

## **Colorado Model Office Project**

# **ONGOING ASSESSMENT OF THE PRIVATIZED CUSTOMER SERVICE UNIT FOR THE DENVER COUNTY DIVISION OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT**

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**April 4, 1997**

Prepared under a grant from the Federal Office of Child Support  
Enforcement (Grant No. 90-FF-0027) to the Colorado Department of  
Human Services for the Model Office Project

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This is a continuing assessment of one aspect of the Model Office Project. It involves the impact of a privatized and specialized Customer Service Unit (“Unit”) to handle all phone calls to the Denver County Child Support Division (“Division”). We examine the Unit’s effects approximately one year after its implementation. The purpose of the Unit is to improve services to clients and to relieve child support technicians of time consuming telephone duties, thereby enabling them to engage in more productive tasks.

This assessment is based on many different types of information. One major source is a survey conducted with 249 parents who called the Unit during January 13-15, 1997. (See Appendix A for a copy of the 1997 Customer Service Survey.) For comparison purposes, we contrast the reactions of callers to the Unit with those reported by 242 parents interviewed in March 1996 with respect to calls they had placed to the Denver County Child Support Enforcement Unit during the week of February 20, 1996. (See Appendix B for a copy of the 1996 Customer Service Survey.) To gauge the impact of the Unit on agency efficiency, we collected and analyzed various indicators of child support performance for Denver County before and after the implementation of the Unit in April 1996. To elicit the more lasting reactions of workers, we conducted face-to-face or telephone interviews with 22 child support technicians in Denver County. We also incorporate the results of a focus group with 12 custodial parents that we conducted on May 11, 1995. Finally, we draw upon the reactions of child support technicians and Unit employees gleaned in the course of preparing our report on the implementation of the Unit, **Preliminary Assessment of the Privatized Customer Service Unit for the Denver County Division of Child Support Enforcement.**

## **CLIENT REACTIONS**

Improving customer satisfaction was and is the major objective of Denver's privatized customer service intervention. It was hoped that services to clients would improve if a dedicated Customer Service Unit was created to handle all calls to the Denver CSE. In addition to handling routine calls, the Unit was expected to dispose of simple case actions. The selected agent for the intervention was Lockheed Martin IMS's Family Support Registry (FSR). The FSR was considered to be a good choice since it had the staff, equipment and experience in place to handle this service.

During the week of January 13-15, 1997, Unit staff maintained a log of callers. Two weeks later, during the first part of February 1997, interviewers at Colorado Market Research were able to administer a customer satisfaction questionnaire to 252 of these callers, of whom 249 were custodial or noncustodial parents. The results of these interviews, when compared with the results of interviews conducted with 242 parent callers to the Denver County CSE in February 1996, afford some opportunity to examine whether the Unit has improved client satisfaction.

In both study years, the bulk of our interviews were conducted with custodial parents who were most apt to report calling to "check on the status of a case." Noncustodial parents in both study years were most apt to report calling to try to "resolve a problem." The other common reasons for phoning mentioned by custodial parents were trying to solve a problem, asking a question, and getting information. Noncustodial parents mentioned calling to ask a question, clarify something or question an enforcement action.

### **REACHING A HUMAN BEING**

The first challenge that confronted callers in both study years was getting to speak with a human being. Prior to the introduction to the Unit, most callers reached their technician's voice mail. According to clients interviewed in the 1995 focus group, they usually got no response to the voice mail messages they left for days or even weeks. Several clients spoke about the frustration of being tied to home while awaiting a return call. Some of the

clients said they had to call a supervisor to get their technician to phone back. Indeed, only 46.2 percent of custodial parents and 31.1 percent of noncustodial parents reported that their technician “usually” called back within 24 hours.

The introduction of the Unit has meant that callers reach a customer service representative. There are no answering machines or voice mail systems. On the other hand, callers often encounter busy signals and wait times. With over 400 calls a day, the Unit is experiencing call volumes that exceed pre-project expectations. As a result, callers currently experience an average wait of 3 minutes and 58 seconds before they speak to a customer service representative. It is not known how many callers reach a busy signal when they call the Unit and must call back. Approximately 27.4 percent of all calls to the Unit are abandoned before a representative gets on the line.

That many clients experience difficulty getting through to a representative is documented in the 1997 survey of callers. About a third of custodial parents and 46 percent of noncustodial parents strongly agreed with the statement, “I had to make a lot of calls before I got through.” More to the point, over half of custodial (52%) and noncustodial (60%) callers said that the statement, “I had to wait a long time to speak with someone” was “very true.” Table 1 summarizes caller experiences with access to child support and Customer Service Unit staff.

