

# BICS

THE BEHAVIORAL  
INTERVENTIONS  
FOR CHILD SUPPORT  
SERVICES PROJECT

## STREAMLINE OR SPECIALIZE

# Increasing Child Support Order Modification Review Completion in Ohio

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The Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) project aims to improve federally funded child support services by increasing program efficiency, developing interventions informed by behavioral science, and building a culture of rapid-cycle evaluation. MDRC led technical assistance for the BICS team, partnering with MEF Associates and the Center for Policy Research. The BICS project is funded and managed by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grantees are California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. The evaluation contract is overseen by the State of Washington's Division of Child Support in the Department of Social and Health Services.

**cabs**  at mdrc

### OVERVIEW

State child support programs secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. Establishing paternity, establishing and enforcing orders, and collecting and distributing payments are core child support program functions. An essential part of the child support process is setting order amounts that match the parents' financial situations, which can change over time. Parents may request to have their child support orders modified under certain conditions — for example, if there has been a substantial change in one or both parents' circumstances or if the child support order has not been reviewed in three years.

In Ohio, the process to modify a child support order has two stages. First, one of the parents on the order must demonstrate that he or she is eligible to apply for a modification review. Second, if the parent is found eligible to apply, he or she is asked to provide relevant financial information so that child support staff can conduct the review and determine whether the order should be modified. Both of these stages require parents to complete and submit paperwork to the child support agency. The full process typically takes more than 100 days, and many requests drop out without a completed review.

In Cuyahoga County (which includes Cleveland) and Franklin County (which includes Columbus), the BICS team worked with local child support staff to simplify this process. They developed and evaluated interventions based on behavioral science that were designed to make it more likely for parents and staff members to complete the steps of the review process so that parents could receive decisions. Each county ran two separate but related tests. In both counties, Test 1 focused on the first stage of the modification process (eligibility for a modification review) and Test 2 focused on the second stage (reviewing the order for possible modification). Test 2 was delivered *after* the eligibility stage in both counties, so it could only affect outcomes later in the process.

In Cuyahoga County:

- Test 1 eliminated the eligibility stage for many parents, making their orders eligible for a modification review by default.
- Test 2 provided parents with greatly simplified modification paperwork, called an affidavit, along with reminders to complete the paperwork.

In Franklin County:

- Test 1 sent parents a simplified modification application package with a redesigned double-sided form and a one-page fact sheet that included language to encourage parents to complete the form.
- Test 2 provided a simplified modification affidavit and also assigned cases to a staff unit dedicated to modifications. Those specially trained staff members provided individually tailored outreach and support to parents in a manner informed by behavioral science and designed to help them complete their modification requests.

Because the materials and approaches were different in each county, each county's tests were evaluated separately using a random assignment research design. Although the counties' tests had different approaches, the outcomes used to evaluate Test 1 and Test 2 were the same in each county.

Test 1 Outcomes:

- Percentage of requests with modification reviews scheduled (after parents returned paperwork from the modification application package)
- Percentage with completed modification application package returned
- Percentage completing the modification review process

Test 2 Outcomes:

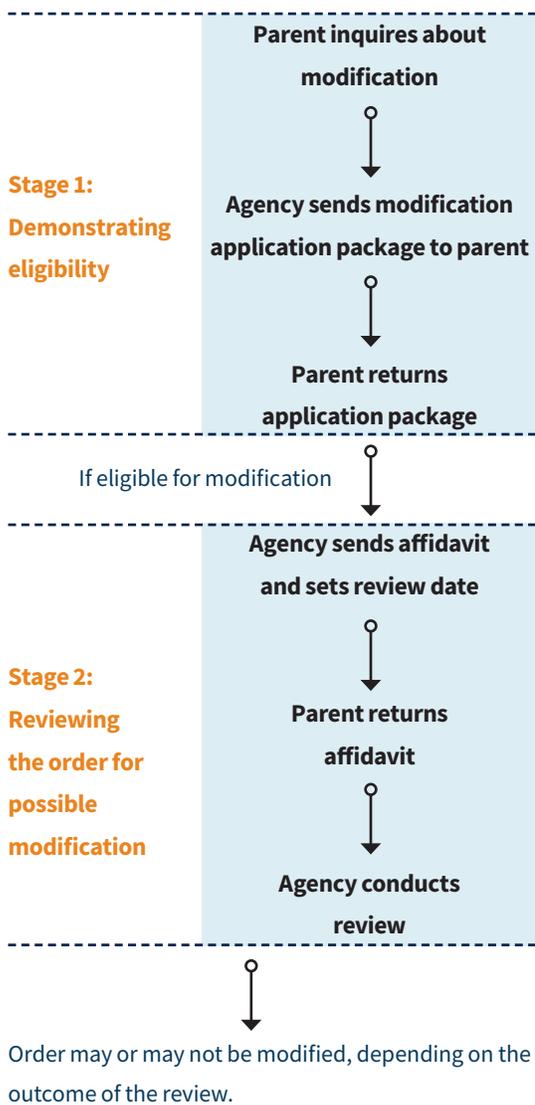
- Percentage with completed affidavit paperwork returned
- Percentage completing the modification review process

Cuyahoga County's Test 1 resulted in a large increase in the percentage of modification requests that had application packages returned and that completed modification reviews. Test 2 had minimal effects on the percentage of applications that returned affidavit paperwork or completed modification reviews.

