



Using Culturally Competent Outreach to Enhance the Success of Child Support Programs

The United States is a diverse nation composed of many unique individuals and communities, each a product of their own experiences and environment and shaped by their culture. Differences in cultural backgrounds can lead to miscommunication that may impede the success of programs that serve the public, including child support services. To be successful in providing services to a diverse public, child support organizations must be able to bridge cultural divides by leveraging culturally competent outreach methods. These methods seek to understand all aspects of the cultures of a target community in order to facilitate a more efficient interaction between government programs and program participants.

The Impact of Culture on Participation in Government Programs

Culture encompasses many factors, such as religion, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender, age, education, economic status, immigration status, and geographic location. Culture includes learned behaviors and beliefs that shape an individual's worldview. In every society, there is a dominant culture under which all other cultures are subsumed. An individual can belong to both the dominant culture of a society and a competing subculture, usually manifesting through the family. Family systems have immense influence on individuals, and they sometimes have philosophies and expectations that conflict with those of the dominant culture. Those conflicts can create friction between individuals and the society encompassing them and may impede someone's willingness to engage with government programs such as child support enforcement.

For example, in certain Hispanic cultures, family problems are expected to stay within the home. The involvement of official authorities, such as government agencies, may be interpreted by the family as a lack of confidence in and disrespect toward either parent. In cultures that have a philosophy of shared familial honor and reputation (for example, many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures), seeking help from official authorities for something as personal as child support may offend the non-custodial parent to the point of non-cooperation. These are just two types of cultural ideals that may prevent custodial parents from seeking child support services.

Understanding and Reaching Program Participants

Culture defines the “correct” and “desirable” way for individuals to interact. Individuals become encompassed by the culture in which they live, and it is difficult to see outside of this field to realize that there are other ways of thinking and doing that are just as logical and effective. The biases in viewpoints and behavior created as a result may go unnoticed by members of the dominant culture, but other members may recognize such biases and consider them to be disrespectful. For example, direct eye contact is generally a desired habit in conversation, but some cultures view this behavior as pretentious or arrogant, and thus very disrespectful. When program staff engage in direct eye contact while providing information or services, some individuals may feel uncomfortable or alienated and become less likely to participate further in government programs.

Another dominant cultural trait in the United States favors taking initiative to solve one’s problems. Therefore, if an individual cannot resolve a problem, it is seen as either a lack of effort or an inability to succeed. In the child support enforcement space, this is often translated into strategies that punish those who are unable to comply with child support requirements. Culturally competent outreach considers the cultural context surrounding parents to understand what factors may affect their cooperation, and then takes that information into account to create strategies that generate better collaboration among families and government agencies.

Informing and Engaging Employers

Culturally competent outreach is an effective way to inform diverse groups about social programs and services. In child support programs, this includes the notifications required of employers by child support agencies. Employer reporting, such as the notification of new hires, is often where child support enforcement begins, and it is essential to getting children the financial support to which they are legally entitled. There are many cultural outlooks that may impede cooperation with employer reporting requirements.

For example, employers who hire large numbers of migrant workers may not report new hires to child support agencies for fear the information may be shared with other federal agencies, creating the possibility of losing their labor force if customs paperwork violations are found. In another example, Native American tribes and their enterprises constitute sovereign nations, and most tribal employers are not required to report new hires to state or federal directories. However, it is highly desirable that they share this information because of the large number of employees hired by tribes engaged in the resort and gambling industry. Even so, some tribal employers, because of their cultural history and past interactions with the government, may not be willing to cooperate with

new hire reporting initiatives. Using culturally competent outreach to understand the cultures in which Native American employers operate can help to create a symbiotic relationship with child support agencies that is beneficial for all.

If employers consistently miss completing new hire reports, they are labeled “non-compliant” and can face financial penalties. That’s where culturally competent outreach can be of assistance. Perhaps the employer has limited access to mail or the Internet and requires another method to report. Perhaps the employer speaks limited English and needs assistance to understand the reporting requirements. Rather than issue fines to business owners for not reporting new hires, child support organizations may instead choose to create a bilingual outreach and customer service campaign. Such culturally competent outreach practices seek to understand employers from their viewpoint in order to find strategies that will enhance the employers’ compliance with new hire reporting.

Getting Started

To become well-versed in the culture of its target audience, a child support organization should begin by learning about the culture’s past, which is key to understanding its current dynamic. However, it is important to remember that the historic portrait of a culture is just that—a picture of the past. The past may influence how cultures respond to current issues, but it doesn’t necessarily give us an accurate picture of a culture’s contemporary existence or its current perspective. Thus, to really know a culture, organizations should also learn how it exists in the present moment—the culture’s philosophies, traditions, and customs; contemporary ideas on the past; the culture’s place in modern society; and the current issues facing the community. This knowledge is crucial to developing cooperative relationships with target audiences.

For example, in New Mexico, there are many casinos operated by tribal entities, some complying with child support reporting at a high rate despite a difficult past relationship with the state. These tribes had fought for years against the encroachment of non-tribal cities and government involvement in the well-being of their tribe. With the growth of the gambling industry in the state, the relationship between the tribes and the state began to change; as their enterprises with the non-tribal world around them began to integrate, the tribes became valued partners of the state, cooperating regularly with child support programs. However, there are other tribes whose history of mutual alliance with the government is changing as a result of the current debate with the state over contractual obligations owed to one another; their cooperation with government programs, including child support reporting, has significantly declined.

In New Mexico, culturally competent outreach methods helped raise the new hire compliance rate among many tribal employers. The state’s outreach campaign focused

on what each tribe could do to improve the well-being of its children, including complying with the state's new hire reporting requirements. Tribal entities received informational flyers, letters of introduction, and invitations to participate in roundtable discussions. An outreach representative trained in tribal conversational etiquette attended the discussions with tribal leaders and employers to provide information regarding child support reporting. Approaching tribal employers as partners in the continued success of their tribe facilitated the high compliance rate in child support reporting we see among some of New Mexico's largest tribal employers today.

Another way to get to know a culture is to become part of it. For child support organizations, this could mean engaging in community events, meeting community leaders, and asking people what they need and want from social programs. This allows the child support organizations to have a clearer understanding of the goals and strategies that will best serve their target audience. With this in-depth cultural knowledge, their culturally competent outreach strategies will incorporate the target community's perspective.

In the end, many come to see that though there may be differences among diverse communities and their cultures, we all want to see the next generation succeed—and that is the ultimate shared goal of both parents and child support programs.

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