



# The Little Network That Grew and Grew

## Starring: Region V Conference Calls and The Long-Time Illinois Players

By Elaine Blackman  
*OCSE*

When all parties had dialed in on the regularly scheduled conference call on Feb. 17, a familiar voice set the usual, comfortable tone for returning listeners; some dialing in for the first time felt a sense of openness and ease. “Welcome to our first Collaboration Network Call in 2009,” announced host Lois Rakov, “where we hope we each find new contacts, learn about resources, and hear about success stories or challenges that will inspire all of us in our work for children, fathers, and families.”

Seated in a conference room with Region V folks in Chicago, Rakov proceeded to introduce guest speaker Vicki Turetsky of the Center for Law and Social Policy. “The discussion today will center on the child support-related provisions in the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act in Congress, a timely subject in light of the bill’s reintroduction in 2007, and how the process might go if and when the House and Senate go forward,” said Rakov.

Following Turetsky’s presentation, callers from a wide variety of organizations throughout Region V took turns with questions, comments, and suggestions regarding the congressional bill, as well as related topics, such as advantages of implementing a State commission on fatherhood and how it could help address barriers to employment for incarcerated parents.

All the while, one Ohio caller listened for resources, such as Turetsky’s published summary of the bill, which he would quickly retrieve and post on a Web site accessible to all.

How did one State conference call grow to become a popular and productive regionwide networking tool? Here’s the story:

### Prologue

Many years ago, when the national child support enforcement community was developing a growing interest in hospital-based voluntary paternity establishment, an ACF (Administration for Children and Families) workgroup, with representatives from OCSE, Head Start, Child Welfare, and others, set out to study the benefits of cross-agency cooperation on behalf of the families they served.

Meanwhile, OCSE Regions and State child support agencies also began to reach out to a variety of social service organizations in light of their interest in voluntary paternity establishment, and in search of new and better ways to improve the well-being of children.

### Act I

#### *Enter Illinois Child Support Enforcement.* Illinois

CSE was looking for ways to partner with other agencies to educate its staff and clients about procedures used to establish legal paternity. In Fiscal Year 1997, CSE received a 3-year Federal demonstration grant to promote and facilitate access to child support services and to increase paternity establishment and child support collections for children and families in Head Start and child care programs. It was under this grant that CSE began a series of conference calls with Head Start agencies around the State.

“The idea to initiate conference calls under the Child Support/Head Start collaboration grant was to widen CSE’s ability to talk to Head Start grantees about the importance of having the father acknowledge the child on the birth certificate,” says Mike Vicars of OCSE Region V. “Not only would the CSE program benefit from having the father identified on the birth certificate in a child support case, but the child would have the advantage of knowing his/her parentage, have certain legal rights that legal paternity bestows, and would have the opportunity to maintain an emotional bond with him—a win-win

situation for all involved.”

But as the grant period was ending, Child Support and Head Start wanted to be able to keep the discussion going about the voluntary paternity establishment process and what worked and what didn't. They had learned, for example, that attitudes about child support among collaborating Head Start staff in Illinois ranged from very positive to knowing very little about the benefits of paternity establishment or the responsibilities of fathers, particularly noncustodial fathers.

## Act II

### **Enter OCSE Region V.**

To help Illinois to continue the conference calls, OCSE Region V picked up the reins. Participation on the calls soon grew from the Illinois CSE grantees, to include contacts with community action agencies and fatherhood organizations.

“Head Start was interested in getting fathers involved in the lives of the children it served,” says Vicars, so the calls further opened up to a variety of agencies around the State, and then those agencies made contacts around the region to fatherhood groups, as well as academic university groups.

In addition, says Rakov, “Region V Head Start awarded Early Head Start demonstration grants and Fatherhood Special Initiative grants, which encouraged Head Start programs to build fatherhood programs and to emphasize the importance of *both* parents in their children's lives.” Rakov was project manager of the Illinois CSE/Head Start collaboration grant project. “The grant made it possible for a lot of people to get to know each other—and a wide diversity of people—who were involved in a variety of agencies.” She remembers that the State Head Start director saw the calls as a free training opportunity and orientation for staff about topics such as women's roles and the fatherhood movement, fathers and literacy, and how to teach children to read.