Table 1 Percent (and Number) of Custodial and Noncustodial Parents Rating Access to CSE and Customer Service Unit Workers in Different Ways				
	1996		1997	
	Custodial	Noncustodial	Custodial	Noncustodial
Tech calls back in 24 hours Usually	46.2% (69)	31.1% (29)		
Had to make a lot of calls before reaching Unit Very true Somewhat true			34% (31) 20% (9)	46% (31) 16% (11)
Had to wait a long time to speak Very true Somewhat true			52% (94) 15% (28)	60% (41) 15% (10)
Tech called back in 2 days			34% (42)	34% (10)
Eventually spoke with tech			51% (58)	64% (36)

Once they get past the wait time, however, callers speak with a customer service representative who attempts to handle their questions or problems without intervention by the child support technician. If technician intervention is required or requested by the client, a message is sent asking the technician to contact the client within two days. About a third of parents who requested that their technician call them back said that they had been recontacted within the promised two day period. About one-half to two-thirds reported that they had eventually spoken with a technician. At the same time, nearly half of custodial parents (46.5%) and a third of noncustodial parents (32.1%) who requested a return call said they had never received one.

### **BEING TREATED WELL**

In both study years, clients generally report being treated with professionalism. An almost identical proportion of parents reported professional treatment in 1996 and 1997 if those who characterized it as “usual” are compared with those who said this characterization was “very true.” Naturally, the 1997 ratings are more favorable if those who characterized professional treatment as “somewhat true” are combined with the more enthusiastic

respondents. During both study years, nearly three-quarters of custodial and two-thirds of noncustodial parents characterized the technician or the customer service representative as professional.

In a similar vein, high and similar proportions of custodial and noncustodial parents felt as though their technician or customer service representative had avoided using jargon. If those who felt that this characterization was “somewhat true” are added with those who evaluated it as “very true,” the patterns are decidedly more favorable in 1997. As with professionalism, clients during both study years tended to find those who tried to help them understandable with nearly three-quarters of custodial and two-thirds of noncustodial parents characterizing it this way.

The differences for the two study years are more substantial when we compare responses to other items dealing with the competence of the person on the phone and their interest in providing help. Clients who called the Customer Service Unit in 1997 were more apt to characterize representatives as knowledgeable and helpful. This was particularly the case for noncustodial parents who were displeased with many aspects of the service they received in 1996.

Nearly three-quarters of custodial and noncustodial parents in 1997 agreed strongly or “somewhat” with the statement, “The person I spoke with seemed knowledgeable about the child support system.” To contrast, 60 percent of custodial and 31 percent of noncustodial parents in 1996 gave their technicians “excellent” or “good” ratings for explaining the child support system. As for willingness to help, 80 percent of custodial and 71 percent of noncustodial parents in 1997 agreed strongly or somewhat with the statement, “The person I spoke with tried hard to help me.” To contrast, 60 percent of custodial and 24.5 percent of noncustodial parents in 1996 rated their technicians as “excellent” or “good” with respect to being “available and willing to help.”

Despite the efforts expended by technicians and customer service representatives, however, satisfaction remained elusive for many custodial and noncustodial parents in both 1996 and 1997. In response to the item, “I accomplished what I had hoped to,” 42-45 percent of custodial parents in both study years found this to be “usually” the case, or “very true.” And in response to the item, “The person I spoke with handled my problem or “took the necessary action or follow-up on the case,” about half of the custodial parents and between a third or a half of noncustodial parents in both study years found this to be “usually” the case or “very true.”

Client reactions to technicians and customer service representatives in 1996 and 1997 are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Percent (and Number) of Custodial and Noncustodial Parents**  
**Rating CSE and Customer Service Unit Workers in Various Ways**

	1996		1997	
	Custodial	Noncustodial	Custodial	Noncustodial
The person I spoke with was professional: Usually Very true Somewhat true	72.1% (108)	56.5% (52)	72% (130) 17% (31)	66% (45) 16% (11)
I accomplished what I had hoped to: Usually Very true Somewhat true	41.5% (62)	36.0% (33)	45% (81) 17% (31)	25% (17) 16% (11)
The person I spoke with avoided using jargon: Usually Very true Somewhat true	72.1% (108)	62.8% (58)	86% (156) 6% (11)	69% (47) 13% (9)
The person I spoke with seemed knowledgeable/explained the child support system: Excellent/good Very/somewhat true	59.8% (90)	30.6% (28)	78% (141)	74% (50)
The person I spoke with handled my problem/took the necessary action or follow-up on the case: Usually Very true (Unit rep) Somewhat true	50% (75)	46.5% (43)	48% (87) 17% (31)	31% (21) 9% (6)
The person I spoke with tried had to help me/was available and willing to help: Excellent/good Very/somewhat true	59.8% (90)	24.5% (23)	80% (145)	71% (48)

## BEING REFERRED TO A TECHNICIAN

An important objective of the Customer Service Unit is to relieve technicians of routine questions and case actions posed by clients. It was expected that most callers would be adequately handled by customer service representatives and that only a minority would require attention by the child support technician. Indeed, a monitoring effort conducted during one week in June 1996 revealed that approximately 30 percent of calls to the Unit are referred back to technicians for further attention.

In the manual logs of calls maintained by customer service representatives during January 13-15, 1997, representatives noted whether they had handled the caller's matter or had referred it to the technician for further action. Based upon these records, it appeared that the referral rate was substantially higher than expected (see Table 3). According to the logs, fully 55 percent of custodial parent calls were referred to the technician. More significantly, 87 percent of noncustodial parent calls were referred.

