Child Support Learning Agenda:

Using interactive workshops to inform development of a Child Support Learning Agenda

Shannon Weaver, Rebekah Selekman, Alex Bauer, Pamela Holcomb, and Heather Zaveri

Introduction

To inform the development of a Child Support Learning Agenda (CSLA), the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS), both within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), held a series of interactive workshops with federal and external experts to identify key learning questions related to the child support system.

A learning agenda is a set of systematically identified questions that directly relate to the work of an agency. When answered, the agency can work more effectively and foster a culture of learning and continuous quality improvement. Developing a learning agenda involves an iterative cycle of engaging with partners, identifying priority questions, updating the learning agenda, and conducting the activities specified in the learning agenda.

To develop a learning agenda, it is important to engage with experts to receive feedback on high-priority questions, document learning activities, and understand available data, tools, methods, and analytic approaches. To this end, the Evidence Capacity Support (EvCap) team engaged with a wide range of people knowledgeable about the child support system to inform the development of the CSLA.

Description of workshop structure and process

In 2021, OPRE led an initial brainstorming workshop with a small group of OPRE and OCSS staff to identify key topics in child support that, when explored, could improve child support services, operations, and outcomes. Then, in June 2022, the EvCap team hosted a virtual workshop with staff from OPRE and OCSS to build on the ideas generated during the 2021 workshop and to generate preliminary topics to explore throughout a series of federal workshops. To explore the preliminary topics, the EvCap team held five additional workshops (referred to throughout the remainder of this brief as "federal workshops"), each addressing a specific topic: (1) operations and administration, (2) establishment and enforcement of child support orders, (3) family strengthening, (4) partnering with other programs, and (5) customer service. Recognizing that equity considerations are integral to the learning agenda and relevant to each topic, workshop attendees considered questions related to equity in each workshop.

> ### ACF Evidence Capacity Support: Developing a Child Support Learning Agenda
>
> The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and program offices at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), are partnering to extend and deepen their evidence capacity. Evidence capacity refers to the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency's ability to build and use evidence to make decisions and inform its work. Through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support (EvCap) project, OPRE is building on efforts to strengthen evidence capacity at ACF and incorporating the principles of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. The EvCap project prioritizes the learning needs of agency staff and partners for information about the context, reach, implementation, performance, and impact of their programs.
>
> The EvCap team (Mathematica) is working with OPRE and the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) to support development of a learning agenda that will guide OPRE and OCSS research planning and execution. The engagement with OCSS will build on previous OPRE and OCSS learning activities to identify child support learning questions that may affect:
>
> - How OCSS allocates funds
> - Identification of training needs
> - Opportunities for program innovation
> - Identification of data sharing and system needs
> - Dissemination opportunities
>
> The goal of this engagement is to enable OCSS and OPRE to work more effectively, efficiently, and collaboratively toward advancing their missions and supporting broader agency goals.
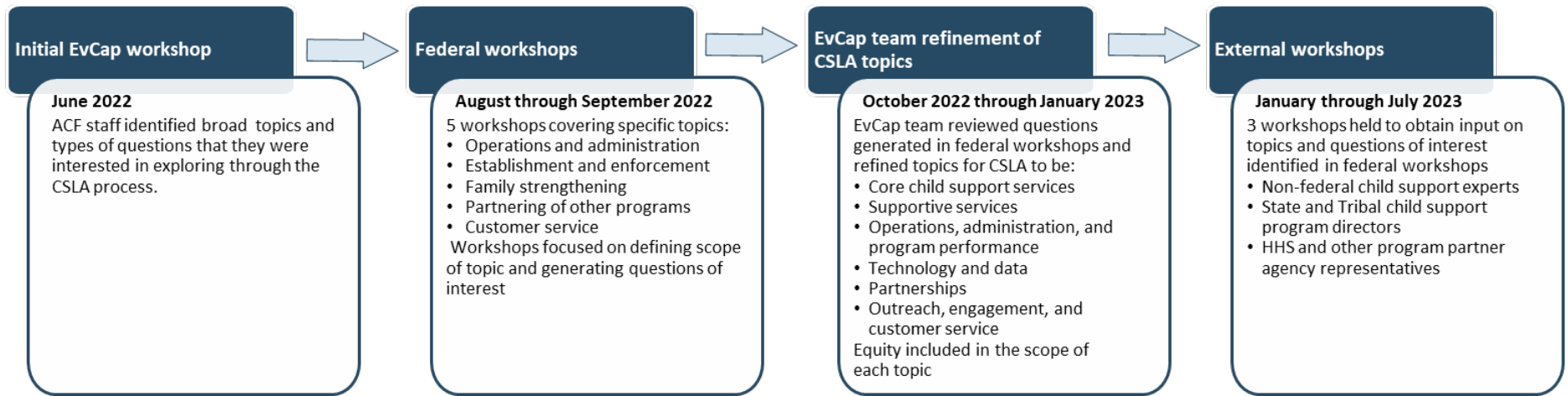
All federal workshops followed a similar format. At the beginning, the EvCap team described the purpose of the workshop and provided background on the objectives of the CSLA. Then, attendees engaged in brainstorming activities about that workshop's topic. Workshops incorporated human-centered design principles and techniques, including the use of Mural, a digital collaboration tool.[1] Facilitators also used small-group breakout rooms and full-group discussions to encourage attendees to share input in multiple ways.

