



**KEN PAXTON**  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

## **Written Testimony of Ruth Thornton**

Director, Child Support Division & Title IV-D Director  
Office of the Attorney General of Texas  
Before the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Work and Welfare

### **I. Introduction and Purpose**

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee - thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I serve as the Title IV-D Director for the State of Texas and Director of the Child Support Division within the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) under Attorney General Ken Paxton. Under Ken Paxton's visionary leadership, the Texas Child Support Division has not only reached new heights but has also been positioned for lasting success. His steadfast support of the program has empowered our staff and leaders to innovate, strengthen our systems, and deliver better outcomes for families across the state.

Texas operates the largest child support program in the nation, serving roughly 1.5 million cases, reaching more than 1.6 million children, and collecting and disbursing approximately \$4.5 billion every year on behalf of families. The program's scale means that the lessons we learn in Texas have implications for other states, both in terms of operational realities and policy design. My testimony today will explain: first, how the child support program has evolved nationally over the last 30 years, using Texas data to illustrate those trends and challenges; and second, how Texas is adapting in practice, concluding with recommendations for federal partnership that would strengthen outcomes for children nationwide.

### **II. National and Texas Data: The Program's 30-Year Evolution**

#### *Scale and Reach*

Over the past three decades, the Title IV-D program has grown into one of the most consequential economic stability programs for children in the United States. Nationally, the program now serves approximately 12 million children and collects over \$30 billion annually, with the vast majority of those dollars reaching families directly rather than being retained by government. This scale is

significant not only because of the number of children served but because of the program's ability to deliver predictable, court-ordered support that helps households plan, avoid crises, and meet everyday needs.

Texas reflects and amplifies these national dynamics. We currently manage about 1.5 million active cases and serve more than 1.6 million children, meaning the child support program touches the lives of nearly one in four Texas children. Over roughly two decades, annual collections more than doubled from approximately \$1.9 billion in 2005 to \$4.5 billion in recent years. This growth has occurred even as we have pursued improvements in technology, service delivery, and customer experience. The program today operates at a scale and complexity fundamentally different from the environment in which Title IV-D was originally designed, and as the program has matured, expectations have rightly increased. Our systems, tools, and strategies must keep pace.

#### *Caseload Composition: From Cost Recovery to Cost Avoidance*

An essential part of the program's evolution has been the changing composition of the caseload. When the Title IV-D program was established, a core objective was cost recovery - recouping public assistance expenditures, especially cash assistance under what is now the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. That reality has changed markedly. Nationally, only about 7 percent of cases involve current TANF assistance, and in FY2024 about 97 percent of child support collections were distributed to families rather than retained for government cost recovery.

Texas mirrors this shift. While we continue to serve families receiving public assistance, current TANF cases now represent a very small share of our caseload - approximately 0.36 percent - with a sustained decline in assistance-linked cases and growth in Medicaid-only and never-assistance cases. As that shift has unfolded, the fiscal value of child support has increasingly moved from cost recovery (after a family's receipt of public assistance) toward cost avoidance, where consistent child support payments reduce the likelihood that families will need to rely on TANF, Medicaid, or other public benefits in the future. In that sense, an effective, efficient child support program is proactively fiscally conservative: by stabilizing income, it helps parents bridge employment gaps, manage expenses, and ensure basic needs are met, which ultimately lowers future public assistance outlays and supports family self-sufficiency.

#### *Demographic and Family Structure Changes*

Family structures have also evolved in ways that shape how child support services must be delivered. In FFY2025, approximately 72 percent of children in the Texas IV-D caseload were born out of wedlock. This figure reflects long-term demographic shifts seen across the country. It underscores the centrality of early, accurate establishment of legal parentage, often through voluntary acknowledgments at birth. In Texas, we facilitated 133,259 paternity acknowledgments in the most recent reporting year, which helps families access benefits such as Social Security and

veterans' benefits, reduces future litigation cost and complexity, and grounds child support orders in clear legal relationships.