In Franklin County, Test 1 had few effects on the percentage of modification requests that had reviews scheduled, returned affidavit paperwork, or completed modification reviews, but Test 2 resulted in substantial increases in paperwork returned and reviews finished.

Overall, the Ohio BICS tests demonstrate that streamlining the administrative process — by eliminating an entire stage — led to a large improvement in the targeted outcomes. Combining a shorter form with dedicated, specialized staffing support for parents also affected these outcomes. In contrast, interventions that only simplified paperwork and sent reminders did not appear to achieve meaningful effects.

**Figure 1.**  
**Ohio's Existing Modification Process**



The sections that follow provide more background on the existing process; the design, results, and implementation of the interventions by county; and lessons for the child support community.

## THE EXISTING PROCESS

There are two stages in the order modification process in Ohio. These stages are also described in Figure 1.

**STAGE 1 - DEMONSTRATING ELIGIBILITY:** Parents who are interested in having their orders reviewed for a possible modification must fill out a one-page, double-sided form and submit a modification application package with documents proving that they qualify for this review. The most common reasons to qualify are (1) that the income of either or both parents has changed by at least 30 percent or (2) that an order has not been reviewed in the last 36 months. Parents may obtain the modification application forms online, from their caseworkers, or from other front-line staff members at the child support agency. Agency staff members review the modification application package and determine whether an order is eligible for a modification review. If an order is found to be eligible, a review is scheduled, as described in Stage 2.

**STAGE 2 - REVIEWING THE ORDER:** The agency sets a date for the review and mails both parents associated with the order a complex affidavit packet (9 pages in Cuyahoga County and 10 pages in Franklin County). The county's packet instructs parents to provide updated financial and personal information. The county's mailings are followed by a 6-page affidavit packet sent by the state. Parents have 45 days to complete and return either or both of the affidavit

packets.<sup>1</sup> In Cuyahoga County, staff members send parents a reminder letter 10 days before the review deadline. In Franklin County there is no expectation that staff members provide reminders, although some may do so on their own. If the parent who initiated the review returns the packet by the 45-day mark, the agency conducts the modification review.<sup>2</sup> Staff members review the information to determine whether the order should be modified, and if so, calculate a new order. This review is a “desk review,” meaning that the parents are not present when the agency decides on the modification.

Data from the two counties show that they receive more than 5,000 applications for modification reviews each year. The process generally takes more than three months from the submission of the application to the completion of the review. In recent years, these counties have completed modification reviews for about 55 percent of these applications on average. Cuyahoga County completes around 3,500 reviews annually, while Franklin County completes about 2,500 reviews. There are three reasons that modification requests may not proceed through the full administrative process: Modification applications can be denied (if the requesting parent fails to demonstrate eligibility for a modification of the order) or dismissed (if the required information is not submitted). Finally, the requesting parent can terminate the request at any time before the review date.

Cuyahoga and Franklin Counties had several reasons for trying to improve the modification process. Reviews help counties ensure that parents’ obligations reflect their current statuses. As years pass after a child support order is established, one or both parents may experience major changes in their incomes and employment. In instances where a parent ordered to pay child support has experienced a decrease in income, there is evidence that a “right-sized” order will make the parent more likely to pay.<sup>3</sup> If the paying parent’s income has increased, the upward modification contributes to the financial stability of the household receiving support. The counties also hoped that right-sizing child support orders would lead to increases in collection rates and payment amounts.

## INTERVENTION DESIGN, RESULTS, AND IMPLEMENTATION

After Cuyahoga and Franklin Counties identified their goal — increasing the percentage of initial modification requests that complete the modification process — the BICS team and the county agencies engaged in a process called “behavioral diagnosis and design” to develop the interventions. As part of this process, the

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<sup>1</sup> Staff members in both counties said that they accept either the county or state packet.

<sup>2</sup> The agency may conduct a review with only the requesting parent’s financial information. It may get the other parent’s information from state and federal databases.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Takayesu, *How Do Child Support Order Amounts Affect Payments and Compliance?* (Santa Ana, CA: Orange County Department of Child Support Services Research Unit, 2011).

team interviewed staff members and parents, observed program activities, and analyzed data in order to map out the steps in the modification review process and identify “behavioral bottlenecks.” These bottlenecks are points where parents or staff members may face psychological and behavioral tendencies that get in the way of completing the modification review process. The interventions focused on addressing the following bottlenecks:

- The process is slow and opaque, requiring parents to complete multiple steps with little explanation of those steps. Parents also receive both state and county forms, which creates additional complexity and cognitive load.<sup>4</sup> The process requires two rounds of paperwork without offering parents a clear roadmap of the process. As a result, parents do not understand why two rounds are required and are confused when they receive a second, longer form to fill out.
- The forms are complex, take a long time to complete, and require a lot of supporting documentation.
- Parents may plan to complete the forms but procrastinate, forget, or otherwise struggle to follow through on their intentions.

