

The Parenting Coordination (PC) Project Implementation and Outcomes Study Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parenting coordination is a non-adversarial process that aims to minimize the impact of high-conflict custody disputes through parent education, mediation, conflict resolution, and intensive case management. Despite the potential of parenting coordination to help children and their caregivers grapple with the many challenges related to custody disputes, cost has limited the availability of such services. To make parenting coordination services more widely available, the DC Superior Court, the American Psychological Association (APA) Practice Directorate, Argosy University, and the DC Bar Family Law Section launched the Parenting Coordination (PC) Program as a pilot project in 2004, and it became a court-funded program in 2009. The PC Program strives to serve the needs of low-income, high conflict families involved in child custody disputes in the District of Columbia.

In 2009, APA requested that Child Trends analyze data from the PC Program and gather information from staff (including the clinical director and psychology graduate student trainees), program participants, and stakeholders (e.g., advisory board members and judges) with the aim of developing recommendations that could inform future replications of the PC Program in other jurisdictions. Child Trends analyzed survey data collected from participating parents between 2004 and 2009; conducted semi-structured interviews with staff, judges, parents, and advisory board members; and examined PC records. This report presents key findings from this work including information on the demographics of the families in the program, on the program's implementation and performance, and recommendations for replicating the PC Program. For more information about the study methods, see Chapter 1.

STUDY FINDINGS

Several findings stand out in this study. First, staff reported that a persistent focus on the best interests of children helped parents and caregivers overcome the barriers to involvement in the PC Program and enabled caregivers to shift their priorities to the well-being of their children. Stakeholders agreed that the PC Program's individualized services allowed program staff to create supportive relationships, identify service needs, and to develop and implement pragmatic solutions in many cases.

Second, although the program successfully reached its target population, program staff often found it challenging to link clients to appropriate community-based services. Staff and participant surveys indicated that the families served by the program did not have the resources to afford parenting coordination outside of this program. In addition to interpersonal conflict, however, a majority of parents faced combinations of problems related to poverty, unemployment, housing, education, health, and/or mental illness. These complex needs often required more intensive, frequent, and longer services that were not accessible to the PC Program's clients. In the absence of a staff person dedicated to this task, parenting coordinators struggled to identify and build relationships with appropriate service providers.

Third, like many pilots, the PC Program faced challenges in obtaining adequate funding. The program's use of student interns dramatically reduces the cost of the program from what it would be with full-time salaried parenting coordinators. The program's paid staff includes only a full-time clinical director and a part-time administrative assistant. Nonetheless, several stakeholders reported tensions around the program's budget and the cost per person served—tensions that the recession has exacerbated. In addition, the recession has resulted in an increase in the number of low-income families being referred for PC Program services.

Finally, analysis of the available data suggested some positive trends in terms of the PC Program's impact on families and the court. Analysis of court activities revealed several significant associations between parenting coordination and decreased use of court resources. However, statistically significant changes in parents' perceptions of their relationships and their children's behavior were generally not seen, presumably due to the small number of study participants.

STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

This executive summary focuses on three recommendations related to replication, though several other recommendations are highlighted throughout the chapters that follow. First, we recommend that replication sites gain firm commitments from multiple stakeholders concerning the program's funding and supervisory structure. Manualizing the program—as suggested in the replication chapter of this report (Chapter 4)—would help frame the expectations and increase the knowledge of stakeholders. Prior to implementing the program, stakeholders should know the program's service capacity and long-term strategy for sustainability. While there are many possible strategies, multiple funding streams for a pilot phase might include local foundations and a network of private donors, which would provide future replications a broad base of financial and political support. Ideally, the program would eventually be adopted and fully funded by the court, as is currently the case for the PC Program in DC.

Second, the planning of new programs should include identifying and building relationships with resources that PC clients are likely to need. Planners might develop a partnership with an existing nonprofit or government agency that serves and refers a similar client population. Once these resources are identified, training for parenting coordinators should include a session on how to access referral services.

Third, we recommend developing a basic data-driven performance measurement system that will allow programs to monitor the number and types of clients, the services and referrals they receive, their length of time in the program, and their progress. The system should be in sync with forms in the program manual to monitor program fidelity and which might allow for sharing the development cost of the system across multiple sites. In Chapter 3, we discuss problems with existing instruments and recommend new ways to measure client progress.