Modern cases frequently involve complex family dynamics, including multiple households, shared custody, intermittent employment, and, at times, family violence and safety concerns. These circumstances require approaches that are individualized and flexible, rather than one-size-fits-all enforcement. They also require effective coordination with courts, community partners, other state and federal programs, and safety-focused services so that compliance is achievable and sustainable.

### *Labor Market Shifts and Enforcement*

Even as the program has adapted to family and caseload changes, enforcement remains a core pillar of child support administration. Income withholding, where an employer deducts support from wages, continues to be the single most effective tool available, accounting for roughly 70 percent of all collections nationally. The reliability of income withholding is straightforward: when parents are engaged in W-2 employment, withholding removes friction, reduces missed payments, and increases consistency without constant court intervention. In that regard, income withholding can be seen as much as a service provided to paying parents as it is an enforcement tool.

However, the structure of work has changed. Growth in independent contracting and gig work reduces the reliability of single employer- wage withholding as a sole strategy. Income is more dispersed and sometimes less visible in traditional reporting systems, making timely data and flexible enforcement tools essential. Texas has responded by extending new hire reporting and wage withholding requirements to cover independent contractors, but these adaptations require ongoing innovation. Federal help is needed to create systems that share data with gig platforms and other nontraditional payers, so states can locate income and enforce child support even when there is no standard employer.

### *Technology Modernization and Customer Experience*

The effectiveness of the child support program is inseparable from its technology. Across the country, more than 30 states are currently in some phase of child support systems modernization, reflecting a shared reality: many core IV-D systems were built decades ago, are large and deeply integrated, and rely on technologies that are increasingly difficult to maintain. Modernizing these systems is neither quick nor inexpensive. It is a complex, multi-year effort that touches every aspect of program operations from case management and financial processing to enforcement, service delivery, and reporting.

While there are many functional elements of child support programs that are common nationwide, there is no one-size-fits-all modernization solution. The design and implementation of a system must reflect each state's laws, court processes, program structure, and administrative model. As a result, states often arrive at different technical and operational approaches, even when solving

similar problems. To help manage this complexity, states actively collaborate through national forums and peer networks to share lessons learned, best practices, and cautionary insights. That collaboration helps smooth the learning curve and reduce avoidable costs, but it does not eliminate the underlying challenges associated with large-scale technology projects of this nature.

Historically, states followed a cycle in which a system was built, used for decades, and eventually replaced through a single large modernization initiative. As states move to modern technology stacks, there is a growing recognition that this model is neither sustainable nor desirable. The long-term goal is not simply to replace aging systems, but to transition toward more flexible, modular platforms that support iterative improvement, allowing programs to adapt continuously to policy changes, evolving customer expectations, and new opportunities for automation and integration.

Texas's experience reflects this broader national context. The state's former mainframe case management and financial system, deployed in 1997, was a stable and secure platform that served the program well for many years. Over time, however, it constrained process improvement, limited integration with modern tools, and depended on technical skillsets that are no longer widely taught or readily available in the labor market. In that environment, modernization was not discretionary; it was essential to maintaining program effectiveness and long-term viability.

### **III. How Texas Is Adapting: Accountability, Employment, Parenting Time, Safety, and Efficiency**

The core mission of the child support program has not changed: to establish, enforce, and modify child support obligations so that children receive consistent, reliable support from both parents. In Texas, we approach this mission with a clear expectation of personal accountability. Every parent has a responsibility to support their child. When a parent has the ability to pay and does not, enforcement, including income withholding, liens, license suspension, and, when warranted, contempt, remains appropriate and necessary. When a parent lacks the ability to pay, accountability does not disappear; it shifts to active engagement in services that address the barriers to payment. This distinction preserves fairness, strengthens compliance, and maintains the credibility of enforcement.

#### *Fatherhood Engagement and Education*

Texas recognizes fathers as essential partners in their children's lives and has invested in initiatives that promote engagement, strengthen families, and improve child support outcomes.

Through the Leading Fatherhood Initiatives for Texas collaborative, co-founded with Texas Health and Human Services in 2021, Texas advances coordinated, father-focused programs statewide. Key efforts include the Texas Fatherhood Summit and a statewide webinar series for service providers.