To address these bottlenecks, the team developed four interventions: Cuyahoga Test 1 and Test 2 and Franklin Test 1 and Test 2. In both counties, Test 1 was designed to target the first stage of the process, determining eligibility for a modification review, and Test 2 was designed to target the second stage, the actual review. In addition to measuring the interventions’ effects on important outcomes, each test included an implementation analysis that employs quantitative data and interviews with staff members, and a cost analysis based on information provided by the counties.<sup>5</sup> Each county’s tests, results, and implementation and cost findings are described below.

### **Cuyahoga County: Tests**

Cuyahoga County’s tests were implemented from June 15, 2016 through January 31, 2017, with 3,267 initial modification requests included in Test 1 and 3,895 modification requests that had been scheduled for reviews included in Test 2.

**TEST 1:** Cuyahoga County eliminated the first step in the modification process for parents whose eligibility for a modification could be determined using existing

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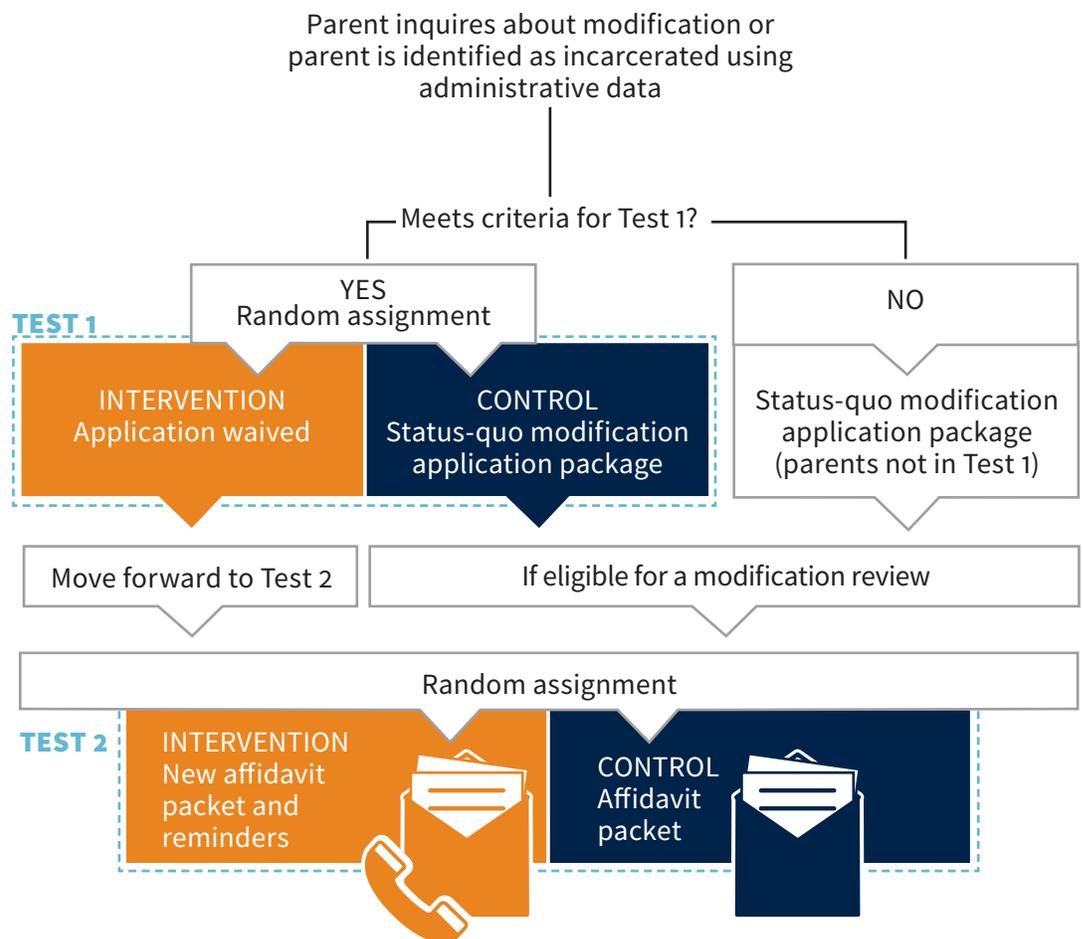
<sup>4</sup> Cognitive load is the effort associated with a specific topic. Cognitive loads rise for even mundane tasks when a person is stressed (for example, by poverty) or has many things to do.

