmedv.org/content/state-u-s-territory-coalitions/>*

2. Work with local courts, the child support agency, and service providers to ensure that your organization has all available informational materials (brochures, information sheets, etc.) regarding obtaining child support, complying with orders, and other important information to distribute to participants in the supervised visitation/safe exchange program.
3. Provide appropriate referrals to organizations that can assist with the child support process; develop relationships so that the handoff can be “warm,” with supervised visitation staff connecting individuals directly with staff from the service provider.
4. Consider engaging in an assessment of the number of clients who seek child support and their experiences with the process and share aggregated, non-identifying information with other stakeholders working to enhance the system.
 - Because supervised visitation and exchange programs work with many families who are involved with or have had experience with the child support system, they are well positioned to learn first-hand about families’ perspectives of the system and to help identify and support efforts to make improvements
 - Strategies can be as simple as including questions about whether participants receive child support, and, if not, if they plan to seek it or have sought it in the past. Programs can compile this data, stripped of any identifiers, to assess participant families’ involvement in the child support system. By also asking questions about whether participants’ experiences with the system have been positive or negative, and in what ways, programs can collect information that provides stakeholders with actual, on-the-ground feedback on the current child support system.

¹ See, for example, Baker, C. K., Billhardt, K. A., Warren, J., Rollins, C., & Glass, N. E. (2010). Domestic violence, housing instability, and homelessness: A review of housing policies and program practices for meeting the needs of survivors. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15(6), 430–439; Goodman, L. A., Smyth, K. F., Borges, A. M., & Singer, R. (2009). When crises collide: how intimate partner violence and poverty intersect to shape women’s mental health and coping? *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 10(4), 306–329.

² In 2008, child support payments lifted a million people from poverty; the increase in child poverty without child support would have been 4.4 percent. See <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/29421/412272-Child-Support-Plays-an-Increasingly-Important-Role-for-Poor-Custodial-Families.PDF>

For More Information

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This project is supported by grant 2015-TA-AX-K023 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.