	Custodial	Noncustodial
Referred	55% (100)	87% (58)
Not referred	43% (78)	13% (9)
Not clear	2% (3)	
Number	181	67

Lockheed administrators and Unit representatives are mystified by these rates of referral. Moreover, they do not match rates generated in the agency's own tracking study conducted on March 17-19, 1997, which revealed that only 20 percent of callers were referred to technicians for further attention. In addition to being dramatically lower, Lockheed's study did not show significant differences in referrals for custodial versus noncustodial parents. There is no ready explanation for this discrepancy, although Lockheed's analysis of printed chronology messages are undoubtedly more reliable than the manual logs maintained by

representatives. (See Appendix C for a copy of Lockheed's analysis of callback requests based on a total volume of 1,111 calls during March 17 -19, 1997.)

Representatives believe that some obligor referrals are due to the fact noncustodial parents want modifications, reductions in their arrearages and other financial adjustments that the representatives are unable to discuss. They maintain that there is often little that the representatives can do for noncustodial parents except perhaps to assure them that they are heard and that messages are relayed promptly to technicians who must respond within two business days. Indeed, the limited range of actions that technicians are able to take on behalf of noncustodial parents makes the high levels of user satisfaction reported by noncustodial parents in 1997 all the more impressive.

Requests for technician assistance by custodial parents are more frustrating to customer service representatives since many questions from custodial parent are informational. Representatives are trained to give clients most of the answers they want: case status reports and expected time frames. At the same time, they cannot prevent custodial parents from insisting on talking with their technicians, even when there is nothing new to be said. It appears that at least some custodial parents insist on this type of contact.

## **REACTIONS TO TECHNICIANS**

When they ultimately speak with their technicians, clients in 1996 and 1997 rate their willingness to help and their initiation of appropriate case action about the same. In both study years, about 40-50 percent of custodial and noncustodial parents felt as though technicians had taken the necessary case actions. On the other hand, perceptions of technician helpfulness were significantly higher. Noncustodial parents in 1997 were significantly more apt to feel as though their technicians had helped them as compared with their counterparts in 1996. Nearly three-quarters (72%) agreed that their child support technicians had been helpful. This may be due to the fact that technicians are now required to return calls to clients within 48 hours and in past years response times were significantly lengthier. Client ratings of technicians have clearly not suffered as a result of

the implementation of the Customer Service Unit, and for noncustodial parents, they appear to have improved quite a bit. Ultimate satisfaction, however, remains difficult to achieve. In both study years, only about 40 percent of parent callers reported accomplishing what they had hoped (see Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**Caller Reactions to Child Support Technicians Before and After**  
**Introduction of Customer Service Unit**

Percent (and Number) Reporting:	1996		1997	
	Custodial	Noncustodial	Custodial	Noncustodial
The person I spoke with handled my problem/took the necessary action or follow-up on the case: Usually Yes	50% (75)	46.5% (43)	43% (32)	46% (18)
Was your tech helpful? Yes			57% (43)	72% (28)
The person I spoke with tried to help me/was available and willing to help: Excellent/good Yes	59.8% (90)	24.5% (23)	58% (43)	64% (25)
I accomplished what I had hoped to: Usually Yes	41.5% (62)	36.0% (33)	41% (30)	39% (15)

### **BEFORE AND AFTER ASSESSMENT**

About one-half of the 1997 callers interviewed by Colorado Market Research had called the Child Support Enforcement Division prior to April 1996 when the Customer Service Unit was begun. These individuals were asked to compare service today with the service they recalled receiving before April 1996. The responses to this question appear in Table 5. Approximately 25 percent of responding custodial and noncustodial parents characterized today's service as "much better" and another 25 percent characterized it as "somewhat better." Thus, 50 percent of callers would rate the Unit as an improvement. Nearly a third of each group characterized service as "about the same." Only a handful of parents (17-18 percent) characterized current service as "somewhat" or "much" worse.

Table 5 Client Comparison of Service at the Child Support Agency Before and After Introduction of the Customer Service Unit		
Percent saying service after implementation of the Unit is:	Custodial	Noncustodial
Much better	22% (22)	27% (8)
Somewhat better	25% (25)	28% (8)
About the same	32% (31)	28% (8)
Somewhat worse	7% (7)	7% (2)
Much worse	11% (11)	10% (3)
Can't remember	3% (3)	
Number	98	29

These patterns are particularly positive because we believe that most clients were predisposed to oppose the Customer Service Unit. In the focus group with clients conducted on May 16, 1995, custodial parents were unanimously opposed to a specialized Customer Service Unit. They said that they wanted to deal with their technicians directly. Although they were frustrated by problems they had communicating with technicians and wished that technicians were more responsive and energetic, they did not want to be shielded from their technicians. They opposed any type of arrangement that distanced them from their technicians or introduced another level of bureaucracy. They also doubted whether customer service personnel would know enough about their case to be helpful. They feared that they would be bounced back and forth between technician, customer service representative, FSR representative and supervisor. Clearly, these fears and negative expectations have not materialized.