<sup>5</sup> Administrative data from Franklin and Cuyahoga Counties and the state office were used for the impact analysis. The implementation findings on outreach were calculated using data provided by Cuyahoga County and interviews with both staff members and sample members. Cost findings were based on administrative reports from the county and interviews with county staff members.

administrative data. Essentially, Cuyahoga created a default for parents meeting certain criteria: (1) they were incarcerated or (2) they were inquiring about modifying orders that had not received modification reviews in the previous 36 months.<sup>6</sup> In behavioral science, creating default situations — and the overall simplification of steps — are considered particularly effective ways to influence behavior.

To determine the impact of Test 1, parents who met either of the two criteria listed above were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or the control group (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> The staff moved intervention group requests forward to the

**Figure 2. Cuyahoga County Random Assignment**



**6** Parents who had not had a modification in 36 months were identified for the study and randomly assigned when they inquired about the modification process, but an inquiry was not required for incarcerated parents. Incarcerated parents were identified and randomly assigned from a list developed from administrative data. Incarcerated parents assigned to the intervention group were immediately given a random assignment for Test 2. Incarcerated parents in the control group for Test 1 were mailed the control group modification application package.

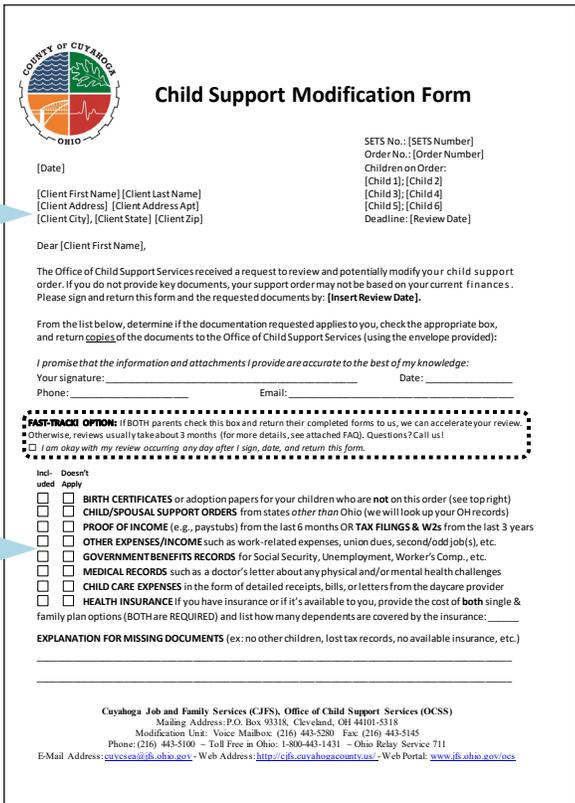
**7** Parents who did not meet either of the study criteria were not included in Test 1 and went through the normal process.

second stage of the modification process without requiring applications from parents. This intervention streamlined the eligibility-determination process, removing steps and reducing the time needed to complete the process. In addition, it made the process consistent with many parents' belief that requesting an order modification would only require submitting paperwork once. All parents in the control group had to complete the business-as-usual process of submitting the modification application package so that the staff could determine whether or not they were eligible for a review.

**TEST 2:** Cuyahoga County's second test consisted of a simplified affidavit packet combined with reminders. Additionally, the state suppressed the state affidavit for parents in the intervention group, so only one affidavit was sent to parents. As shown in Figure 2, all modification requests that were deemed eligible for the second stage of the modification process, whether they were part of Test 1 or not, were randomly assigned to either the Test 2 intervention group or to a control group.

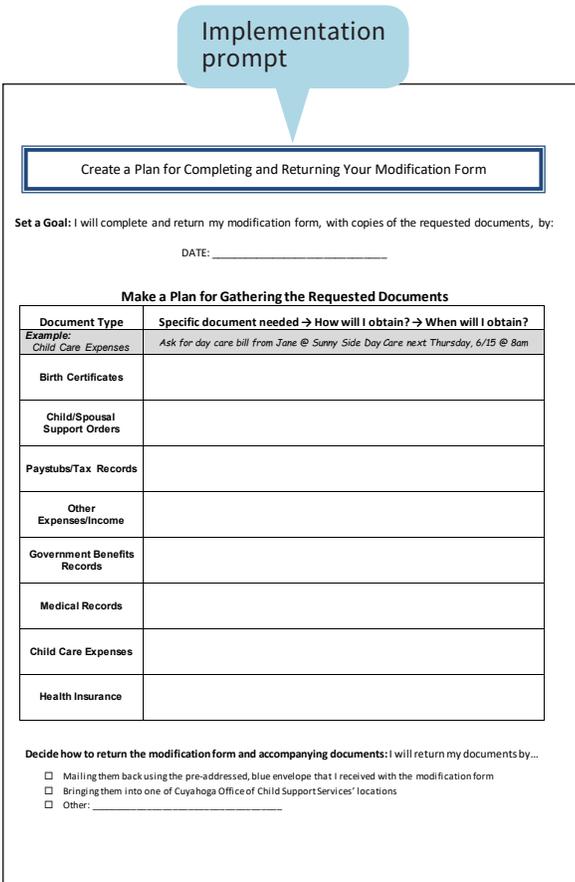
Instead of the complex and lengthy affidavit packet, intervention group parents received a revised affidavit consisting of a one-page modification form (see Figure 3)

