

Incorporating Survivor Voice to Improve the Safety of the Child Support Program

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KEY LESSONS

1. Centering domestic violence (DV) survivor voice reveals gaps between policy intent and survivors' experiences, which creates opportunities to make child support programs safer and more responsive.
2. Engagement approaches vary across agencies, and even small, intentional efforts can prove valuable in strengthening agency materials, policies, and processes.
3. Engagement between state and tribal child support agencies and DV survivors requires strong agency commitment and trust-building; leadership must signal that survivor voice is essential to decision-making, and partnering with trusted DV coalitions and community organizations helps establish credibility and reduce barriers to participation.
4. Compensating DV survivors at fair market rates for their expertise demonstrates respect for survivors' expertise and promotes sustained participation.
5. Closing the feedback loop sustains engagement; DV survivors remain involved when they see how their input shapes materials, policies, and practices.
6. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to engaging with DV survivors; tailor engagement approaches based on agency capacity and readiness.
7. Deeper engagement requires time and organizational culture shifts, including longer timelines, iterative processes, and shared decision-making.

Introduction

Centering domestic violence (DV) survivor voice in child support policies and practices can help agencies better understand families' needs and improve how the program works, helping to build a safer system.¹ Through the Safe Access for Victims' Economic Security (SAVES) Center and demonstration project, child support agencies have centered the voice of DV survivors in child support program design, policymaking, and research. This brief describes the SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement, how each of the 12 SAVES demonstration sites² funded under the project incorporate DV survivors' voices into their

¹Berastain, P., Taggart, S., & Clinton, C. (2025). *Meaningful engagement and partnership with domestic violence survivors to improve safe access to child support services*. SAVES Center. https://savescenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/SAVES_Meaningful-Engagement-with-Survivors-.pdf

²Office of Child Support Enforcement (2022). *Safe Access for Victims' Economic Security (SAVES)*. Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/css/grants/current-grants/safe-access-victims-economic-security-saves>

work, and summarizes sites' strategies to improve safety in the child support program through survivor engagement.

Applying the SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement to the Child Support Program

Engagement approaches vary across sites, and even small, intentional efforts can prove valuable in strengthening agency materials, policies, and processes. To assess the depth of survivor engagement across demonstration sites, the SAVES Center adapted the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](https://www.facilitatingpower.com/spectrum_of_community_engagement_to_ownership)³— a tool designed to assess and strengthen community participation in decision-making³— into the SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement (Figure 1). The SAVES Center contextualized the framework for DV survivors navigating the child support program and reframed the most participatory stage—from 'Defer To' to 'Co-design,' reflecting a form of engagement in which DV survivors and child support staff share in decision-making to guide program and policy changes alongside child support agency staff. The SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement comprises five stages, where higher stages represent more participatory DV survivor involvement.

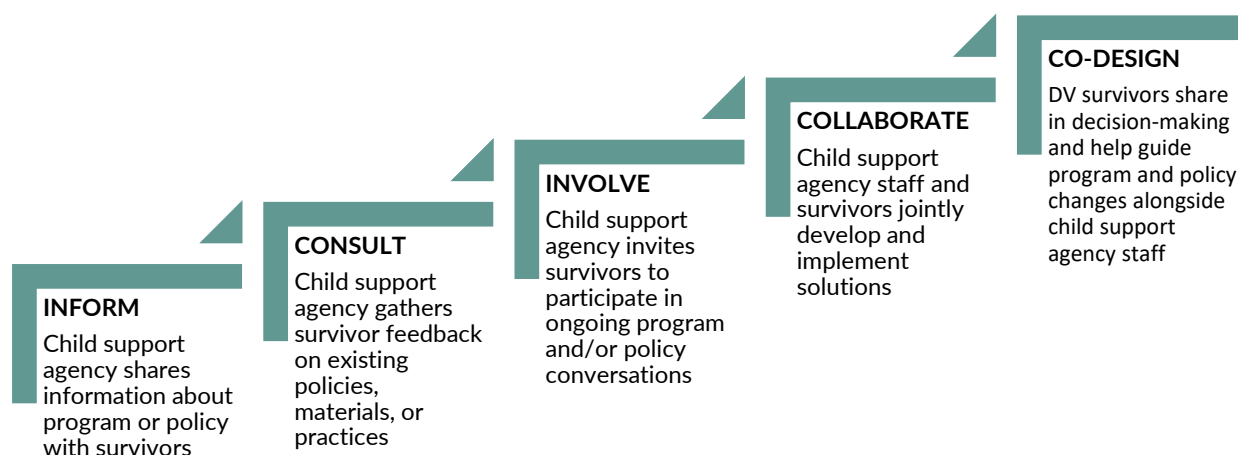


Figure 1. SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement

Sites' Approaches to Engaging DV Survivors in SAVES Work

DV survivors are the experts on how the child support program affects their families and their safety. This expertise uniquely positions them to help child support agencies identify:

