

Caseworker Guide for DV Survivor-Centered Communication

This desk reference guide is designed to help child support professionals navigate conversations with parents in a way that keeps safety at the forefront. It provides guiding principles for discussing the child support process while being mindful of the potential impact of domestic violence. The guide also helps staff recognize when a situation may be outside their role, respond with empathy and transparency, and connect parents to domestic violence (DV) resources when specialized support is needed.

Note: Please follow your agency's policies and procedures first and foremost.

Guiding Principles

Acknowledge and Accommodate

- Notice common feelings and fears and reassure the parent they are not alone
- Let the parent guide the speed of the discussion and be willing to repeat information
- Be present, listen, and don't jump to your response

This may sound like:

"I'm so sorry that was done to you."

"I believe you."

"No one deserves to be treated that way."

"Many parents feel worried or fearful about child support."

"I'm here for you. You're not alone."

Empower

- Recognize the survivor is the expert of their situation
- Simplify choices, offer options and resources, don't rush decisions, and respect the decisions the survivor makes
- Affirm the survivor's strength and resilience

This may sound like:

"You're the expert on what you've gone through, and I'm here to support you."

"Would you like me to explain some options for next steps?"

"You're the one fighting for what your child needs."

Validate

- Normalize conflicted feelings — urgency vs. fear to move ahead, hope vs. frustration, desire to "leave for good" vs. the pull of the reasons they've stayed
- Accept their story as their experience
- Reinforce that they are not responsible for the violence — domestic violence doesn't occur "between" partners
- There may not be simple or easy answers, but support their decisions

This may sound like:

"You have been through so much."

"This can be a frustrating experience; I can take hearing that."

"No matter what you decide, I'll do everything I can as a child support worker to support you."

"You aren't to blame for what was done to you."

Contextual Humility and Awareness

- Respect their perspective and approach interactions with curiosity rather than judgement
- “Understand that a person’s culture and their community’s history shape how they experience trauma and whether they seek help
- Start where they are and how they see themselves, not where you think they should be or how you see them

This may sound like:

“I can’t be in your shoes, but I’m here to walk beside you through the child support process.”

“What has helped you feel supported in the past?”

“What might I do that doesn’t feel helpful?”

Collaboration and Respect

- Model language that supports mutual safety and respect
- Be mindful and aware of your own trauma experiences and how that impacts your daily work and interactions with parents

This may sound like:

“I need just a second to think about what you’ve shared so I can give you the best support possible.”

“You know better than I do what you need to get child support safely; I’m here to help make that happen for you.”

“My expertise is on the child support process; how can I help you through this?”

Be Trustworthy and Transparent

- Only promise what you can deliver and follow through
- Explain processes and what you can and can't control
- Be transparent about system and protection limitations

This may sound like:

“Here are the next actions that will happen on your case, and who will be taking those actions.”

“Even with all the precautions I’ve described, it may not be safe for you to get child support. I can help you take the steps needed to stop child support if that’s what is best for you.”

General Talking Points and Scenarios

Limiting or Preventing of Over-Disclosure by Survivors

Affirm your commitment to family safety and give resources to help parents safely access child support while being clear that the child support worker is not a DV advocate or expert.

If a parent wants to share more about their domestic violence experience than the child support staff are equipped to respond to, the child support worker may say:

CS Worker: I am here to listen, but you don't have to give me details of what happened or prove anything to me.

CS Worker: My job is to understand your safety concerns and explain what we can do to address them, so you can make informed decisions to help keep yourself and your children safe

CS Worker: You can share as much or as little of your experience as you want. You're the best judge of what information is important for us to consider your safety when going through the child support process.

CS Worker: I'm not an expert on domestic violence, but I know someone who is an expert. Is it okay if I connect you to them?

Neutral on child support, not neutral on violence

- **Neutral on child support** - Interact with people who cause harm in a respectful manner, with the understanding that to be neutral on child support requires additional protections for survivors to mitigate the impact of DV on child support processes.
- **Not neutral on violence** - Clearly communicate that you/your agency condemn violence/abuse in relationships and you/your agency will incorporate protective measures, if possible, to prevent it in child support processes. This should be a “general” message to families (not specific to a case).