Figure 1 depicts the structure and process of the CSLA workshops, which included the following:

- In June 2022, the EvCap team facilitated an initial virtual workshop with OPRE and OCSS staff to identify the broad preliminary topics and types of questions they wanted to explore throughout the rest of the workshops.

- From August through September 2022, the EvCap team facilitated five virtual federal workshops with experts from OPRE and OCSS. Each workshop lasted 60 to 90 minutes and focused on a specific topic. The purpose of each workshop was to define that topic's scope, generate questions of interest, and identify high-priority questions. Federal staff participated in any of the five workshops, depending on interest and availability.

- Following these five workshops, the EvCap team reviewed the information generated by attendees, further refined the preliminary topics, and identified six primary topics for the CSLA. In the next section, we describe in more detail the process of refining the topics.

---

[1] In the OPRE-sponsored Review of Human-Centered Design in Human Services, the authors define human-centered design as "a problem-solving and design approach that emphasizes designing for and with those who will ultimately utilize the solution (i.e., the end user)."

Figure 1. Process and structure of CSLA workshops

Initial EvCap workshop

June 2022
ACF staff identified broad topics and types of questions that they were interested in exploring through the CSLA process.

Federal workshops

August through September 2022
5 workshops covering specific topics:
- Operations and administration
- Establishment and enforcement
- Family strengthening
- Partnering of other programs
- Customer service

Workshops focused on defining scope of topic and generating questions of interest

EvCap team refinement of CSLA topics

October 2022 through January 2023
EvCap team reviewed questions generated in federal workshops and refined topics for CSLA to be:
- Core child support services
- Supportive services
- Operations, administration, and program performance
- Technology and data
- Partnerships
- Outreach, engagement, and customer service

Equity included in the scope of each topic

External workshops

January through July 2023
3 workshops held to obtain input on topics and questions of interest identified in federal workshops
- Non-federal child support experts
- State and Tribal child support program directors
- HHS and other program partner agency representatives

- From January through July 2023, the EvCap team hosted three additional workshops with experts external to OPRE and OCSS (referred to throughout the remainder of this brief as "external workshops"). The first was with researchers and practitioners in child support and child support–related fields, such as fatherhood experts and court system representatives. The second was with state and tribal program directors. The third was with other federal program partners including representatives from the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, the ACF Office of Family Assistance, and the U.S. Department of Labor. In these workshops, the experts provided feedback on the scope of topics and illustrative learning questions of interest developed in the first five workshops.

The input and feedback collected across the workshops reflects the thoughts and opinions of the workshop attendees. The workshops did not intend to build consensus across federal experts, researchers, practitioners, or state or tribal child support program directors.