Figure 3. Intervention Materials



**Personalization**

**Simplification**



**Implementation prompt**

with a fact sheet. The form also highlighted an option to fast-track the modification review if both parents agreed. (Fast-tracking allowed the modification review to be held before the normal 45 days had elapsed.) Control group parents received the business-as-usual affidavit packets.

Approximately five days after the revised affidavit was mailed, agency staff members attempted to reach intervention group parents by phone using a script that incorporated reminders, personalization, and loss aversion (the idea that people are more sensitive to losses than to equivalent gains). Depending on the contact information available, these parents were also sent some combination of letters, text messages, and automated telephone reminders approximately 10 days before the deadline for returning the form. These reminders were designed to counteract the potential for parents to forget or procrastinate when completing and returning the forms. In some instances, staff members completed the reviews even if the affidavit was not returned, relying on available administrative information and conversations with one or both parents.

### **Cuyahoga County: Results**

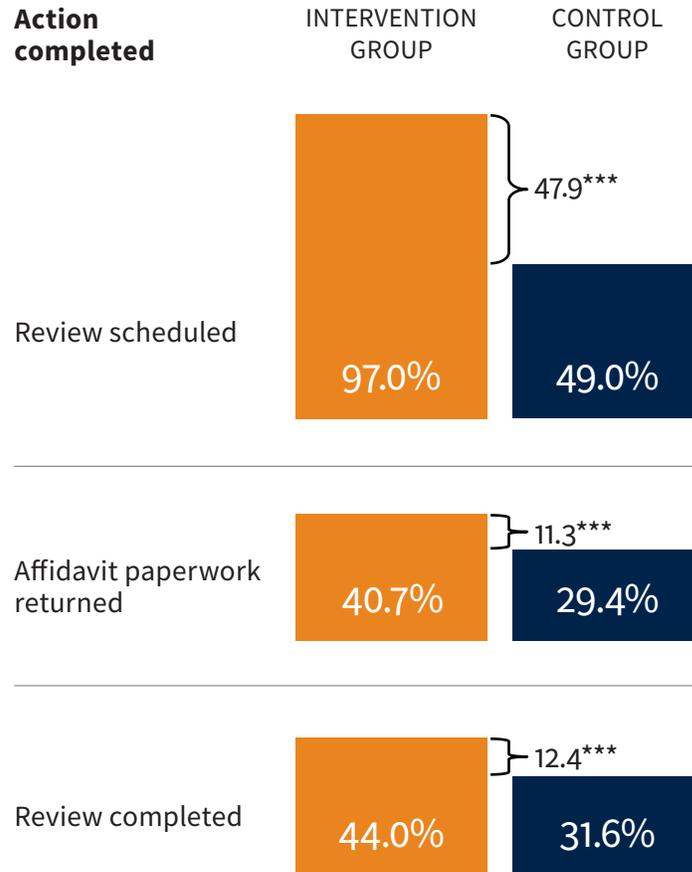
**TEST 1:** Parents assigned to the intervention group in Test 1 in Cuyahoga County were more likely to reach important milestones in the modification review process, as illustrated in Figure 4. These differences are statistically significant, meaning that there is strong evidence that the intervention caused the increase. The proportion of modification requests that were scheduled for reviews nearly doubled, from 49.0 percent of the control group to 97.0 percent of the intervention group. This increase led to effects in the second stage of the process: The proportion of modification requests that saw modification affidavits returned to the agency increased by 11.3 percentage points, and the proportion of modification requests that saw reviews completed increased by 12.4 percentage points.<sup>8</sup> Said differently, modification requests in the intervention group had about 38 percent more requests complete affidavit paperwork and the entire modification process than those in the control group.

**TEST 2:** Given its design, Test 2 could only affect outcomes later in the process: the proportion of modification requests in which an affidavit was returned to the agency and the proportion in which a review was completed. As indicated in Figure 2, Test 2 included parents who were assigned to the intervention group and the control group in Test 1, and parents who were not included in Test 1 at all. In this test, the number of affidavits returned and reviews completed increased by about 2 percentage points. These increases are not statistically significant, meaning that the differences cannot be attributed to the intervention with confidence.

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<sup>8</sup> While some parents in the Test 1 intervention group were also in the Test 2 intervention group, the Test 2 results show that, on its own, the Test 2 intervention did not have any effects. It is safe to assume, therefore, that the effects described here are largely the result of the Test 1 intervention.