“From there, with Region V as sponsor, the calls just grew and grew,” says Rakov.

## Act III

Now, between 35 and 50 people participate in the quarterly Region V Collaboration Network Calls. Vicars announces each upcoming call on the Region V fatherhood listserv and asks for RSVPs so he can arrange for the number of phone lines and the agenda of speakers.

Rakov handles outreach for speakers and moves the discussion along on each call, while maintaining the easygoing tone. She keeps a running list of ideas to pursue for future calls and asks for suggestions during the calls for future speakers among a widening variety of agencies and organizations throughout the



six-state region. The calls are open to anyone in the region; however anyone, anywhere, is welcome to call in.

And now, anyone, anywhere, can access notes and resources from each conference call online at [http://www.opnff.net/midwest\\_fatherhood.asp](http://www.opnff.net/midwest_fatherhood.asp), thanks to Steve Killpack of the Ohio Practitioners' Network for Fathers and

Families. Killpack's reason for posting the material, he says, started because “smaller faith-based organizations that serve fathers may not be aware of the collaboration that sponsors the calls, so I try to be the community

organizing body that connects these folks to the calls.” On every call, says Rakov, “we emphasize that there might be possibilities for grants for their fatherhood groups and others, and that people need to build on their existing partnerships with their local or State child support agencies.”

Rakov retired from the Illinois CSE in 2002, but she did not retire her passion for the calls. (She continued to work on the calls as a contractor until 2007, when her status changed to “volunteer.”) By continuing to involve more people on the calls, the subject areas have widened and the calls have given rise to partnerships, she says. The calls devoted to healthy marriage, for example, “have really helped participants to understand how they can combine healthy marriage work with child support work.”

In the past few years, topics on the calls have included: bridging fatherhood, healthy marriage, and domestic violence; helping children with incarcerated fathers; teens



as parents (with teens as guest speakers); and the national Project to Avoid Increasing Delinquencies (PAID). On the latter call, last August, participants discussed how various activities, such as review and modification of child support orders, contribute to decreasing arrears and increasing collections, in keeping with the goal of PAID.

“We always have good conversations,” says Vicars, but quickly adds: “Only with Lois’ contacts and knowledge



## How to Grow Your Own Collaboration Network Call

Below are suggestions for starting a network of conference calls based on Region V’s experience in the previous article:

- **Contacts:** It is important to identify people who are interested and want to participate in the calls.
- **Content:** Topics have to be relevant to participants to maintain interest. Most of the time, the participants on our calls suggest the topics.
- **Connection:** Our topics are generally centered on fatherhood, but we always emphasize the connection to the child support program. This is not difficult as there is a natural connection between fatherhood issues and child support.
- **Outreach:** We are always adding groups and individuals to our participant base as people move on to new jobs and organizations. This helps to stimulate new ideas and conversation. One of the strengths of our quarterly calls is the experience and diverse backgrounds of the participants.
- **Listserv:** In Region V, we maintain a listserv of e-mail addresses so we can easily communicate information about calls, agendas, and other topics. This saves a lot of time.

—Mike Vicars, OCSE Region V

have been able to constantly expand this immensely helpful network tool.”

For more information about the *Region V Collaboration Network Calls*, please contact Mike Vicars at 312-886-5339 or michael.vicars@acf.hhs.gov. For information about OCSE grants, please visit <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/grants/>. To learn about the national PAID, visit <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/resources/paid/>.

## OCSE Grant Announcements on Web

OCSE Special Improvement Project (SIP) and Section 1115 demonstration grant announcements for FY 2009 are posted on the Web. For the first time, there is a separate announcement for each priority area.

SIP grants (applications due April 20):

- Using new methods to improve collection rates
- Improving Child Support Enforcement and court collaboration

Section 1115 grants (applications due May 4):

- Projects in support of the Prisoner Reentry Initiative
- Projects to support data analysis of arrearages
- Projects that provide family-centered services for unwed parents in the IV-D caseload
- Projects in support of the PAID initiative

To learn about OCSE grant opportunities available in the future, check the HHS Web site: <https://extranet.acf.hhs.gov/hhsgrantsforecast/>

## Child Support Report

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/csrindex.html>

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