- Areas where program requirements conflict with safety planning;
- How language, processes, timelines, and other system elements can feel coercive or unsafe; and
- Gaps between agency safeguards and DV survivors' experiences, revealing where the policies and programs designed to support them fall short.

The SAVES demonstration sites engaged DV survivors in a variety of ways, with approaches varying in both form and depth across the framework's five stages. Although the Inform stage (i.e., sharing information with DV survivors about the child support program) is a necessary foundation, the SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement encourages sites to move *beyond* this stage to more deeply engage DV survivors. The more participatory approaches, reflected in the Consult through Co-design stages, are those in which DV survivors have active voices in shaping the policies, practices, and tools that

³ González, R. (2019). *The spectrum of community engagement to ownership*. Facilitating Power. https://www.facilitatingpower.com/spectrum_of_community_engagement_to_ownership

affect them. Many sites worked across multiple stages simultaneously and may appear in more than one stage. Table 1 illustrates site-reported engagement activities by framework stage.

Table 1. DV Survivor Engagement Activities Across SAVES Demonstration Sites

Framework Stage	Engagement Activity	Demonstration Sites Engaging in this Practice
Inform: Child support agency shares information about program or policy with DV survivors	Public awareness and outreach: Publish bench cards, brochures, and other materials to inform DV survivors of safety-related processes and protections available through the child support program	Colorado, Georgia, Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO), Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin
Consult: Child support agency gathers DV survivor feedback on existing policies, materials, or practices	Recruit into engagement activities (e.g., advisory groups, listening sessions): Conduct targeted outreach to DV survivors to participate in child support program improvement activities, such as advisory groups or listening sessions	Colorado, Georgia, LCO, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin
	Convene advisory groups: Convene groups of DV survivors to provide input on child support program policies, practices, and safety protocols	Colorado, Georgia, LCO, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Wisconsin
	Hold focus groups / listening sessions: Hold structured sessions to gather DV survivors' perspectives on their experiences navigating the child support program and their safety-related needs	Michigan, New York, Washington
Involve: Child support agency invites DV survivors to participate in ongoing program and/or policy conversations	Gather feedback on safety tools (e.g., screening tools): Engage DV survivors to review and provide feedback on safety screening tools used to identify risk and inform case handling in the child support process	Colorado, Georgia, LCO, Minnesota, New York, Wisconsin, Virginia
	Gather feedback on program materials and content: Engage DV survivors to review brochures, process guides, staff training materials, and other child support program content for accuracy, accessibility, and trauma-informed framing	Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Washington
Collaborate: Child support agency staff and DV survivors jointly develop and implement solutions	Jointly revise content and/or update practice or policy: DV survivors work alongside child support staff to revise materials, co-develop training, and shape program policies to better reflect survivor safety needs	Colorado, Georgia, LCO, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Wisconsin
	Incorporate survivor voice at external meetings or conferences: DV survivors present alongside child support staff at local, regional, or national convenings to elevate survivor perspectives in policy and practice conversations	Colorado, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Virginia
Co-design: DV survivors share in decision-making and help guide program and policy changes alongside child support agency staff	Survivor advisory and leadership participation: DV survivors participate in leadership roles, share in decision-making, and/or have opportunities to guide the direction of program and policy work	Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia

State Spotlights: The SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement at the Sites

The examples highlighted below detail how two SAVES demonstration sites developed and sustained approaches to engaging DV survivors across all stages of the framework, from Inform to Co-design. Minnesota's consensus-based model and Virginia's Impact Expert Advisor approach each illustrate what it looks like when child support agencies move beyond consultation to bring DV survivors into the work as partners and decision-makers.