**Figure 4. Cuyahoga County Test 1 Results**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services.

NOTES: Results in this figure are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

**THE DURATION OF THE PROCESS:** Descriptive statistics show that the Test 1 intervention decreased the time it took to get a review scheduled by 38.8 percent, or by 43.4 days.<sup>9</sup> A nonexperimental analysis of the Test 1 requests that resulted in modifications found that parents in the intervention group had to wait an average of 68 days after random assignment to receive new order amounts, while parents

<sup>9</sup> A test of statistical significance comparing the duration of the administrative process between the intervention and control groups would be biased because a value was only observed for requests that completed the full process and not for all requests that entered random assignment.

in the control group had to wait 112 days on average. Test 2 did not appear to make any practical difference in the amount of time parents spent waiting for decisions on their reviews.

### **Cuyahoga County: Implementation and Cost Findings**

Implementation was initially challenging because the county had to make some changes to its information technology to deliver the Test 1 and Test 2 interventions. There was also some turnover in the assigned county staff shortly before the study launched. However, after the first few weeks, the two tests were delivered as designed.<sup>10</sup>

One challenge in the implementation of Test 2 related to reaching parents by phone to remind them to return the paperwork. Although both text messages and automated telephone reminders (robocalls) went out to all intervention group parents for whom contact information was available, staff members were only successful in reaching 39.0 percent of the parents by telephone.<sup>11</sup> A nonexperimental comparison of modification requests in the Test 2 intervention group showed that 60.2 percent of modification requests completed the modification process when either parent was reached by phone, compared with 54.3 percent of modification requests when neither parent was reached by phone.<sup>12</sup>

The costs associated with both of these tests were minimal; the county reported no increase in costs for the intervention group over the control group. Cuyahoga County saved on both staff time and mailing by having parents in Test 1 skip the eligibility-determination process. The county reported that those savings more than offset any costs associated with texting and reminder calls made by staff members in Test 2.

### **Franklin County: Tests**

Franklin County's tests launched on August 28, 2016, and enrollment continued through May 31, 2017, with 2,565 initial modification requests included in Test 1 and 1,249 modification requests that had been scheduled for reviews included in Test 2.

**TEST 1:** Franklin County's Test 1 focused on the eligibility stage. The Test 1 intervention graphically redesigned, clarified, and simplified the application form using

<sup>10</sup> This conclusion is based on the research team's monitoring of random assignment ratios, regular reviews of case files of a sample of randomly assigned orders, and interviews with county staff members.

<sup>11</sup> They counted a parent as being "reached" if the call was answered. Staff members called both parents.

<sup>12</sup> This analysis is not conclusive because it is possible that parents who could be reached by phone differed from those who could not be reached.

clearer language informed by behavioral science, though the length of the redesigned form remained the same. Included with the form was a one-page document with a simplified, four-step overview of the modification review process on one side (see Figure 5) and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on the other.

**Figure 5. Franklin County Simplified Process Overview**



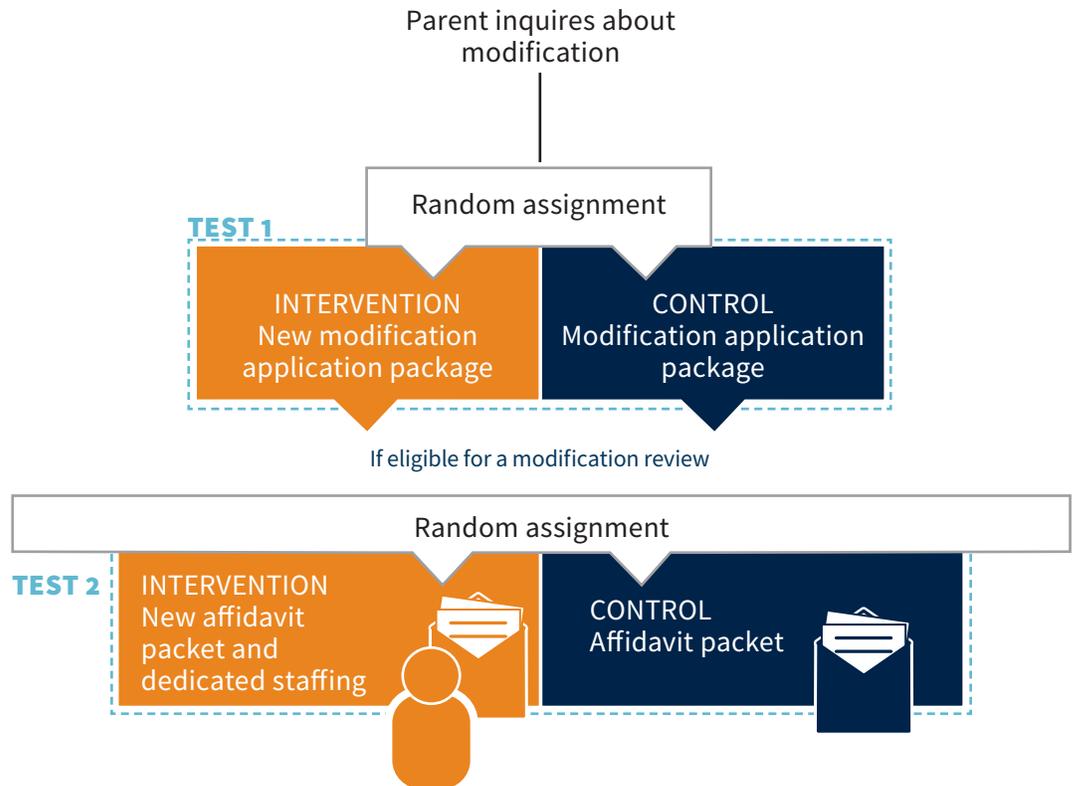
**THE ORDER REVIEW PROCESS WILL THEN BE FINISHED!**