### **SUMMARY OF CLIENT REACTIONS**

Although parents were opposed to the idea of specializing the customer service function with a special team of workers handling all telephone duties, they appear to be satisfied with their experiences when they phone the Unit. Twelve months after implementation of the Unit, three-quarters of custodial and noncustodial parent callers characterize Unit

representatives as knowledgeable and helpful. These reactions were substantially more favorable than those garnered by child support technicians in 1996, particularly among noncustodial parent callers who tended to be extremely critical.

The Unit also seems to have had a beneficial effect on client reactions to their child support technicians. In 1997, substantial proportions of parent callers who were referred to their child support technicians by the representatives characterized their representatives as helpful. Ratings of technicians in 1997 were noticeably higher for noncustodial parents.

Finally, an explicit question comparing the quality of service before and after introduction of the Unit revealed that half the respondents feel that service is currently “much” or “somewhat” better. This question was only answered by about half of the interviewed parents who recalled phoning the child support agency at both points in time.

It is not totally clear why 1997 callers are more satisfied with their experiences calling the Child Support Division since many callers, like their 1996 counterparts, report that they failed to accomplish what they had hoped. One possibility for their more favorable reactions is that they are able to talk with a human being when they phone and that most who are told that they will be contacted by their child support technician report that this does occur.

Perhaps the chief areas of concern for parents who call the Unit are the busy signals and wait times that they encounter. More than a third of custodial and noncustodial parents say that they have to make a lot of calls before they reach the Unit. More than half of parent callers say that they have to wait a long time to speak with someone. Call volumes have greatly exceeded projected levels. It will take more phone lines and customer service representatives to accommodate callers in a more timely manner. The Unit's statistics for the month of February 1997 show an average daily call volume of 460 with waits averaging 3 minutes and 58 seconds and 27.4 percent of callers hanging up before the phone is answered.

Another area of concern is the number of calls that are referred to technicians which may exceed original expectations, particularly for noncustodial parents. While some callers insist on speaking with child support technicians even though there is nothing further to be accomplished, others need to speak with staff who have more expertise. Although representatives have expressed an interest in handling a broader range of tasks, they currently lack the time and training to handle a more ambitious range of child support duties that might reduce the need to refer cases to technicians.

It should be noted that there is some sentiment that the referral rates noted on the logs maintained by representatives during January 13-15, 1997 were unusually high. More recent tracking of referrals to technicians by Lockheed IMS indicates that only 20 percent of callers are referred and 80 percent of callers are handled entirely by customer service representatives. It is unclear why the referral rate elicited using manual logs during January 13-15, 1996 were so much higher. The Lockheed rates were generated by printing all mail messages generated by representatives during March 17-19, 1996. This is undoubtedly a more reliable method for tracking referrals and suggests that the child support agency is realizing the full efficiencies of a specialized Customer Service Unit by having 80 percent of its calls handled by representatives.

## **CHILD SUPPORT TECHNICIAN REACTIONS**

Another goal of Denver's privatized customer service function is to relieve Child Support Division personnel of time-consuming telephone calls and interruptions that reduce their efficiency. In-person and telephone interviews with county child support division staff reveal these objectives have been largely achieved and that most interviewed staff continue to support the Unit and favor its continuation. While there are still concerns with customer service representatives' performance and knowledge of child support procedures, county staff are nearly unanimous in their belief that some type of Customer Service Unit is essential to effective and efficient operation of the Child Support Division. As one establishment technicians put it:

The Customer Service Unit should continue. It is essential especially with welfare reform in the near future. People don't realize how many phone calls our large caseload volume generates. It has to work in my opinion. I don't have a preference between private or in-house as long as they get the job done and are effective. . . .I think the Unit will continue to be more productive over time.

## **REDUCING DIRECT PHONE CALLS**

Technicians agree that the Customer Service Unit has dramatically reduced the number of direct phone calls they receive, although some clients continue to by-pass customer service because they encounter busy signals and long wait times. County staff explain to clients that they must contact customer service initially and point out that all calls are documented for future reference. With the passage of time, more clients appear to be willing to comply with these procedures.

Legal technicians responsible for enforcing court-ordered child support are somewhat more supportive of the Unit than are technicians who work on establishing paternity and child support orders. Establishment teams generate fewer callers than do teams handling enforcement matters. As one technician explained:

There really aren't a lot of establishment calls. Absent parents avoid contacting technicians because they don't want to pay child support.

While some interstate technicians report that their cases do not result in a large number of calls, others say that they often give out their direct numbers so "we don't have to waste time going through customer service. Time is a big factor in interstate cases."

Despite these differences in usage, a majority of county workers in all units appreciate the freedom from constant phone calls that they have experienced and feel that it has improved their efficiency and productivity.