CS Worker: We are a public agency whose actions are grounded in the best interest of the child. It is not in the best interest of the child to allow one party to use our system to harm, harass, intimidate, or manipulate the other party. We assess each case to determine what services are appropriate and provide services based on our assessment.

Responding to Distrust of the System

Parent: Why should I tell you anything? How would you understand? Why should I trust anything you tell me?

CS Worker: It's understandable that you don't trust what I'm saying. I know that it will take time to earn your trust. I'm willing to take time to answer any questions you have and to explain what's happening on your case.

CS Worker: This can be a frustrating experience and the process might not feel supportive right now. Would you be willing to share more about what's been challenging or what's making you feel uncertain?

CS Worker: You're right, I'm not in your shoes so I can't fully understand what it's like for you. I will listen if you'd be willing to share what concerns you most or what you hope will happen on your case?

Responding to Distrust of the System

Parent: Can I, or I want to, forgive the back child support. (Or, I'm okay with this amount of child support, I don't want to go higher).

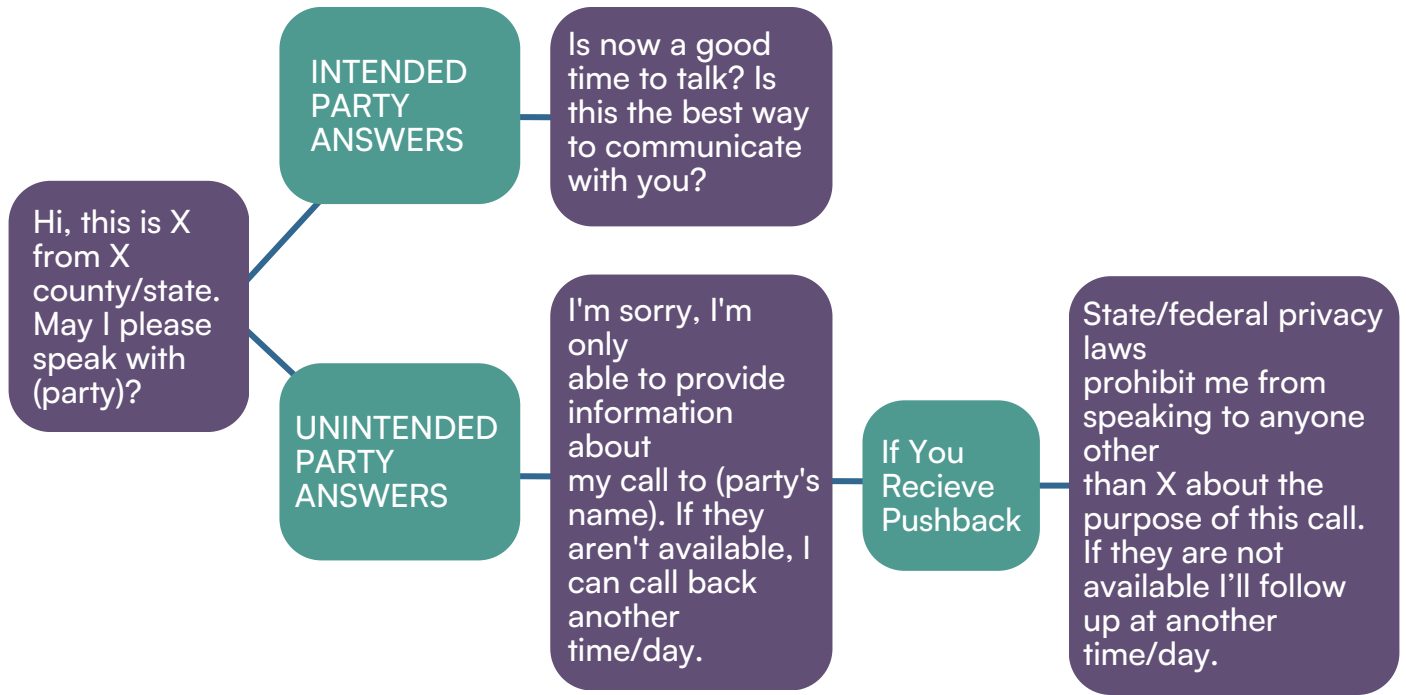


CS Worker: You know your situation best. My role is to give you the information you need to make the best decisions for you and your children. If arrears are forgiven, you can't request them later. Sometimes, people agree to waive past support or take less child support because they think it's safer or they're afraid of the other parent's reaction. If you want, we can inform the court or the other parent that you asked to waive arrears or take less support, but we as the state can object or say we need to conduct additional review. Would that help?

