



STATE OF MICHIGAN
17TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT COURT

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Implementation of Community Engagement Task Force Recommendations

Kent County Friend of the Court's Sixth Annual Report

Introduction

The recommendation of the Friend of the Court Community Engagement Task Force, adopted by the Kent County Board of Commissioners on August 24, 2017 (see attached copy), requires presentation of an annual report to the Chief Judge and the Board of Commissioners.

Since the last annual report in August 2022, issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have largely resolved for the FOC Bench Warrant Department. The three Kent County Deputies assigned to the Kent County Friend of the Court (FOC), have been engaging with parents in the community to make child support payment arrangements and resolve most FOC bench warrants without arrest.

Task Force Recommendations

The following address the Task Force Recommendations.

A. Help parents understand and navigate the child support system early in the process in an effort to prevent cases from evolving to the point of noncompliance.

- 1. Work with KCHD, DHHS, hospitals, and the Prosecuting Attorney's Office to establish and promote a program of early engagement with parents in new paternity cases, including but not limited to DNA testing, custody and parenting time, appropriate support levels, and agency referrals.*

Previous reports detail FOC's work with the Kent County Prosecuting Attorney's Office (PAO) and the Kent County Health Department (KCHD) to develop an early engagement program. This program launched but was discontinued due to lack of parent participation. Parents and parents-to-be were reluctant to participate and initiate a new paternity or child support case. However, FOC and PAO have continued collaborating to provide parents opportunities to address parenting time contemporaneous with the PAO's child support establishment case. In 2023, this collaboration resulted in adding a QR Code on documents sent to parents when their PAO case is initiated. When parents scan the QR Code with their mobile devices, they are taken to a website to sign up for a meeting to discuss parenting time with FOC staff. If the parents reach an agreement regarding parenting time at the FOC, the agreement is provided to the PAO for inclusion in the final judgment on their case.

In addition, every eligible PAO judgment includes language for “facilitated parenting time,” a free FOC service that provides parents an opportunity to meet with FOC staff within one year of their PAO judgment to establish parenting time.

In 2023, the FOC and PAO started a series of “lunch & learns” to explore ways to better collaborate, share information, and improve parent experiences when interacting with both offices. We have covered topics including order processing, interstate child support cases, and custody/parenting time.

2. *Assign specific staff member to contact payers by phone upon entry of an order, again with focus on helping the family navigate the system.*

The FOC’s Early Engagement Program (EEP) continues to reach out to parents with new support orders, prioritizing parents who were defaulted on a PAO judgement. A full-time FOC staff member contacts parents who are ordered to pay support, updates the parent’s information with FOC, and provides information on available FOC services. EEP helps ensure a parent understands their child support order and builds a rapport with parents. In 2022, EEP contacted, or attempted to contact, parents on 1,767 cases (966 YTD through July 2023).

In addition, Kent County FOC was selected by the Michigan Office of Child Support to pilot a new program of child support navigators. These individuals will be placed with community organizations and will be available to provide additional support for parents navigating the system. This pilot program is anticipated to be up and running in 2024.

3. *Provide outreach through community organizations to discuss the resolution of warrants with payers and develop formal partnerships with community organizations like LifeQuest and Strong Fathers, and hold non-traditional and community “office hours,” especially in zip codes with historically high numbers of warrants.*

The FOC conducts outreaches with our Resources for Parents Program (RPP), which was re-launched post-pandemic in June 2022. When fully staffed, RPP consists of two full-time caseworkers and one full-time casework assistant. Since June 2022, FOC/RPP has conducted 43 outreach events with community partners including LifeQuest, Safe Haven Ministries, Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, The Other Way Ministries, Michigan Works, and more.

While parents are in RPP, traditional enforcement such as show cause hearings and bench warrants are deferred. The RPP caseworkers meet with the parents regularly to help parents meet their parenting and financial goals.

- B. *FOC to contract with a community-based entity to conduct home visits with those for whom a show cause hearing is imminent.*

FOC ran a pilot program from February 2019 through January 2020, when FOC engaged the services of an independent contractor to meet with parents in the urban core

who were facing an imminent show cause hearing. This program was discontinued for reasons detailed on the 2020 Annual Report.

