



Community Corner

PEP Pressure in a Pandemic Environment

*by John Hurst, Georgia Division of
Child Support Services*



At 11:59:59 p.m. on September 30, 2020, Federal Fiscal Year 2020 (FFY 2020) ended. In the child support community, this date marks the end of the reporting period for annual performance. Normally this is a routine event for states; however, not much about FFY 2020 was routine due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

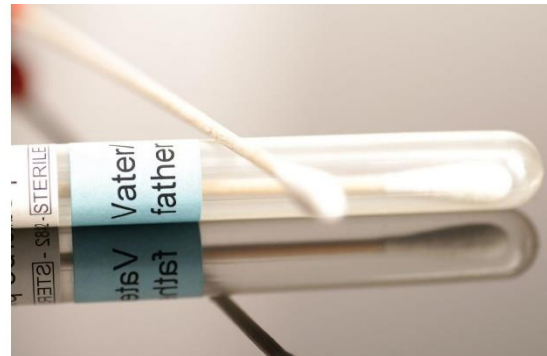
For many states that typically perform well in paternity establishment percentage (PEP), the restrictions to in-person activities brought on by the pandemic resulted in states not reaching the 90% federal benchmark for this performance requirement. In Georgia, we finished FFY 2020 with an 84.11% PEP, which meant we needed to finish FFY 2021 at 86.11% or higher to avoid a 1% to 2% penalty to our TANF block grant.

I had two major challenges awaiting me when I became Georgia's IV-D director in December 2020: the ongoing pandemic and the potential penalty if we did not improve our PEP by at least 2% in FFY 2021. Our agency was very responsive at the onset of the pandemic and had implemented temporary operating procedures that enabled us to continue to provide services while keeping our customers and employees safe. Obtaining the 2% PEP increase as the pandemic continued through FFY 2021 was a daunting target that would require an "all hands on deck" effort from our team.

It was clear that the challenge we had in front of us had captured the attention of our department commissioner and her team. The support we received from them was helpful, as it enabled us to tap into some resources for assistance that we may not have otherwise been able to

access. We received help from the Administrative Office of the Courts, Council of Superior Court Judges, Office of State Administrative Hearings, and Attorney General's Office in spreading the word and putting short-term processes in place to drive paternity.

After a year of intense focus, monitoring, projecting, brainstorming, worrying, and outstanding performance by our team, I am happy to say that as of 11:59:59 p.m. on September 30, 2021, our PEP was 87.95%. This is a 3.84% increase over FFY 2020. This is both good news and bad news. While we improved by more than the required



2% threshold to avoid a potential penalty, we are still under 90% and must go through this process again this year as the pandemic continues.

There may be relief to this pressure soon. On October 19, 2021, the Paternity Establishment Percentage Performance Relief Notice of Proposed Rulemaking was published, which proposed to modify the PEP requirement from the 90% performance threshold to 50% for FFY 2020 and 2021 for a state to avoid a financial penalty. The adoption of this proposed rule would bring much-needed relief to many states that have shared the same experience as my state in the last year.

John Hurst is the Asst. Deputy Commissioner, Georgia Dept. of Human Services. He has more than 28 years in the child support program, serving in various roles. John was appointed to his current position and in this role, he serves as the IV-D Director of the Georgia DCSS program. John earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in Management from Georgia State University.