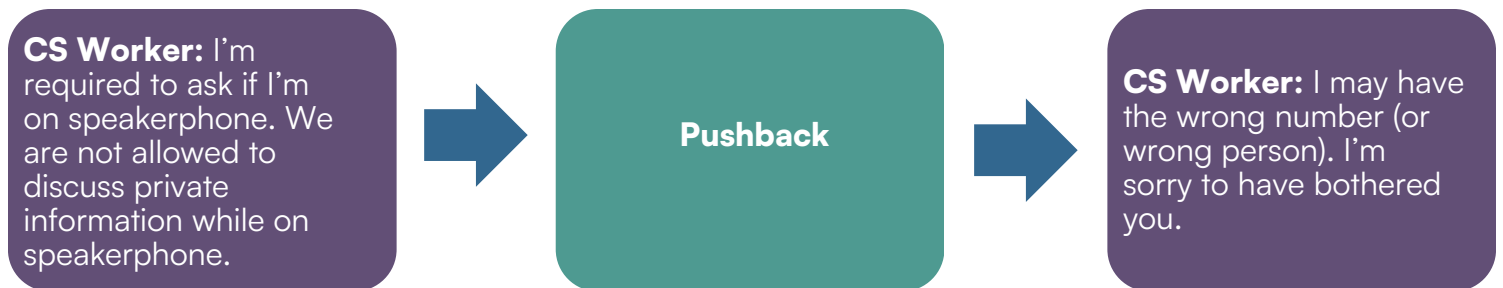
Phone Conversations

Making Initial Contact via Phone Call

- Use “yes” or “no” questions to allow for a person to answer safely if around others.
- Only share information directly with the intended party you are attempting to reach.



If the party is hesitant to respond or you suspect you are on speakerphone:



Parent without Family Violence Indicator (FVI) Calls Office/Call Center

Parent: Why is my case scheduled for a virtual hearing instead of in person?



CS Worker: Federal regulations require us to review all cases and determine the most appropriate actions for the next step on each case. Each case is different. Our legal team determined that a virtual hearing is most appropriate based on federal regulation and we are prohibited from disclosing legal analysis.

Parent: I want my case closed. The other parent and I have worked things out and we don't want/need child support.

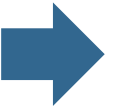


CS Worker: I can forward your request to our legal team. There are many factors they will review prior to taking legal action. Even if both you and the other parent agree to close the case, they may determine that federal regulations require the case to stay open.

OR

It is up to the court to decide if it's legally appropriate to close your case, and the court may determine, based on federal regulations, that your case doesn't meet requirements to be closed.

Parent: Why is the address information of the other parent/party not on my court order? In my other case that information was on the order.