Defining CSLA topics

The five federal workshops each focused on one of the following topics: operations and administration, establishment and enforcement, family strengthening, partnering with other programs, and customer service. After the completion of the federal workshops, the EvCap team reviewed all learning questions generated across the workshops. Ultimately, the five preliminary topics that were the basis for the federal workshops were too broad. Table 1 provides the final CSLA topics and scope after the EvCap team reviewed the questions and refined the topics. Questions focused on equity in child support were integrated throughout each CSLA topic, rather than making equity its own separate topic.

Table 1. Final CSLA topics and scope

Topic	Scope
Core child support services	Includes questions related to best practices, emerging innovations, and lessons learned for the establishment and modification of child support orders, paternity establishment, arrears and payments, use of enforcement tools, approaches to addressing customers' issues related to payment, ensuring safe and trauma-informed access to services for families experiencing domestic violence, good cause exemptions, and equity implications of core child support services.
Supportive services	Includes questions related to the role of child support programs in establishing parenting time and custody arrangements, equity in family strengthening services, effectiveness of employment and other wrap-around and supportive services. This topic also includes how child support programs coordinate services with other agencies and the experience of program participants with services and referrals to those services.
Technology and data	Includes questions related to how child support programs use and collect data, how they measure and monitor program outcomes, how to improve data systems, how technology can ensure confidentiality for those experiencing domestic violence, and how technology and data can support equity and accessibility of services in child support programs.
Outreach, engagement, and customer service	Includes questions related to crafting messaging on child support program services, engaging participants subject to cooperation requirements, providing services to meet diverse family needs, and improving equity in child support programs through customer service.
Partnerships	Includes questions related to identifying best practices for developing and sustaining partnerships, effective partnerships, federal-level partnerships, and types of state-, tribal-, and local-level partnerships that can improve customer experience, program equity, and program outcomes.
Operations, administration, and program performance	Includes questions related to program budgets and funding sources, staffing and staff training, communication and coordination procedures, content and scope of federal performance measures, and ways to address program equity through operations, policies, and procedures.

Questions of interest

In each federal workshop, attendees engaged in a brainstorming activity to develop questions of interest that related to the specific workshop topic. To encourage brainstorming, facilitators asked attendees to consider questions related to (1) implementation, operations, processes, and resources; (2) effectiveness, impacts, and program performance; (3) diversity, equity, and inclusion; and (4) other questions of interest. Following the brainstorming activity, attendees "voted" [2] on the questions they were most interested in learning more about.

The EvCap team reviewed the questions generated across all workshops to identify those that received the most votes. In some instances, multiple questions touched on a similar issue, and the team combined questions into a more general or overarching question that reflected several individual but related questions. Table 2 presents the questions of interest that received the most votes in each workshop. The table organizes questions by the final CSLA topics and identifies how questions aligned to several themes.

After identifying the most frequent questions of interest for each CSLA topic, the EvCap team assessed the key themes that came out across all CSLA topics. The purpose of this was to understand the cross-cutting takeaways that federal staff were raising across CSLA topics. We discuss these key themes below, both those that arose during the federal workshops and the external workshops.

Key themes from federal workshops

Across CSLA topics, several key themes emerged. These themes relate to best practices, equity implications, and a changing vision for the child support program.

Best practices. Across CSLA topics, federal staff raised many questions about identifying and learning more about best practices. These questions were most often related to understanding which practices were most effective in improving program and family outcomes. Federal staff were most interested in best practices related to supportive services and partnerships to support child support programs.

- Within the supportive services CSLA topic, federal staff expressed wanting to serve the entire family holistically by learning about best practices for parenting time orders, employment services, wrap-around services, and coordinated service delivery across programs.

- Related to the partnerships CSLA topic, federal staff wanted to learn about best practices for identifying partner organizations, effective models for establishing and maintaining partnerships, and evaluating and measuring the quality and effectiveness of partnerships.

---

[2] Although the voting sessions varied slightly by workshop, each attendee had approximately nine votes to cast on the questions they thought were most important to include in the CSLA. Attendees could return to the Mural board over the next few days to finalize their votes if they did not finish voting during the workshop.