Texas also delivers father-focused education through partnerships such as the Nurse Family Partnership, which has demonstrated measurable knowledge gains among participating fathers.

In addition, Texas supports community-based fatherhood programs and engages the judiciary through trainings that emphasize the importance of father involvement. Internally, the Fathers in Focus training equips staff to engage fathers effectively and reduce barriers to participation.

Texas further supports families by providing required notices, educational materials, and practical tools to help fathers understand their rights, responsibilities, and parenting roles.

#### *Employment-Linked Accountability: NCP Choices*

One of the most significant evolutions in Texas has been the development and expansion of NCP Choices, a court-ordered employment program that integrates child support enforcement with workforce services for unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents. The premise is simple: parents who cannot pay must take concrete steps to become able to pay, and courts should have the authority to require that engagement. Participation is ordered by IV-D courts, delivered in partnership with the Texas Workforce Commission and local Workforce Development Boards, and structured with clear expectations and consequences. Parents are required to engage in job search activities, training, and employment retention efforts. Failure to comply with program requirements can result in removal from the program and renewed enforcement; failure to pay support when able remains subject to traditional remedies.

An independent evaluation conducted by the University of Texas Ray Marshall Center found notable and durable gains. Compared with similarly situated nonparticipants, NCP Choices parents paid support more often, paid more per month, and paid more consistently, with improvements persisting two to three years after participation. Employment outcomes were stronger, and participants were less likely to file unemployment claims. The evaluation also documented positive effects on custodial households, which were less likely to receive TANF following noncustodial parent participation. These results illustrate that accountability is most effective when paired with ability: employment outcomes are child support outcomes, and early, targeted interventions reduce future public assistance reliance while increasing collections.

Operationally, the program now covers the majority of the Texas population and has produced collections that far exceed program costs annually, supported through a combination of TANF funds and federally approved reinvestment of child support incentive payments. As Texas continues to refine the model, we maintain two parallel expectations: compliance with program participation requirements (to build employment capacity) and compliance with the court-ordered obligation (to meet the child's needs). Keeping these expectations distinct, while enforcing both, avoids conflating unwillingness with inability and preserves fairness.

#### *Parenting Time and the Access & Visitation (A&V) Program*

Texas has long recognized that parents contribute to their children's well-being in ways that extend beyond financial support. Research consistently shows that children experience better outcomes

when they have stable, meaningful relationships with both parents, including emotional support, consistency, and involvement in daily life. Reflecting this understanding, Texas is one of only a handful of states that routinely establishes parenting time provisions at the same time a child support order is created. The Texas Standard Possession Order (SPO), codified in 1989 and incorporated into parenting time orders statewide, provides a predictable framework that helps parents understand when children will be with them, how exchanges occur, and what responsibilities each parent holds. In many other states, parents seeking to establish parenting time must navigate a separate legal process, often at additional cost and complexity. That separation can unintentionally signal to noncustodial parents that financial support is the sole priority, rather than one component of an ongoing parental role. By contrast, Texas's integrated approach reinforces that financial responsibility and active parenting are both essential to family stability, reducing conflict and supporting compliance with child support obligations.

The federally-funded Access & Visitation (A&V) Grant program provides practical services that help families follow and maintain parenting time arrangements. The A&V program's purpose is to increase noncustodial parents' access to and time with their children. In Texas, we use this grant to prioritize services for noncustodial parents in the IV-D program; approximately 90 percent of A&V customers have an active IV-D case, and most are referred by the OAG-CSD.