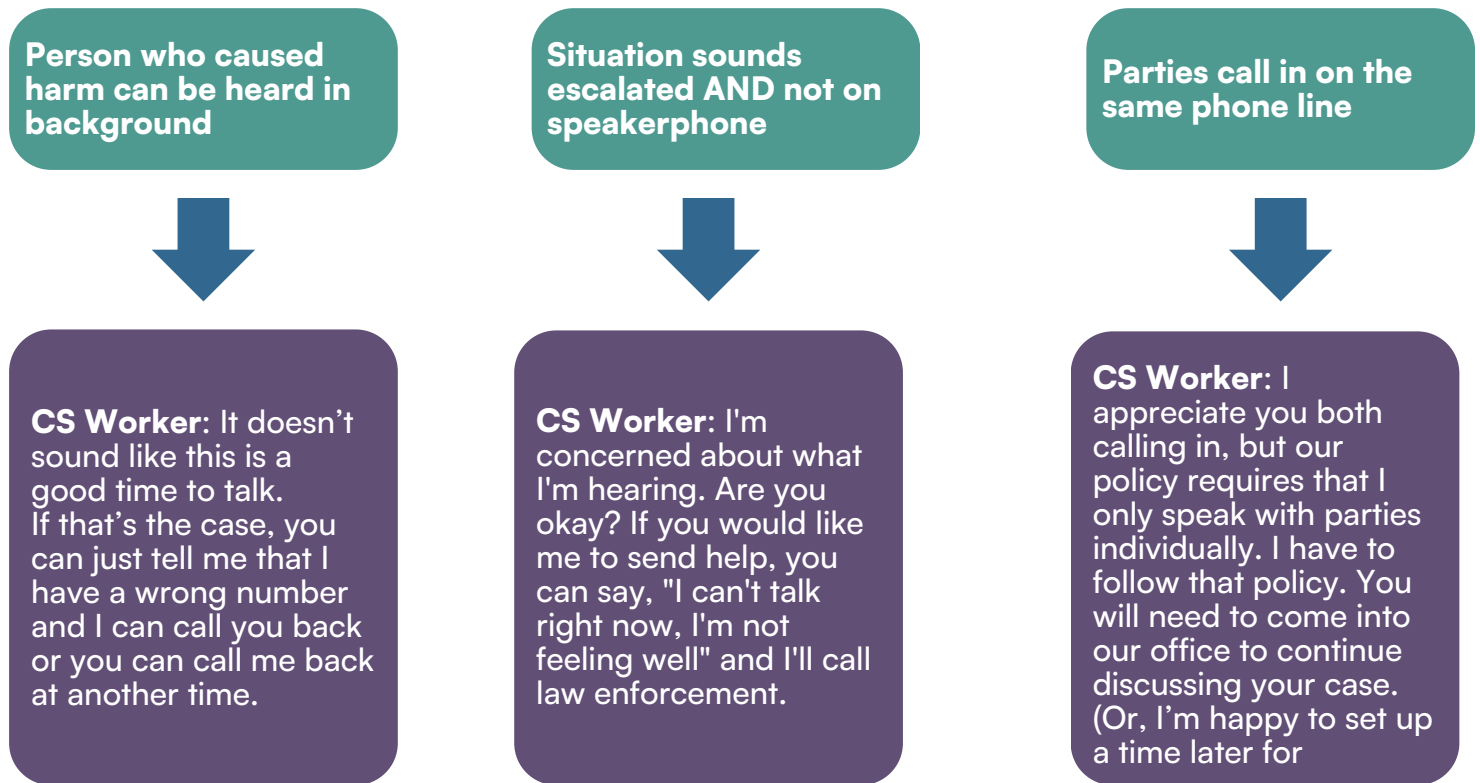


CS Worker: Each case is different and the courts/our agency must follow federal regulations on case information sharing. The other party/parent's address information was redacted based on federal requirements.

Phone Conversations

Safely Terminating a Call When Both Parties are Present

- Don't jump to conclusions
- Pay close attention to background noises and tone of voice
- At an appropriate time, reach out to the impacted party to check on their well-being and to see if they need further assistance



Call 911 if the situation appears critical or if the survivor explicitly requests it, in accordance with your agency's protocol.

Explain the situation, providing any details you have about the individual's potential location and what you heard on the phone. If it's safe to do so, try to stay on the phone until help arrives.

Note: Sometimes calling law enforcement can put a survivor in even more danger. Survivors might experience barriers such as fear, manipulation, control, shame, blame, judgement, or isolation. Carefully follow your agency's protocol for determining when to call 911.