Table 2. Top questions of interest identified in federal workshops, by CSLA topic

1. Core child support services	2. Supportive services	3. Technology and data
What are best practices or emerging innovations for order establishment and modification?	How can child support programs offer holistic services that support the whole family and their specific needs?	How can data be used to improve program performance and program operations?
What are best practices or emerging innovations for improving payment outcomes (i.e., payment regularity, payment amount)?	What types of supportive services are most effective at serving the whole family?	Do current data systems accurately capture data related to race and ethnicity?
How can child support order, enforcement, and modification practices be examined with an equity lens?	What are best practices for establishing parenting time orders?	How should child support program impact and customer satisfaction be measured?
What supports do victims and survivors of domestic violence need to access child support services safely?	What are best practices for providing employment services to assist parents who make child support payments?	How is effectiveness of partnerships measured?

4. Outreach, engagement, and customer service	5. Partnerships	6. Operations, administration, and program performance
How can child support services be marketed as holistic, family-focused services?	How do child support programs think about partnerships and define the objective for establishing partnerships with different organizations?	What resources are needed for child support programs to offer more comprehensive supportive services?
What are best practices for family engagement in child support services and how can these practices address declining caseloads?	Which partnerships improve child support program outcomes?	How can OCSS address the funding, training, and technical assistance needs of states and tribal child support programs?
How can child support programs engage those with lived experience to inform program improvement?	What models of partnerships are most effective and how can they be adapted?	How should performance be balanced with cost-effectiveness, and how might updated performance measures better inform OCSS decision making?
Do cooperation requirements discourage participation and engagement with child support programs and assistance programs that require cooperation?	What federal-level partnerships should OCSS develop to support state and tribal programs' ability to improve customer engagement in child support programs?	How do policies, processes, and practices support building a more equitable child support system or contribute to reinforcing inequities within the child support system?

Key: Alignment to federal workshop themes

Best practices | Equity | Changing program vision | N/A

Note: N/A means the question did not align to a theme from the federal workshops.

Equity implications. Federal staff identified questions related to equity, particularly in the CSLA topics of core child support services; technology and data; and operations, administration, and program performance. Across CSLA topics, federal staff wanted to learn how to make child support programs work better for all child support–involved families and how to prevent the child support system from perpetuating systemic racism.

- Within the topic of core child support services, federal staff were interested in understanding how family structures and demographics affect program participation and payment behavior. They also wanted to learn how programs can provide core services in ways that are more equitable and culturally appropriate.

- Federal staff raised questions in the technology and data topic about how to begin collecting and using data to improve equity in child support programs.

- In the topic of operations, administration, and program performance, federal staff expressed interest in learning how to evaluate and improve practices through an equity lens. They also questioned whether current performance measures in child support programs are equitable and how performance measures could be updated to improve equity.

Changing vision for child support program. Questions federal staff generated across all topics touched on better understanding how the child support system can shift away from a focus on compliance toward a focus on holistic family support. This theme came up particularly in discussions about outreach, engagement, and customer service and the topic of operations, administration, and program performance. Many of the questions identified indicate that federal staff are reflecting on the implications of declining child support caseloads and how to improve family satisfaction with the child support program.[3] Across topics, federal staff raised questions that indicate a need to modernize the child support program to meet the diverse needs of today's families.

- Federal staff raised questions in the outreach, engagement, and customer service topic about how cooperation requirements effect people's engagement with child support and how to improve engagement with people who have been required to cooperate with the program.[4] They were also interested in how programs can engage people with lived experience in the child support system to inform program improvements. Federal staff also wanted to learn how to shift the public image of the child support program to align with the program's efforts to be more family centered.

- On the topic of operations, administration, and program performance, federal staff expressed interest in understanding the types of operational changes and resources needed to offer more comprehensive supportive services. They asked how to set up supportive services with appropriate funding models, and posed questions about staff recruitment, training, and retention approaches.