## **REQUEST FOR TECHNICIAN INTERVENTION**

Most technicians agree that there are still too many requests from customer service representatives for intervention. They report that the volume of requested callbacks varies from day to day. Some requests are predictable such as case-related mail that clients receive like tax certifications. One staff member noted:

At the beginning of the month I get a lot of calls from RA's about the previous month's check. They didn't get one or it wasn't enough. I can tell because the phone calls are related to the same issue.

Call-back requests are perceived to reflect a lack of client confidence in responses provided by customer service representatives. Technicians report that clients complain about getting different answers to the same question from customer service representatives and technicians. Technicians also feel that clients are more accepting of information given by technicians. Presumably, client confidence in Unit representatives will increase over time.

Some callers request to speak with their technicians even though there is nothing new to be said. Technicians believe that customer service staff should be able to tell frequent callers that there is no new information and that their technician will not call back.

A number of Division staff say that the volume of phone calls received by the Customer Service Unit and adherence to strict time-frames per call prohibit a thorough investigation of ACSES chronology by Unit representatives and prompts unnecessary requests for technician intervention. Technicians agree that "it's hard to do quality work when they are pushed for time."

County staff say that requests for technician intervention could be reduced further by increasing the number of Customer Service Unit representatives and by hiring more skilled and experienced staff. Some suggest that the Unit should be staffed by legal technicians with caseload management experience. They feel that child support regulations and procedures are too complex to master without a working child support background.

A few county personnel feel that some customer service representatives use poor grammar, punctuation and spelling in their chronology messages. They complain that it is sometimes hard to make sense of their messages and advocate using staff with better literacy skills.

Additionally, they feel that Unit staff need a clearer understanding of the legal and accounting procedures in child support. An interstate technician complained that it is common for customer service representatives to know only part of an issue and consequently, they are unable to give clients a complete explanation.

Child support staff agree that continued and regular training sessions should be a priority for customer service staff as well as child support division staff. Both groups should attend the same training meetings and receive the same on-line program updates. An establishment technician stressed that:

Reps need to be trained on-line with technicians. They should attend the same classes on welfare reform that we do. . . .They should at least get the basics. Come July they will be getting new questions they can't answer about welfare reform. Consequently, without training they will have to refer most of the calls to technicians. Administrators should avoid these problems before they occur.

While Division staff advocate increased experience and continued education for Unit staff, they are nearly unanimous in their belief that Unit representatives are more knowledgeable and productive than they used to be and have developed important interpersonal skills. They are also perceived to be more assertive, confident, and better able to handle more calls without intervention from technicians.

County staff report that they like customer service representatives to visit their offices to observe technicians' work first-hand. They believe that the arrangement provides customer service staff with a better understanding of how location and employment information

triggers case actions by technicians. They praise Unit representatives who solicit feedback from technicians about appropriate call responses. Some technicians explain:

Reps came over and sat with us to monitor our work. This has broadened their perspective about the work we do. When they see this end, it straightens out their understanding of our job. That enables them to talk better to clients. This interaction should definitely continue. Child support is growing and we need to pass on information and procedures to the reps. We are all doing the same job.

Initially there was a lot of resentment and blaming...a lot of beating up on each other. Now there is more interaction. The reps have come to Social Services to observe how we handle our job. Now they are a person, not just a name or number and I feel we are developing into a team. Initially there was a lot of misinterpretation of messages on both sides.

Concerns about the Customer Service Unit are currently handled at project steering committee meetings and communicated by team representatives. While some technicians agree that this method is effective, others believe that Unit staff would benefit from more direct interaction with Unit representatives.

### **WORKLOAD IMPACT**

County child support staff are divided over whether the Customer Service Unit has affected their workload. A majority of those interviewed report that the Unit lets them do more important tasks such as cleaning up and closing cases, initiating wage assignments, and preparing cases for court action. This is how several characterize the impact of the Unit on their work lives:

Customer service has definitely freed up a lot of my time. I have a lot of cases with serious problems. Answering fewer phone calls lets me get the issues resolved more expeditiously.

Now I don't have to hurry and I make fewer mistakes. Also, I can work more cases and get more orders.....which is the bottom line for us. At the time the Customer Service Unit was established, I got too many calls and didn't have time to work cases. Now I can.

Before I would just put out fires when clients would call, but I wasn't able to completely research the case thoroughly and really make adjustments that would clean up the case and allow me to put it back in the file knowing that I've done as much as I can.

Many county staff say that the Unit has almost eliminated calls with routine questions and requests for case status. Unit representatives also do a lot of important locate work and generate many employer verifications. One technician said:

The biggest impact for me is that now I have an option for answering the phone call. If I am really busy trying to prepare a case for court, I can ignore the call and concentrate on my preparations. If I answer the phone I lose my concentration. When I'm finished with the call, I have to review where I was when the phone rang.

Technicians have fewer complaints about the quality of messages left by Unit representatives. A number of staff say that the referral messages are clear, include the caller's name and have recently "improved 100%." As one technician explained:

Customer service is really good now at trying to implement requests from the county. They are very accommodating. I know when I document calls, it is easy to write "he said/she said." But six months later that doesn't mean anything. I understand how reps can do that, but it is more efficient to have the name included in the message.