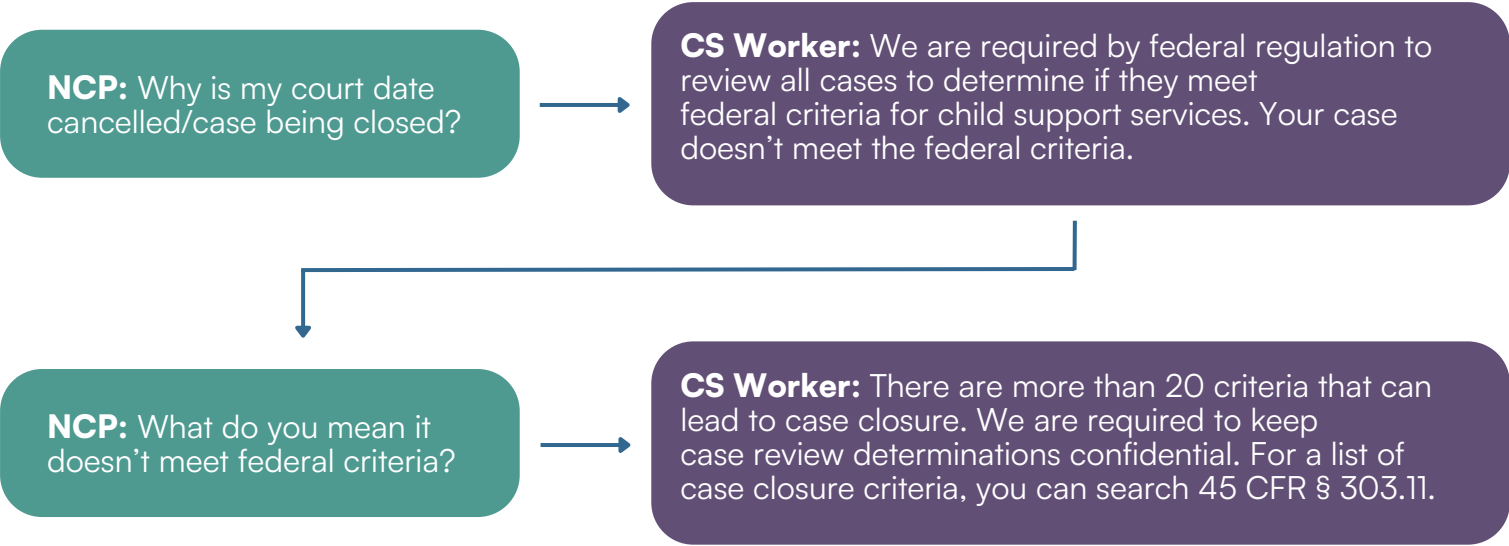
In-Person Interactions

Seeking Address Non-Disclosure in Court

CS worker to parent with FVI: In the court order we're asking the judge to sign today, we're required to include your Address of Record, or AOR. An AOR is the address we use to send you important mail and legal documents about your child support case. It will also be the address to appear in court documents that are public record. It can be different from where you live, like a P.O. box or another address. This helps keep your home address private while making sure you get all the important mail about your case. If you don't want to use your home address, please let us know so we can help you choose a better address to list, or we can also say "No available AOR at this time".

CS worker to parent who has caused harm: Our attorney (legal team) has reviewed this case and determined that federal regulations require us to request that the court keep addresses off the court record.