Minnesota

The Minnesota SAVES Team ("Minnesota")—a collaboration between the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) Child Support Division, [Violence Free Minnesota](#), and [Standpoint](#)—made DV survivor voice a central component of its work. With strong support from DCYF leadership, Minnesota adopted a deliberate approach to moving beyond informing and consulting DV survivors toward collaboration and co-design. As child support leadership noted, "It is possible and beneficial to incorporate survivors into policy conversations." This commitment helped establish a pathway from Inform to Co-Design on the SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement.

Minnesota began by recruiting DV survivors to participate in their work through trusted DV partners, community networks, and peer referrals. Recognizing that deeper engagement requires more than recruitment, DCYF developed a comprehensive onboarding process that addressed confidentiality, informed consent, technology and accessibility needs, expected levels of participation, and available supports. A designated staff member maintained regular communication with DV survivors, conducted individual check-ins, developed safety and care plans, provided meeting reminders, and created a clear process for DV survivors to step back from participation, if desired. Minnesota also benefited from a state law⁴ that excludes compensation for lived-experience engagement in public benefit eligibility calculations, reducing barriers to DV survivor participation.

To foster authentic partnership, Minnesota intentionally framed survivor engagement as a collaborative process, rather than a one-time consultation. DV survivors received Child Support 101 training and opportunities to build relationships with one another outside formal project meetings, helping them feel like partners in the work rather than external reviewers. Together, DV survivors and other project partners on the SAVES advisory council developed a charter that established shared values, group agreements, common terminology, and a consensus-based approach to decision-making. In addition to the advisory council, DV survivors participate in subcommittees and pilot programs, whose work regularly informs program improvements, public education efforts, and outreach activities.

Building on this foundation, Minnesota has created an extensive SAVES grant community, which includes DV survivors, community partners, and institutional stakeholders. This community has grown to approximately 150 participants and continues to expand, providing ongoing input into policies, practices, and strategies designed to improve safety and accessibility within the child support program.

Virginia

Virginia integrated survivor engagement across all phases of its SAVES work, making survivor voice a central component of program improvement efforts. Working in partnership with the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, the state recruited "Impact Expert Advisors" through trusted

⁴ Minnesota Statutes § 256P.06, subd. 4 (2025); § 256P.01, subd. 5a.

relationships and intentionally designed its approach around transparency, accessibility, trust, and survivor autonomy.

Virginia explicitly made trust-building a priority of their survivor engagement model. To begin their work, Virginia offered opportunities for transparent, frank discussions, where the agency staff listened to DV survivors' concerns and needs. Virginia staff described this experience as “humbling,” noting that trust was built when DV survivors saw that criticism was genuinely heard and acted upon. Virginia also prioritized closing the feedback loop by regularly showing DV survivors how their input informed revisions to materials, policies, and trainings.

Virginia recognized that engagement requires both organizational commitment and investment. To reduce administrative barriers and ensure the Impact Expert Advisors received compensation in a timely and accessible manner, Virginia partnered with the state DV coalition to administer payments; Impact Expert Advisors tracked their hours and submitted invoices to the coalition, which distributed payments using SAVES funds reimbursed by the child support agency. Routing payments through the DV coalition, rather than contracting with DV survivors directly, helped avoid the time and resource demands of individual consultant contracting while ensuring that compensation remained accessible.

Virginia's Impact Expert Advisors were offered low-barrier, flexible opportunities to engage with SAVES work and were treated as collaborators rather than one-time reviewers. This approach required staff to embrace flexibility—the longer timelines, repeated revisions, and a genuine willingness to reconsider existing practices based on survivor feedback. The Impact Expert Advisors contributed to the drafting and revision of forms, procedures, print resources, website content, and trauma-informed training. One example is the agency's redesign of the *Getting Child Support Safely* brochure, where the Impact Expert Advisors helped simplify language, improve readability, and reorganize information to make the resource more accessible for individuals experiencing trauma. Both the original and revised versions of this brochure are presented in Appendix A.

Virginia noted that this level of engagement required longer and more frequent meetings to allow time for discussion, reflection, and collaborative decision-making, but that it was worth it. Virginia's Impact Expert Advisors were regularly shown how their feedback influenced revisions to forms, brochures, policies, and training. They valued this joint decision-making and described seeing their feedback turn into tangible changes as validating and, in some cases, “healing.”

Strategies to Strengthen Survivor Engagement in the Child Support Program

Through ongoing conversations with the demonstration sites, the SAVES Center has gained clear insights into how child support agencies have begun—and can continue to—build active, meaningful, and sustainable survivor engagement into state and tribal child support agencies. Below are the key lessons learned about how to strengthen survivor engagement in the child support program.