At the same time, technicians say that they still have many phone duties. Although they do not receive as many direct phone calls, they continue to spend much of their morning returning calls. Clients "just haven't reached a level of trust in customer service answers yet." They also complain about escalating calls to supervisors if they fail to respond to a client within the prescribed 48 hours. As one technician explained:

A call within 48 hours when nothing has been resolved just to tell the client I am working on their issue is wasted time. I think there should be a time-limit for call-backs...maybe 72 hours or even five days. Some things need more than 48 hours to resolve. They require a lot of research.

The 48 hour intervention requirement also eliminates the technician's ability to prioritize his or her work. A technician summed up this concern this way:

Before, I could call clients with the more urgent problems first and let the chronic complainers wait a while. But I can't do that with the 48 hour turn around time requirement. Some issues are more legitimate, but I still have to call complainers back within 48 hours whether I can give them further help or not.

Finally, there is some feeling that any workload relief due to the Unit is masked by increasing caseload volume. As a result, some technicians do not feel that the Unit has made them more productive.

### **SUMMARY OF TECHNICIAN REACTIONS**

Child support Division personnel support the specialization of the customer service function. They feel as though the Unit has dramatically reduced the number of direct phone calls they receive and that they are consequently better able to manage their time and perform important tasks that they had previously neglected. This includes case cleaning, case closing, initiating wage assignments and preparing cases for court action.

At the same time, technicians report that they still spend a good deal of time on the phone, returning calls to clients and responding to requests for intervention within the required 48 hour time period. Technicians would like to reduce the number of requests for intervention that they receive from customer service representatives. One way to do this, they feel, is to provide the representatives with additional training. Indeed, in the wake of welfare reform, representatives will need thorough training on new state and federal regulations in order to respond to the many questions that custodial and noncustodial parents will have.

Technicians feel that another way to cut down on their calls is to increase staffing levels at the Customer Service Unit. Representatives are so pressed for time on each call that they may not have a chance to thoroughly review ACSES chronology and consequently make unnecessary referrals to technicians. Technicians would like to see new representatives

hired who have child support experience, although they acknowledge that the current representatives have become extremely knowledgeable and productive in the year they have been on the job.

Technicians credit representatives with handling most routine questions and requests for case status. They also feel that representatives do a lot of important work in locating obligors including generating many employer verifications. They would like some more flexibility in the 48 hour response requirement, particularly for cases that require additional research and for cases for which there is no new or useful information to report.

## **CHILD SUPPORT PERFORMANCE**

A third goal of the privatized customer service intervention was to increase child support collections in Denver County. If child support technicians were relieved of their telephone duties and the time-consuming interruptions associated with client calls, it was hoped that they would have more time for productive child support tasks. Extra time would go to establishing orders and taking various enforcement actions such as verifying locates and obtaining wage assignments. Ultimately, the time savings associated with the customer service function would be reflected in higher child support collections.

To assess whether the privatized Customer Service Unit has translated into greater productivity and higher collections in Denver County, we collected various measures of child support performance for three periods of time that precede and follow the introduction of the Unit. We measured performance during April-October 1994, April-October 1995 and April - October 1996. The first two time periods precede the initiation of the privatized Customer Service Unit and reflect agency performance when child support technicians were taking their own calls. The last time period, April - October 1996, covers the six month period immediately following implementation of the Unit.

## **PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES**

A comparison of performance measures prior to and following the introduction of the Unit in Denver County suggests that performance has improved over time, but that there has been no radical upturn in productivity since April 1996. The number of cases handled by the Division dropped somewhat since 1994 while the number of staff increased slightly. Child support collections per FTE vary from month-to-month but show no consistent increase during 1996. Collections appear to be fairly constant with annual peaks during tax intercept season.

Several performance patterns look promising and warrant monitoring over a longer length of time. The total number of verified locates during July 1996 -October 1996 rose steadily, as did the number of orders established. Collections due to wage assignments also appeared to be on an upward trend during the last few months of the assessment. Customer service representatives spend a good deal of time verifying locates. Thus, at least some portion of these performance patterns may reflect their direct participation in the location process. The 11 figures in Appendix D summarize Denver County's performance in the child support arena prior to and following initiation of the Unit.

### **TECHNICIAN REACTIONS TO PERFORMANCE PATTERNS**

Child support technicians and supervisors share the goal of increasing collections and expect that the customer service intervention will ultimately yield a more favorable performance picture. In the short-term, however, most do not expect the Unit to have a dramatic impact on child support collections and other performance measures. Many say that Division staff have used the extra time and quiet that the Unit affords to do a variety of critical child support tasks that do not immediately result in collections. In particular, they have spent time cleaning up and closing old cases. This includes updating ledger sheets and payment balances for their swollen caseloads, as well as reviewing an ever-increasing number of reports generated by ACSES for the state's mass case processing initiatives dealing with credit bureau reporting and driver's license suspension. While these are important first steps toward improved efficiency and productivity, they do not immediately translate into higher collection levels.