Franklin's Test 1 intervention attempted to simplify eligibility-stage requirements by organizing information better, by improving the form's look, and by including an easy-to-read table of eligibility requirements complete with an explanation and example of the documents required. The overview and FAQ were also meant to address parents' mistaken belief that requesting an order modification would require submitting paperwork only once.

To determine the impact of Test 1, parents who inquired about modifications in Franklin County were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or the

control group (see Figure 6). Control group members received the business-as-usual materials, Franklin County’s original application to verify eligibility for the review.

**Figure 6. Franklin County Random Assignment**



**TEST 2:** For this intervention, Franklin County combined dedicated staffing with simplified materials. As shown in Figure 6, all requests that were deemed eligible for the second stage of the modification process, whether they were in the Test 1 intervention or control group, were randomly assigned either to the Test 2 intervention or to a control group.

Parents in the Test 2 intervention group were sent a simplified four-page affidavit and the same overview and FAQ document used in Test 1. As in the case of Cuyahoga County, the state suppressed the state affidavit for parents in the intervention group, so only one affidavit was sent to parents.

Additionally, Franklin County created a specialized modification unit — internally called the “mod squad” — to assist parents in the intervention group with their applications. A specialized modification unit reduces its staff members’ overall cognitive loads associated with other, often complex, child support duties, allowing

them to engage more fully in the details of the modification process. The two modification unit staff members were trained in a variety of issues relating to improved services for clients: insights from behavioral science, motivational interviewing (a client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change), implicit bias (being aware of stereotypes and how they influence us), and the psychology of poverty and how it can affect decision making.

The modification unit reached out to parents who had modification review dates set and offered them assistance (in person, by phone, or by email, depending on the parent's preference) to complete the forms. As in Cuyahoga, staff members sometimes completed the reviews by relying on available administrative information and conversations with one or both parents.

### Franklin County: Results

**TEST 1:** Parents in the intervention group in Test 1 were more likely to reach important milestones in the modification review process. In the intervention group, 42.1 percent of modification requests had reviews scheduled, compared with 38.6 percent of modification requests in the control group. The difference of 3.5 percentage points is statistically significant at the 10 percent level, and an increase of 9.1 percent over the control group. These differences carried through the review process: The intervention increased the proportion of modification requests that saw modification affidavits returned to the agency by 3.1 percentage points (or a 16.4 percent increase) and increased the proportion of modification requests that saw reviews completed by 3.2 percentage points (a 14.8 percent increase).

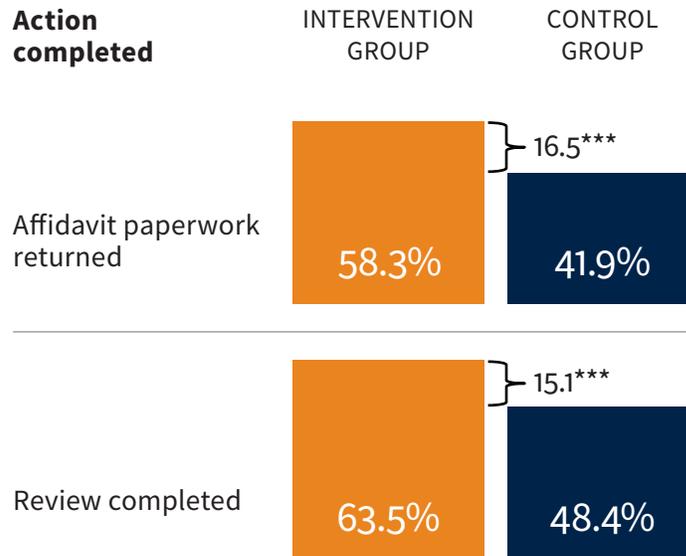
**TEST 2:** The results from Franklin County's Test 2 are summarized in Figure 7. Test 2 could only affect outcomes later in the process, due to the intervention design. In the intervention group, 58.3 percent of the modification requests with reviews scheduled saw affidavit packets returned, compared with 41.9 percent in the control group, an increase of 16.5 percentage points and a 39.4 percent increase. Furthermore, nearly 63.5 percent of intervention group modification requests completed the modification process, compared with only 48.4 percent in the control group, an increase of 15.1 percentage points (or a 31.2 percent increase).<sup>13</sup>

**THE DURATION OF THE PROCESS:** Descriptive statistics show that both Test 1 and Test 2 very modestly increased the amount of time it took for modification requests to complete the modification process. These differences are very small and were not measured using experimental methods. It is difficult to say whether they are the result of the intervention or are simply due to chance.