Ensure strong agency commitment. DV survivors have more opportunities for engagement when agency leadership signals that DV survivor voice is not just symbolic, but integral to decision-making. Several sites found it helpful to secure leadership and staff buy-in before recruiting DV survivors to engage in any activities. For example, Wisconsin emphasized preparing staff and leadership for DV survivor engagement before launching advisory activities, while Virginia noted that deeper engagement required staff to be open to revising materials, policies, and practices based on survivor feedback. Although policy, regulatory, and other requirements may limit opportunities for co-design, leadership commitment signals a desire for—

and enables—engagement in ways that are practical and feasible. Strong support from the agency also signals that the resources needed to engage DV survivors (e.g., staff time and flexibility, program or policy revisions) are prioritized.

Intentionally build and maintain survivor trust. Recognize that DV survivors may be hesitant to engage with the child support program due to prior experiences with systems, ongoing safety concerns, or uncertainty about how their input will be used. Many SAVES sites partnered with trusted DV coalitions, shelters, courts, and community organizations to recruit DV survivors, which helped to establish credibility, reduce participation barriers, and engage a diverse range of DV survivors. Effective strategies to maintain trust beyond recruitment include providing clear information about the DV survivor role and expectations, offering flexible and low-barrier ways to participate, maintaining regular communication, and creating opportunities for relationship-building among DV survivors. To ensure agency staff have the capacity to build and maintain trusting working relationships with DV survivors, agencies should ensure staff are trained in trauma-informed practices and prepared to connect DV survivors to appropriate resources if engagement opportunities create a trauma response.

Compensate DV survivors at rates that demonstrate respect and reduce barriers. Compensating DV survivors at consultant-level rates acknowledges the value of their expertise and promotes participation. In alignment with federal Office of Child Support Enforcement guidance⁵, the SAVES sites compensated DV survivors for their time and expertise, typically between \$50 and \$150 per hour. Sites also recognized the challenges that can come with compensation, such as potential impacts on public benefit eligibility or delays associated with government contracting processes. Sites worked closely with DV survivors to discuss potential impacts, concerns, and options. Many sites also partnered with DV organizations to administer payments, helping agencies navigate administrative barriers while ensuring DV survivors received compensation in a timely and accessible manner.

Create a strong feedback loop to boost survivor engagement and retention. DV survivors remain engaged when they see how their input shapes materials, policies, and/or training. Reporting back on updated materials and/or program or policy changes reinforces agency credibility and partnership. Incorporating DV survivor feedback directly into revisions reinforces the value of their contributions and encourages continued participation. Agencies that demonstrate impact build long-term relationships and sustain survivor participation over time.

Build in time and staff capacity for an organizational culture shift. The deeper the engagement, the greater the investment required—sustained collaboration means longer timelines, more frequent touchpoints, iterative input and review, and genuine shared decision-making. This often represents a significant shift for agencies, requiring staff buy-in and a willingness to balance DV survivor experiences with the statutory and operational requirements of a complex system. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; agencies should tailor their engagement strategies based on their capacity and readiness, and plan to grow that capacity over time. Several sites are now extending survivor engagement beyond SAVES activities. For example, Colorado, Minnesota, and New York have supported survivors in presenting at state and national conferences, while Ohio and Oklahoma have incorporated survivor perspectives into training and outreach efforts with partner agencies. These efforts demonstrate how survivor engagement can be sustained and expanded beyond a single initiative.

⁵Office of Child Support Enforcement. (2022). *A starter kit on engaging people with lived experience in child support programs* (p. 3). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/engaging_starter_kit.pdf

Conclusion

The SAVES Center Framework for Survivor Engagement provides a structure for agencies to develop their own approaches to incorporating DV survivor voice into program and policy decision-making. SAVES demonstration sites illustrate how engagement with DV survivors is both feasible and impactful. By engaging survivors, sites can strengthen program safety and improve families' experiences. While engagement approaches vary across sites—from consultation to deeper collaboration—even small, intentional efforts can prove valuable in strengthening agency materials, policies, and processes. These experiences show that survivor voice can be integrated into program and policy decisions in structured, adaptable ways.