Key themes from external workshops

In workshops with child support experts external to OPRE and OCSS, which included researchers, practitioners, state and tribal program directors, and federal partners representing various agencies and offices., the EvCap team shared summaries of the topics and the most frequent questions from the federal workshops. A key purpose of the workshops with external experts was to ensure the ideas generated to inform the CSLA reflected diverse perspectives and experiences. The external experts discussed the following themes:

---

[3] Graham, Tracy, and Melody Morales. "Child Support Caseload Trends: 1999-2016." March 10, 2017. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/ocsedatablog/2017/03/child-support-caseload-trends-1999-2016.
[4] Applicants for certain types of public assistance (for example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) are automatically referred to their state or tribal child support agency, which will identify and locate the noncustodial parent, establish paternity where appropriate, and obtain child support payments. This allows the state or tribe to recoup or defray some of its public assistance expenditures with funds from the noncustodial parent and might enable the custodial party to become self-sufficient. Failure to cooperate with the child support program could result in loss of some or all of public assistance.

Language inclusivity for tribal child support programs. Tribal child support program representatives shared the importance of using language in the learning agenda that includes tribal child support programs.

Representation of judicial state needs. Attendees in the external workshops included representatives from the judicial system as well as child support programs that use judicial procedures for setting and enforcing child support orders. These attendees suggested questions that would address judicial program needs. For instance, several of their questions related to improving partnerships between child support programs and the court system. Attendees with backgrounds in judicial procedures provided feedback on how to broaden questions to resonate with child support programs that use judicial procedures.

Considerations for data and measurement. State child support program representatives agreed with the need for improved technology and data practices in the child support system and added that state child support programs especially want to focus on building their capacity for internal data analysis. State and tribal child support program directors want to ensure that their staff can analyze data for decision-making and program improvement purposes. Attendees from tribal child support programs shared that prioritizing new performance measures or data collection efforts did not resonate with how they think about program impact. These attendees shared how they think about assessing their programs' impact through storytelling and that additional data collection requirements could limit staff capacity to hear and share these stories. External federal experts echoed the need for more holistic ways to measure participant success, including through stories and clearer definitions of who is considered a child support program customer.

Trauma-informed approaches and confidentiality. External federal experts raised the need to emphasize trauma-informed approaches when identifying best practices for core child support service provision, especially for participants experiencing domestic violence. External federal experts also noted the need for new data and technology to ensure confidentiality for those experiencing domestic violence.

Reflections and next steps

Overall, the workshops generated productive discussions among attendees, identifying nearly 500 questions of interest that reflected diverse perspectives of the child support program. Throughout the workshops, some aspects of the process worked well, and others were challenging. The following are some strategies that could apply to other learning agenda brainstorming scenarios.

- To ensure that attendees understood the objectives of developing a learning agenda, facilitators used plain language to explain what a learning agenda is and how ACF will use it. During workshop activities, facilitators encouraged attendees to brainstorm questions and topics they want to learn about.

- To help attendees generate ideas, facilitators encouraged attendees to consider questions related to "implementation, effectiveness, diversity, and other." Facilitators also encouraged workshop attendees to brainstorm questions of interest that might be beyond the traditional scope of the child support program.

- Using Mural created a few technological challenges but helped attendees generate valuable content. An advantage of using a digital collaborative tool such as Mural is that it enables people to contribute ideas even if they do not like to speak up in a large group setting. Having multiple facilitators for each workshop enabled attendees who might have trouble using Mural to continue to provide input. Moreover, small breakout rooms promoted enhanced discussion and served to gather input from attendees in a short amount of time.

Engaging child support experts in developing the CSLA helps define and drive evidence-based research priorities for the child support field. This brief and a complementary brief on the targeted literature synthesis [link to be added] conducted by the EvCap team share findings from the key activities in developing a learning agenda. ACF will consider the information collected through the brainstorming

workshops and complementary literature synthesis when it identifies funding opportunities for research projects, demonstration grants, and technical assistance in the coming years. In addition, ACF will implement a process for periodically updating the CSLA so it can continue to support the planning and execution of relevant, responsive, and timely child support research that expands the evidence base and informs program improvements.

Connect with OPRE