C. Use specially-trained FOC deputies to follow up on warrants, prioritizing cases with high arrears owed to the custodial parent (not the State), thereby increasing the funds made available for the children and minimizing the potential for incidental contact and arrest by other law enforcement agencies.

- Establish and follow written training protocol for cultural competency for FOC Deputies*
- Establish and follow training protocol regarding FOC warrant resolution and access to specialized resources*
- Establish benchmarks for number of contact and number of warrants addressed*
- Emphasize resolution of warrant instead of arrest (performance measure of 85% resolution without arrest)*
- Concealed weapons, plain clothes, and unmarked vehicle*
- Strict instructions not to pursue anyone who flees solely on the basis of the FOC warrant*
- Increase cooperation with other law enforcement agencies encountering payers with support warrants so those payers can avoid arrest*

Due to federal child support distribution guidelines, most money collected by FOC is distributed to families first, so prioritizing cases with arrears owed to the custodial parent has proven unnecessary.

Three deputies are currently assigned to FOC. These deputies are training through the Kent County Sheriff's Department in community policing, diversity, cultural awareness, and de-escalation. Each deputy is required to complete the cultural intelligence (CQ) training provided by Kent County. In addition, each deputy is trained on FOC services, practices, and policies. The FOC training ensures each deputy understands how support orders are entered and modified and whether a case is appropriate for enforcement. The deputies are trained in applicable child support law and understand the primary inquiry for enforcement is a parent's ability to pay, and the deputies conduct interviews with parents to ascertain same. Being well acquainted with FOC services, the deputies can identify helpful services for parents including support review requests, referral to the Resources for Parents Program, appointments with FOC staff, parenting time enforcement, and mediation services.

FOC works to ensure deputies appear non-threatening, and the deputies have strict instructions not to pursue any parent who flees solely because of a FOC warrant. The FOC deputies continue to work in the community in plain clothes, with unmarked vehicles, and are not visibly armed.

The FOC deputies were successful again in 2022 in resolving most FOC warrants without arrest. The deputies will often have multiple contacts with a parent to make

arrangements to pay support and dismiss a warrant. The deputies also continue to receive contact from individuals seeking their assistance resolving a warrant based on “word of mouth.” The community approach, focused on contacts and resolution, helps foster a positive relationship between FOC (and KCSD) and parents in the community.

Each year, the FOC deputies exceed the performance measure of resolving 85% of FOC warrants without arrest. In 2022, the deputies resolved 99% of FOC warrants without arrest.

The FOC deputies continue to collect significant support:

2017	\$461,820.84	2021	\$627,179.03
2018	\$577,504.90	2022	\$761,343.54
2019	\$815,912.16	2023 (YTD)	\$476,789.33
2020	\$408,379.33		

The FOC deputies continue to encourage contact from the Kent County Sheriff Road Patrol and other law enforcement agencies when someone is stopped on a child support warrant with no other charges/warrants. This communication enables law enforcement to resolve the warrant without arrest.

D. In response to public comment:

1. Expand capacity for credit card payments at all phases of the enforcement process.

FOC started processing credit card payments in 2016, and credit card payments have steadily increased since:

2016 (Aug—Dec)	\$16,959.34	2020	\$615,450.29
2017	\$263,510.20	2021	\$993,811.00
2018	\$497,479.68	2022	\$1,516,355.88
2019	\$580,313.16		