Successful engagement requires preparation and sustained commitment. Before recruiting DV survivors, agencies should assess their leadership support, staff capacity, compensation infrastructure, and plan to grow and maintain that foundation over time. Strong agency commitment, intentional trust-building, meaningful compensation, closed feedback loops, and dedicated time for organizational culture shift are the building blocks of DV survivor engagement that are not only effective but long-lasting.

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Appendix A

Appendix A presents an example of how Virginia's Impact Expert Advisors contributed to the redesign of the *Getting Child Support Safely* brochure, illustrating how survivor input can directly shape program materials.

Appendix A1: Virginia's *Getting Child Support Safely* Brochure, Original

Original brochure prior to Impact Expert Advisor review

DCSE
Division of Child
Support Enforcement



GETTING CHILD SUPPORT SAFELY: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



Domestic Violence Triggers

If you are concerned about DCSE taking any actions, you can speak with a child support safety specialist to discuss your case.



Safely Seeking Child Support

DCSE has ways to help you access child support services safely.



Assistance and Child Support

You can update information about safety at ANY TIME. Even if you've already told your Child Support or TANF worker that you didn't have any safety concerns.

YOUR SAFETY IS A PRIORITY

It is important for children to receive financial and medical support from both of their parents and/or caretakers. The Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) is committed to making the child support process as safe as possible for parents, caretakers and their children.

To receive child support services, you must provide information about yourself, the children, and the person you are seeking support from. As you read about the steps to take, you may want to think about any safety concerns this process may raise and discuss them with your Child Support caseworker.

Please remember: If you open a child support case, you can close the case for support owed to you at any time you feel proceeding with pursuit would not be safe.

ASSISTANCE AND CHILD SUPPORT

If you apply for or receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), you are required to cooperate with the Child Support Program; however, that requirement may be waived if you have safety concerns for yourself and/or the children. Your Child Support or TANF worker can explain what actions can be taken to help access these programs safely.

Highly trained advocates are available 24/7/365 to talk confidentially with anyone experiencing domestic or sexual violence, seeking resources or information, or questioning unhealthy aspects of their relationship.



To find a local domestic violence services provider near you:
<https://vsdvalliance.org/get-help-ayuda>



Contact Us
1.800.838.8238



To Chat (works best on tablet or computer):
1.804.793.9999

POSSIBLE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRIGGERS



Establishing Paternity: We will reach out to the other parent to establish paternity, this may involve genetic testing, or having the other parent sign a form acknowledging paternity.



Collecting Support: If the noncustodial parent is employed, their employer will be contacted, and they may have their child support payments taken out automatically from their paycheck and sent to DCSE.



Court Proceedings: DCSE may file with the court to have the non-custodial and/or custodial parent/caretaker appear before a judge to order child support payments, establish paternity, modify the child support order, or for other actions that can't be completed in the office.



Notification by Law Enforcement: If the other parent cannot be reached by mail, email, or phone, law enforcement officers can deliver important legal documents to their home or workplace.



Support Enforcement: When the case meets the necessary criteria, including multiple missed payments by the non-custodial parent, DCSE can:

- Suspend a driver's license
- Withhold money from bank accounts and other financial institutions.
- Collect federal and state tax refunds
- Withhold funds from unemployment benefits
- Suspend professional or recreational licenses (medical, law, fishing, hunting).



Review and Adjustment: Child support orders at least three years old are eligible for a request for review and adjustment. This review may increase, decrease, or not change the amount of child support that the noncustodial parent must pay. A change in either parent's circumstances, including obtaining a raise or becoming unemployed, could be reasons to increase or decrease a child support payment amount during those three years.

STAYING SAFE WHILE SEEKING CHILD SUPPORT

DCSE has ways to help you access child support services safely.

- Remove your location/residence or employment information from petitions, notices, or any required financial disclosures. While your address can be suppressed from most forms, it is not possible to suppress the name of the child support office or the court that issued the order.
- DCSE can request your in-office appointment to establish parentage be scheduled separately from the other parent.
- Can arrange separate dates for most DCSE appointments that require the custodial and noncustodial parents live participation.
- Can offer telephonic or virtual appointments to customers who have concerns with having to show up for DCSE appointments in-person.
- Help inform you on safety precautions that can be taken before, during and after a court hearing to include, how to request a telephonic or virtual court appearance and how to receive an escort into and out of the courthouse.