In FFY2025, Texas received \$953,374 in A&V federal funds and provided a \$120,000 state-funded match (exclusive of in-kind support). With those dollars, we served 26,531 customers statewide through three primary channels. The A&V Hotline, staffed part-time Monday through Friday from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., handled 23,356 calls in FFY2025, offering parents immediate guidance on understanding and navigating their orders. Our contracts with Domestic Relations Offices (DROs) in Bexar, El Paso, Harris, and Tarrant counties delivered direct services to 1,221 customers, including education on orders, mediation of co-parenting disputes, and assistance with modification and enforcement of parenting time. Through POLL (Parenting Order Legal Line) LiveChat, provided in partnership with the Texas Supreme Court, the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, and the Texas Legal Services Center, nearly 2,000 parents received legal information from family-law attorneys in FFY2025. Outreach tools remain essential: we distributed 50,000 My Sticker Calendars to help parents and children manage schedules, and our txaccess.org website received 301,138 visits, indicating sustained demand for trusted, accessible guidance.

Like many formula-funded grants, A&V allocations fluctuate over time. Across recent award cycles, Texas's awards remained fairly static at slightly more than \$900,000. While we maximize impact within available funds, temporary staffing rates have risen approximately 70.5 percent over five years, increasing operational costs for services like the hotline and reducing dollars available for additional or expanded offerings. At the same time, Texas's population growth and the share of single-parent households point to continued increases in demand for parenting time support. The result is a widening gap between need and funding, even as A&V demonstrates clear value in helping parents understand and follow their orders.

It is important to note that while the child support program can establish parenting time provisions, enforcement of visitation generally falls outside IV-D authority. A&V helps bridge this gap by delivering practical, accessible services that make compliance more likely. Yet federal funding for A&V remains modest relative to child support enforcement funding, which can unintentionally signal to families that parenting time is a lesser priority. Texas's experience suggests that right-sizing A&V funding would improve compliance, reduce disputes that spill into child support enforcement, and strengthen family stability.

### *Safety-Focused and Family-Centered Innovations*

Texas complements enforcement and parenting time services with family-centered, safety-focused initiatives that support trust, access, and voluntary compliance. The Texas Parenting and Paternity Awareness (PAPA) curriculum, delivered statewide, helps young people understand responsibilities and practical parenting skills, building a foundation for future compliance and increasing the likelihood that young adults will choose to sequence parenthood after completing their education, establishing a career, and within the context of marriage. We have invested in family violence initiatives, including the Get Child Support Safely resource suite, which provide safety planning and trauma-informed guidance so survivors can engage the child support system without elevated risk. These efforts are not peripheral; they improve outcomes by reducing barriers, clarifying expectations, and increasing confidence that the system is both accessible and fair.

### *Modern Technology*

In 2025, Texas implemented a modern case management and financial platform, retired its legacy mainframe, and entered a stabilization phase that marks a new starting point for continuous improvement. Texas approached modernization with the understanding that large, complex public systems cannot be fully designed years in advance and then delivered unchanged. Rather than relying on static requirements developed long before development begins, Texas adopted an agile delivery model in which requirements are defined immediately prior to development and informed directly by state staff, including frontline users and designated product owners embedded in program operations. This approach ensures the system reflects how work is actually performed and can adapt as policy, technology, and operational realities evolve.

Ultimately, the measure of a technology modernization effort is not whether a system goes live, but whether it enables the program to do its job better and faster, with higher quality and greater reliability. Success is reflected in outcomes that matter to customers and staff alike: quicker service delivery, improved accuracy, clearer communication, and an ongoing ability to innovate and improve as needs change.

With a modern platform in place, Texas is now positioned to apply systems thinking to how the child support program measures performance and improves service delivery. For the first time, the

program has the data, flexibility, and integration capability needed to move beyond siloed metrics and toward a more holistic view of efficiency, quality, and reliability across the end-to-end customer experience. This creates opportunities to identify bottlenecks, reduce rework, improve timeliness, and strengthen consistency in outcomes for families.

#### *Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness*

Behind all of our program services is a commitment to stewardship and efficiency. Texas remains among the most cost-effective child support programs in the nation, collecting nearly \$10 for every \$1 spent on the program (FFY2025). The State Disbursement Unit processes high-volume payments reliably, and digital services, such as real-time customer chat, virtual court and lobbies, and improved online portals, allow parents to access information and make payments without in-person barriers. The modernization of our core systems enables faster implementation of policy changes, better data quality, and clearer communications, which translate into improved experiences for families and more effective casework for staff.