Another limitation on collection levels is the socioeconomic status of many obligors. Increased productivity is hard to realize in AFDC caseloads where there is limited income. As one enforcement technician explained:

I don't deal with a lot of working men. I spend more time looking for them than finding them. There is a lot of unemployment or under-the-table construction types of work. It's impossible to track how much mail I get, but I am caught up on my reports.

Still another limitation on collection levels is the quality of service of process. Some technicians feel that improved performance in the establishment teams depends on successful service of the Notice of Financial Responsibility (NFR). While they appreciate the Customer Service Unit, they believe that successful service is more important than a specialized customer service function in establishing orders. The Division has been experimenting with various approaches for achieving service of process.

## **SUMMARY OF PERFORMANCE PATTERNS**

To date, there is no evidence of dramatic increases in productivity in the Division since the introduction of the Customer Service Unit. All performance measures appear to be modestly on the rise over the three time periods under study. Several patterns look promising and warrant further analysis over a longer period of time following the initiation of the Unit. This includes the number of verified locates and wage assignments.

Although performance gains did not occur in the period under study, Division staff are confident that performance statistics will improve substantially over time. For example, one technician reports using the extra time she has to follow-up with employers about absent parents who have wage assignments that aren't being regularly paid. Many others report spending time cleaning up and closing out old cases. These activities are expected to make a difference. Lacking time to institute necessary closure routines, many old cases with unlocated absent parents have remained in the case pool, artificially depressing the agency's performance levels. As these cases are eliminated, the percentages of cases

with orders, paternities established and collections per technicians will increase. As one supervisor noted:

Establishment stats are way up. Before customer service, technicians would have stacks of status letters to dispose of. We wouldn't be where we are today without the Customer Service Unit.

It will clearly take a longer study period to reach more definitive conclusions about the impact of the Unit on child support collections and other performance activity in Denver County. It is also important to keep in mind that many factors come into play in child support collections like the resources of noncustodial parents and the quality of service of process. These are factors that are not affected by a specialized Customer Service Unit and the liberation of technicians from time-consuming telephone tasks.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This is an assessment of the Child Support Division's privatized Customer Service Unit in Denver County approximately one year after it was initiated. The assessment consists of telephone interviews with 242 parents who called the Unit seeking child support assistance during January 13-15, 1997, in-person or telephone interviews with 22 child support technicians and supervisors in the Denver County Child Support Division, and a review of child support performance statistics for the Division during 1994, 1995 and 1996.

With respect to parents who telephoned the Unit, we find strong evidence of satisfaction. Callers used to be very frustrated when they called Division employees because they invariably reached answering machines and needed to leave voice mail messages and await unscheduled return calls. Currently, callers who phone the Unit reach a representative. Despite the fact that many callers say they ultimately failed to achieve what they had hoped, three-quarters of interviewed custodial and noncustodial parents characterize representatives as "knowledgeable" and "helpful." These reactions were substantially more favorable than those garnered by child support technicians in a survey

of callers to the Child Support Division in 1996, particularly among noncustodial parent callers who tended to be extremely critical. The Unit also appears to have had a beneficial effect on client reactions to their child support technicians who received higher ratings in 1997 as compared with 1996. Finally, an explicit question comparing the quality of service before and after the introduction of the Unit revealed that half of the callers who remembered phoning the agency at both point in time feel that service is currently “much” or “somewhat” better. Although parents initially were opposed to the idea of creating a special team of workers to handle all telephone duties and feared that they would be shielded from their technicians and bounced back and forth between unhelpful and ill-informed receptionists, this has clearly not materialized.

In a similar vein, child support technicians and supervisors report being far more pleased with the Unit than they originally expected to be. Many had doubted whether non-child support personnel could help clients; they doubted whether the customer service function could be physically separated from actual case handlers; they worried about losing control over their cases; they feared that clients would manipulate customer service representatives; they had concerns about job security and the implications of privatization for Division employees. Many of these concerns were addressed in the initial months of project implementation (See Preliminary Assessment of the Privatized Customer Service Unit for the Denver County Division of Child Support Enforcement). In the ensuing months, support for the Unit among Division personnel appears to have only grown. An overwhelming majority of interviewed technicians and supervisors rate the Unit favorably and support its continuation. Most believe that the Unit has reduced the number of direct calls that they receive and that they are consequently more efficient in their child support tasks. Technicians say they are using their time to clean up and close old cases, initiate wage assignments and prepare cases for court action. They credit Unit representatives with handling most routine requests for case status and performing many location tasks and employer verifications.

There is some confusion about the precise level of referrals to technicians. A log of calls maintained by Unit representatives revealed referral rates that exceeded 50 percent. However, a more recent assessment of referral patterns for 1,100 calls handled by representatives during March 17-19, 1997, disclosed that only 20 percent were referred to technicians for further action and that representatives were handling 80 percent of calls to the Division entirely on their own.