To Chat (works best on tablet or computer):
1.804.793.9999



Contact Us:
1.800.838.8238



To find a local domestic violence services provider near you:
<https://vsdvalliance.org/get-help-ayuda>

Appendix A2: Virginia's *Getting Child Support Safely* Brochure, Revised

Revised brochure reflecting Impact Expert Advisor feedback



CHILD SUPPORT SAFETY IN VIRGINIA

You Have Options!

If you have experienced domestic violence, safety can be a big concern. This is especially true when deciding to apply for child support. If you worry that receiving child support will put you or your child in danger, the Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) wants you to know, there are options to help you safely access support.

This information and associated services are grant-funded pilot activities and only available to customers who have their case currently being managed in the Manassas District Office, as per the Safe Access for Victims' Economic Security grant (HHS-2022-ACF-OCSE-FD-0017, award number 90FD0252). All individuals with child support cases managed by the Manassas District Office are receiving this brochure.

These options are available to individuals with cases managed in Virginia. If you have an interstate case, please check with the agency managing your child support case about what safety options are available to you.



SAFETY RISKS WHEN APPLYING FOR CHILD SUPPORT

To get child support services, we will ask you to give info about yourself, your children, and the other parent. If you have been hurt, abused, or felt controlled, please read the following information carefully and consider any safety concerns.

TANF and Child Support: In Virginia, applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) opens a child support case. However, if you have been hurt, abused, or felt controlled, you may not want child support services. This is known as "good cause" or "good cause not to cooperate with DCSE". You can ask your TANF case advisor for good cause if you believe providing information about you, yourself, or the other parent to DCSE would put you or your children in physical, emotional, or psychological danger.

Law Enforcement: Police can deliver legal documents to an unreachable parent. Notify us if police contact poses a danger.

Paternity: Paternity establishment involves DCSE requesting engagement and requires the other parent to either sign a form acknowledging paternity or undergo a DNA test.

Collection: If the other parent is employed, their employer may be contacted for automatic child support deductions from their paycheck.

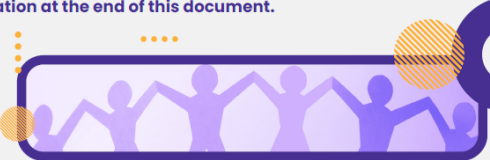
Actions by DCSE: When the other parent misses multiple child support payments, DCSE can:

- Suspend a driver's license and/or professional or recreational licenses (medical, law, fishing, hunting, etc.)
- Withhold money from bank accounts, garnish wages or collect federal/state tax refunds
- Withhold funds from unemployment benefits

Review and Adjustment: Child support orders over three years can be reviewed for potential changes in payment amounts based on life changes.



A DCSE safety navigator can help you better understand the risks and plan for your safety. If it is or ever becomes unsafe to collect child support, contact a DCSE safety navigator using the information at the end of this document.



OPTIONS TO SUPPORT YOUR SAFETY THROUGH THE CHILD SUPPORT PROCESS

Address Protection: Your home and work addresses can be omitted from certain documents. The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) runs Virginia's Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) for mail forwarding. If you'd like information on this program, please ask a DCSE case advisor.

Separate or Virtual Meetings: Schedule in-office appointments separately from the other parent, opt for phone-based, or virtual appointments. If you'd like to do this, please ask a DCSE case advisor.

Court Escort Information: You can learn what resources are available, including how to request an escort for your visits to the courthouse related to your child support case (if available), by asking a DCSE case advisor.

Case Management: You can request a family violence indicator (FVI) be placed on your child support case to protect your personal information from being released on most forms. If you'd like to do this, please ask a DCSE case advisor.

IF YOU NEED TO SPEAK WITH SOMEONE IMMEDIATELY, CALL THE STATEWIDE HOTLINE

If you have experienced domestic violence, help is available. A trained advocate on Virginia's Statewide Sexual and Domestic Violence Hotline can help plan for your safety and get you connected with resources closest to you. **This service is free, confidential, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year.**

Call: 1-800-838-8238
Text: 804-793-9999
Chat Online: www.vadata.org/chat/

DCSE Safety Navigators: A child support safety navigator can discuss risks and provide options to help keep you safe. You can get connected with a safety navigator by emailing us at the address below or by scanning the QR code.

Monday through Friday – 8:30am to 4:30pm EST
Email: DCSEsafe@dss.virginia.gov



DCSE Safety Navigator Self-Referral Form: If it ever becomes or is unsafe to collect child support, contact a child support safety navigator to update your safety status by scanning this QR code.