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**13** The percentage of reviews completed is higher than the percentage of affidavits returned because in some cases, the child support agency got the information needed to complete the review in another way, such as a phone call or meeting with one or both parents. The agency then completed the review without a returned affidavit.

**Figure 7. Franklin County Test 2 Results**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency.

NOTES: Results in this figure are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

### Franklin County: Implementation and Cost Findings

Both Test 1 and Test 2 were largely implemented as designed.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, Test 2 involved a dedicated modification unit of Franklin County staff members who received detailed and specialized training. In interviews, these staff members reported that they felt well prepared to provide the intervention in Test 2. They also generally enjoyed this new approach. They found it professionally rewarding and believed that it was more effective in helping parents.

Members of the modification unit also reported that their services seemed to be well received and that parents were thankful for the assistance. Interviews with parents, however, found mixed views about the modification unit’s services. While parents generally appreciated the help, some felt frustrated by the process in general, and that frustration was often tied to the results of their modification reviews. Not surprisingly, those who perceived that they had favorable outcomes appeared more enthusiastic about the support than those who felt the outcomes were not favorable.

<sup>14</sup> This conclusion is based on the research team’s monitoring of random assignment ratios, regular reviews of case files of a sample of orders, and interviews with county staff members.

Franklin County reported reduced costs for both the Test 1 and Test 2 intervention groups, compared with the control groups. Because the intervention group Test 2 mailings were shorter, the county used less paper and ink. Also for Test 2, Franklin County reallocated staff members, caseloads, and functions among its enforcement units to create the two-person modification unit. This reallocation had to be cost-neutral for it to be approved by the county administration. Specifically, the two staff members in the new unit took on modification actions and the modification work of regular enforcement staff members was reduced, while regular enforcement staff members took on the enforcement activities not related to modifications of the two people in the modification unit. For Test 1, the county also reported no additional staff costs; as a result, there was no difference in staff costs for either test.

### LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

The results of Test 1 in Cuyahoga County show that greatly simplifying the administrative process led to substantial improvements in outcomes. Test 2 in Franklin County shows that combining a shorter form with dedicated, direct support to parents from specially trained staff members also led to substantial improvements in outcomes.

In contrast, the results of Test 2 in Cuyahoga County and Test 1 in Franklin County suggest that only revising and simplifying paperwork and sending reminders did not achieve similar results. These findings on the impacts of changing paperwork and sending reminders are consistent with other research in behavioral science that has shown that changes in paperwork often lead to modest outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Further research could shed additional light on the relative effectiveness of changes in paperwork and the use of reminders compared with actual redesigns of programs and policies.

Cuyahoga County was enthusiastic about the Test 1 findings, and the county director was, from the beginning of the project, a major proponent of removing the eligibility-determination step in the modification process for most requests. Franklin County was also pleased with the results from its interventions and is considering changes to the modification process in the county after reviewing final findings from the test.

An important lesson for Cuyahoga County was that if the first step of the modification process were removed, it would be necessary to build in additional time

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**15** See Nadine Dechausay and Caitlin Anzelone, *Cutting Through Complexity: Using Behavioral Science to Improve Indiana's Child Care Subsidy Program* (New York: MDRC, 2016); Peter Baird, Leigh Reardon, Dan Cullinan, Drew McDermott, and Patrick Landers, *Reminders to Pay: Using Behavioral Economics to Increase Child Support Payments* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

for reviewing requests. This extra time would be used to handle issues that would normally be addressed in the first step of the process.<sup>16</sup> The State of Ohio has also raised some legal questions that would need to be resolved before any permanent changes to the modification process can be made.

Franklin County identified three aspects of the interventions that it felt were central to their success: specialized training for staff members, specialized caseloads for staff members handling complex processes such as modifications, and active and tailored outreach and assistance.

This study shows the value of rigorously tested interventions informed by behavioral science, particularly interventions that focus on simplifying existing processes or providing direct support to clients. Both counties involved in this study are continuing to use strategies based on behavioral science to improve their processes, allowing for additional learning and improvement.

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**16** For example, a parent might have a pending modification request that has not yet been resolved or a pending court action, which means that a judge may be working on issuing a new child support order amount.

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