#### **IV. Recommendations for Federal Partnership**

One of the strengths of the national child support program is the federal-state partnership at its foundation. Texas's experience suggests several practical ways Congress and federal partners can help states sustain and accelerate progress.

#### *Modernize Employer and Independent Contractor Reporting*

Because income withholding remains the backbone of enforcement, states need timely, accurate employer data and practical ways to identify and withhold from nontraditional income sources. Congress can support standardized reporting across states, including mechanisms for platform-based income and independent contractors. Updated guidance and requirements for new-hire reporting, data matching, and cross-state coordination would strengthen wage withholding where it works best and extend it where traditional employer relationships do not exist.

#### *Expand and Right-Size Parenting Time Support (Access & Visitation)*

Parenting time services contribute meaningfully to compliance and family stability, yet A&V funding remains modest and subject to formula-driven declines that do not reflect caseload size, demand, or inflationary cost pressures (e.g., rising staffing rates). Congress can increase A&V appropriations, update the allocation formula, and authorize greater flexibility to braid A&V services with IV-D activities such as education, mediation, and compliance supports while maintaining statutory boundaries around enforcement.



### *Support Agile Technology Modernization*

Administrative processes designed for fixed-requirement projects can become mismatched with large, complex builds that benefit from agile, incremental delivery. Continued federal efforts to modernize administrative and oversight processes such as procurement and system certification to encourage and support agile project delivery methods will improve the success rate and reduce costs associated with prolonged system modernization projects.

### *Encourage State-Led Innovation with Appropriate Oversight*

To the extent federal partners can allow states the flexibility to innovate while providing clear guardrails and oversight, states are better positioned to develop effective, tailored solutions. Overly prescriptive requirements, tying funding to numerous conditions, or imposing top-down policy changes can make innovation impractical and reduce the impact of successful state-led approaches and create a one-size-fits-all regulatory environment that does not reflect the realities of child support populations and state program needs. Encouragement of innovation should be balanced with the program's core enforcement responsibilities to ensure families continue to receive the support they are owed. Focusing on outcomes tied to these core functions, including timely, consistent, clear, safe, and fair results for families, while supporting state-led innovation, ensures the program continues to evolve efficiently and effectively.

### *Preserve Enforcement Authority While Encouraging Precision*

Strong enforcement tools like income withholding, tax intercepts, liens, license suspension, and contempt must remain available, but enforcement is most effective when applied precisely, fairly, and driven by the ultimate goal of parental support. Federal policy can encourage accountability by supporting employment-linked interventions, promoting timely modification when circumstances change, and continuously evaluating the effectiveness of current enforcement tools.

## **V. Conclusion**

Child support operates at the intersection of law, economics, technology, and family life. Over thirty years, the program has grown in scale, matured in its service to diverse families, and adapted to labor market and technological change. What has not changed is the core mission: children need consistent, reliable support from both parents, and the program must hold parents accountable in ways that are firm, fair, and effective.

Texas's experience demonstrates that strong enforcement, modern systems, employment-linked accountability, and family-centered supports, including robust parenting time services, work together to produce durable compliance and reduce future reliance on public assistance. With continued federal partnership, grounded in practical flexibility, updated measures, and targeted

investments, states can accelerate this progress and deliver better outcomes for millions of children nationwide.

Finally, I would be remiss not to take this opportunity to recognize the incredible staff and attorneys of the Texas Office of the Attorney General - Child Support Division. Their commitment to excellence and unwavering focus on families are what make our program successful. They are the heart and soul of this work, and I am proud to serve alongside them.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to share our perspective and highlight the important work of the child support program. We are rightfully proud of our achievements and the tangible difference our work makes in the lives of children and families. At the same time, we recognize that until every child consistently receives the support they need and deserve, there is more work to be done. We remain committed to disciplined stewardship, continuous improvement, and outcomes that families experience directly: timeliness, consistency, clarity, safety, and fairness. We look forward to working collaboratively with Congress, our federal partners, and the national child support community to advance improvements that strengthen support for the families we serve.