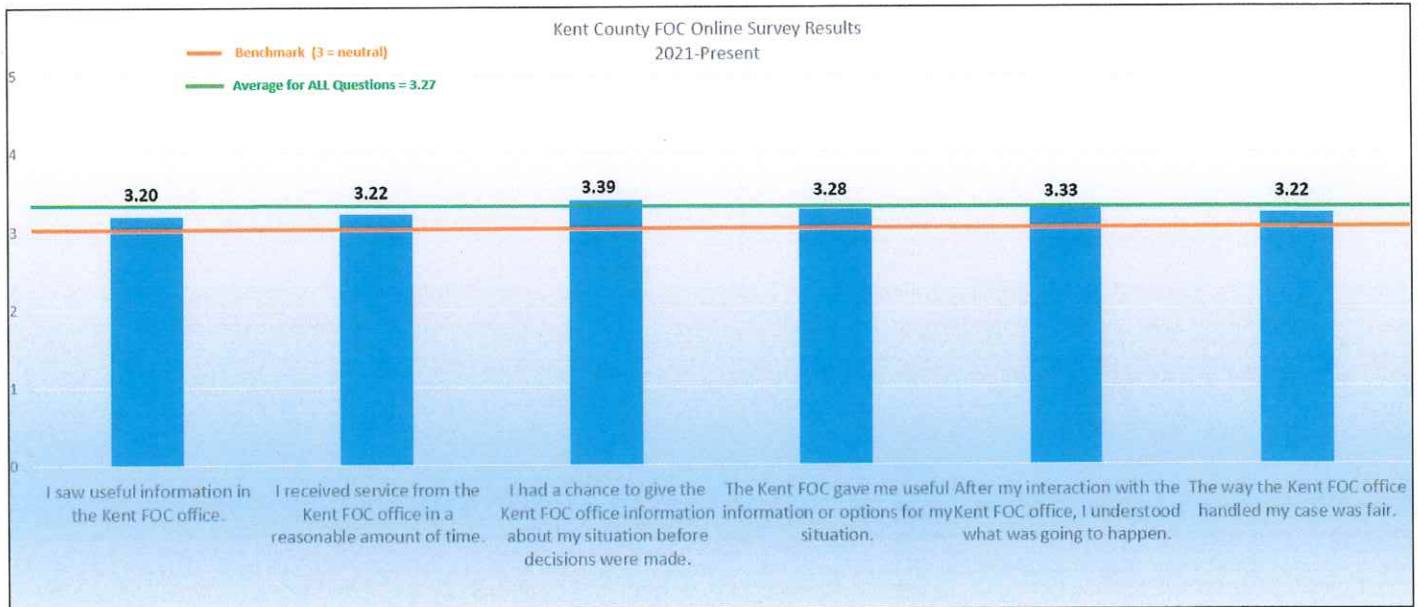
2. Improve parent communication with FOC.

- *Review documents for clarity/plain English*
- *Continue to improve call wait time*

FOC frequently reviews written material mailed to parents, available in the FOC lobby, and available on the internet (accesskent.com). FOC has increased the use of email by adding specialized email addresses for certain services and utilizing Liquid Files, a secure electronic document exchange platform. Through Liquid Files, parents can retrieve and view documents faster than traditional email, and can do so on their mobile

devices. In 2022, FOC received 60,071 telephone calls and 116,182 letters, faxes and emails.

FOC has an ongoing customer service survey available on our website, which was started in 2021. Aggregate results below:



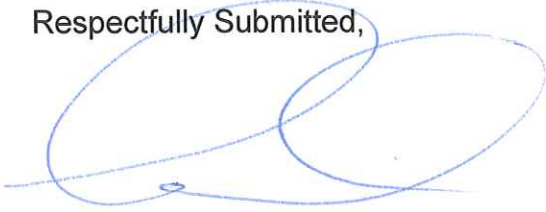
E. *To ensure the ongoing public accountability of the FOC and provide a regular opportunity for public comment on FOC matters, the Board of Commissioners is to formally add the following duties to the Friend of the Court's Citizen Advisory Committee:*

- 1. Review performance measures on customer service and efficacy of enforcement program*
- 2. Review grievances related to support orders and enforcement programs/practices*
- 3. Presentation of annual report to Chief Judge and Board of Commissioners*

The FOC Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) holds its regular meetings six times per year, reviews all FOC grievances, provides opportunity for public comment, and is provided information and input opportunities regarding FOC performance, practices, and initiatives. In 2022, FOC received, and the FOC CAC reviewed, 14 grievances. The FOC CAC agreed with all FOC responses to the grievances submitted in 2022.

The public can also comment during the annual statutory review, the next of which will be in July 2024. Notice for the review is posted on our website and published in The Grand Rapids Press, with invitation to submit written comments to the Chief Judge.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a horizontal line at the bottom.

Traci Schenkel
Kent County Friend of the Court

DATE: 8-16-23