Although there is currently no evidence that child support collections or other enforcement activity has increased dramatically as a result of the Customer Service Unit, division personnel are confident that this will occur. Several performance patterns are promising, such as an increase in verified locates and wage withholdings. As technicians spend time cleaning and closing old cases, it is also expected that the Division's performance statistics will rise.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

Of course, parents and Division staff have some concerns about the Unit and hope to see improvements in Unit performance in coming months. The chief complaints voiced by interviewed parents were due to high call volumes and low staffing levels. Over half of the interviewed parents agreed that they had to wait a long time to speak with someone. Lockheed administrators report that approximately 27.4 percent of all calls to the Unit are abandoned before a representative gets on the line and that the average caller experiences a wait of about four minutes.

Many of the continuing concerns expressed by technicians also relate to call volume and pressures that representatives experience to handle many calls quickly. Technicians agree that wait times are the clients' number one frustration with the Unit and that "it's hard to do quality work when (representatives) are pushed for time." For example, some Division staff feel that representatives are sometimes too busy to thoroughly search ACSES chronology and consequently make at least some unnecessary requests for technician intervention.

Technicians would like to see the efficiency of the Unit improve with representatives handling more calls and referring less. They believe that one way to accomplish this is to expose representatives to more training, especially on issues pertaining to welfare reform and child support accounting procedures.

If representatives had the time, at least some technicians would like them to take on additional duties such as phoning clients back with additional information provided by technicians on chronology messages. Finally, technicians would like representatives to be more adamant with clients who insist on speaking with technicians even if there is nothing more to be said or done. Some would like the response time frame to be changed from 48 to 72 hours.

### **THE FUTURE STRUCTURE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE IN DENVER COUNTY**

While Division staff overwhelmingly support the continuation of a specialized customer service function, they are divided on the form it should take. About half of the interviewed staff favor housing a specialized Customer Service Unit within the Division. The other half of interviewed personnel favor the external approach currently being pursued with Lockheed, IMS.

Supporters of an in-house effort feel that this arrangement would permit customer service representatives to have better access to Division personnel. Theoretically, legal technicians could answer questions immediately, thereby cutting down on client complaints that representatives and technicians give different answers to the same question.

Another argument for an in-house approach is that it affords technicians the opportunity to monitor representatives more closely. As one enforcement technician explained:

I would like to have more supervision and control of what customer service reps do. As it is, if they screw up, I can't discipline or take corrective action. It would be easier if I could have more personal impact on their work.

A third perceived advantage of an in-house approach is that it would be staffed by individuals who are currently employees of the Division. Technicians feel that clerks and lower-level technicians could benefit from the knowledge they would acquire as a customer service representative and put it to good use in other job settings.

Child support could utilize their knowledge and experience by using them in various positions within the Division. They would get promotions. Customer service reps now don't have much interest or motivation to learn more about the child support system and programs.

Finally, an in-house approach would soothe the concerns that some Division employees have about privatization. These individuals see the privatization of the customer service function as a threat to the status quo. As one enforcement technician confided:

I'm leery of privatization in relation to job security. I know it's a-knocking. Customer service reps do what we do for less money. The government has always been a haven. Good pay and security. We all worry that the privatized Customer Service Unit is a step toward privatized child support enforcement.

Division personnel who favor the current, privatized arrangement feel that it is working well and provides a needed measure of accountability in the Division. For example, according to one Division supervisor, the incidence of complaint calls has dropped dramatically since the introduction of the Customer Service Unit. She credits the reduction to improved documentation efforts and enforcement of the requirement that technicians respond to clients needing assistance within 48 hours. Representatives and technicians are required to document all client communication in ACSES chronology. This makes it easy to monitor whether technicians have responded to requests for intervention within proscribed time frames.

Another reason for keeping the privatized arrangement is the Division's prior experience with an in-house customer service function. The supervisor who experimented with in-house customer service is perhaps the most aggressive supporter of a privatized

arrangement. According to this supervisor, in-house customer service representatives frequently neglected to document client calls, thereby protecting underperforming technicians from scrutiny. Conversely, in-house representatives would sometimes hound technicians who were out of their favor. Friendships between representatives and technicians impaired objective accountability procedures. As a result, clients were not consistently well served and there were frequent complaints about technicians failing to respond to requests for intervention.

Because of the dangers of collusion, this supervisor frowns on allowing technicians and representatives to have too much contact. She believes that limited contact increases accountability and reduces opportunities for favoritism. She also supports the retention of strict documentation requirements because they have facilitated a supervisor's ability to monitor team performance and surface important training needs with specific technicians. These sentiments are expressed in the following comments by a supervisor and an enforcement technician:

Technicians with the biggest problem are those whose procedures were possibly incorrect or they needed more training...Customer service has revealed training issues that need to be addressed. It is a godsend!

I guess I don't want an in-house Customer Service Unit because I think the closer proximity to customer service would make it too easy for techs to go over to criticize customer service in person...I like it better the way it is now...contacting them with instructions or corrections by going through the proper channels.

These are just some of the considerations that will need to be weighed in deciding the future manner in which customer service will be delivered in the Denver County Child Support Division.