Seeking Address Non-Disclosure in Court

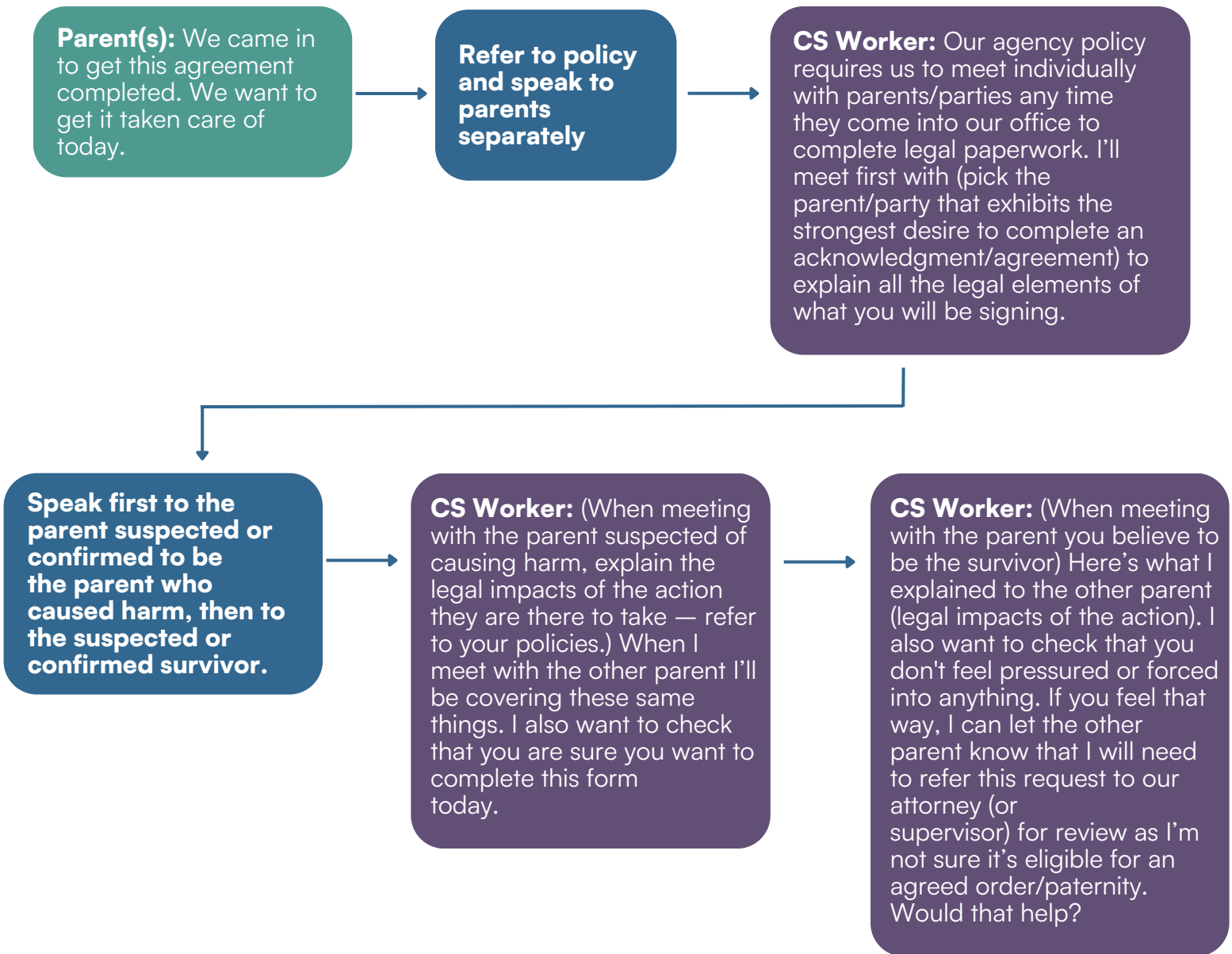


In-Person Interactions

Managing In-Office Interactions when Both Parents are Present

- Speak to parents separately
- Provide space for potential disclosure of safety concerns

Scenario: Parties have already been screened and there is reason to believe that there is DV present. Both parties show up at the office to sign a Voluntary Paternity Agreement.



SAVES CENTER

Safe Access for
Victims' Economic
Security Center



COLORADO
Child Support Services
Department of Human Services



The SAVES Center is a five-year project funded by the Office of Child Support Services, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Award #90FDO253-01-00). The content of this publication by SAVES Center staff does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Child Support Services, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.