

**Mind the Gap  
Program Documentation**

**Interviews with Service Providers**

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To supplement interviews with Mind the Gap program participants, six interviews were also conducted with individuals who provided services related to Mind the Gap. Three Mind the Gap/Goodwill Easter Seals employees, two Child Support Officers, and one Parole Officer were interviewed. Interviews were lengthier than those with participants, ranging from forty minutes to 1.5 hours in length. All names have been omitted from this report. While these interviewees had many praises for the Mind the Gap program, they also had suggestions for program improvement and future work. Major findings from this report include:

**What Worked:**

- Pre-release contact and intensive case management were essential to the program
- Clear, direct communication with participants was vital to gaining trust and building the motivation to commit to the program
- The addition of mentoring and employment services through Second Chance funding greatly improved the Mind the Gap model
- The flexibility to customize the program based on individual needs of participants aided in the ability to help participants
- A focus on self-sufficiency and an internal motivation to change habits and behaviors was also essential

**Areas to Improve:**

- Together, Mind the Gap and Second Chance functioned well. Independently, though, the programs suffered without the support of each other
- The program may have had too much upper-level management and administration in how it was structured
- Coordinated Case Reviews should have been mandated and held more regularly and frequently

**Perspectives from Partner Agencies:**

- Child Support Officers were acutely aware of the additional challenges previously incarcerated fathers face
- CSO's were also heavily engaged in working to change the perception of Child Support in the eyes of participants to a more positive outlook
- The national and local context of child support cases is also changing as the public and policymakers become more aware of the issues faced by previously incarcerated fathers
- Child Support Officers and Parole Officers were, overall, enthusiastic about the additional support Mind the Gap offered participants
- Parole Officers, while praising the extra assistance Mind the Gap provided in managing caseloads, were most concerned with how programs can help participants obtain employment and maintain program accountability

**Looking Forward:**

- Suggestions for future improvements involved adding additional pre-release services
- Staff felt that increased case management and overall expansion of the program into other facilities would be the most desirable next steps
- Participants who successfully complete the program should be filtered back into the program as potential staff, advocates, and volunteers
- Overall, the interagency connections created by Mind the Gap were extremely important to all of the service providers involved in the program, and a future focus will be on maintaining these connections

## **What Worked: Perspectives of MTG staff**

### **Intensive Case Management Beginning Pre-Release**

For the staff who worked directly with Mind the Gap participants, the **case management was an essential part** of the success of the program. As it was described by one staff person, it is *“not only case management – it is mentoring. They respect the case manager, because that relationship began on the inside, and then it was transferred to the outside. So they trust us. A lot of these guys were raised in a way where they are not supposed to trust anyone. But then they meet somebody that’s like them, and that’s what they want. They are hungry for that. For someone that can help them go in the right direction.”*

An important part of the case management process was to **communicate honestly** with participants. One staff member referred to this *“meeting them at their level.”* Another Mind the Gap staffer described it as, *“Part of the process of what I try to implement in the guys I work with is how to become self-supported and how to stop hustling and stop trusting all of the impulses inside your head. Because it really hasn’t worked for them to trust those impulses. And if they want someone to lie to them or shy away from this, they are in the wrong program. Because the staff here is going to talk to them in the raw truth. But from a place of care and of concern. Because we really care about them. Some of the guys respond to this at first as, ‘well, you don’t know me.’ But then, once we establish that honest relationship right away – 99% of the guys we work with really, really respect us. Basically, that’s what we bring to this type of position: a case manager that is genuine and authentic. And when a person is genuine and authentic, the people we work with, they trust us. And in order for any program to be successful, the participants have to trust us. Once they start working with us, they get someone who is authentic and really cares. This kind of work isn’t about the paycheck.”*

Starting this **relationship inside the prison, prior to release**, was also a key component to what staff viewed as a success of the program. As one staff member described it, *“Having someone see them before they get out is so important, when those visits involve building rapport, gaining trust, and starting to provide them with the tools they will need. When Second Chance staff goes in now, its only one time. Trust is a huge thing. They don’t trust anybody. Having Mind the Gap inside the prison helps the guys be so much more successful.”* A Second Chance staff member noted the difference – and new difficulties - in their ability to recruit new participants after Mind the Gap stopped conducting initial meetings inside the prison: *“I don’t have that same rapport with the guys that I did when I was working with David. He kept us in the loop. Having that case manager piece is just essential in making these programs work well.”* Another staff person echoed this sentiment, stating that in general, *“Having a case manager is imperative.”*

### **Employment and Mentoring Components**

The ability to **offer participants many different services** was, in the perspectives of staff, one of the most important qualities of the program. As one staff member described it, *“I think the model is really good and successful, to have the 3-pronged model where the employment piece really helps people prepare to succeed AT the job once they get it, especially through the cognitive skills and motivation, and then to add child support and then mentoring. I think that is pretty impressive, because if a participant doesn’t click with one of the people in a division or if they aren’t seeking help in one of those areas, they can still keep engaged in the*

*other parts of the program – and overall, keeping them involved with at least part of the program functions to help keep them out of prison again, which is ultimately a goal across the entire program.”*

This arrangement also allowed for **collaboration within Goodwill Easter Seals**, across programmatic divisions, opening the potential for future methods of collaboration. One staff person said, *“Once Second Chance funding came in, we would sort of co-enroll people in both programs and were able to offer wraparound, three-pronged services – which I think its just ideal. Another nice collaboration that came out of having multiple divisions of GWES involved was in using the Goodtrak system together when people were co-enrolled in different programs. We could reference people being dually enrolled in multiple programs and track everything together.”*

In terms of mentoring, some participants were initially reluctant. One staff person said that, *“With mentoring, people sort of had to be sold on it. So, we tried to hold off on jumping into other services until they at least had a chance to sit down with the mentor coordinator and at least fill out an interests profile and make some goals in terms of mentoring.”* Another noted that, *“Many men were pretty unsure at first. Because when they hear the word mentor, they immediately think of someone telling them what to do. I really try hard to say – hey, when I match you with someone, that mentor knows nothing about you. This is a fresh start with them. You can tell them whatever you want to. I think helps a little bit, because these guys are used to people worried about their baggage. We don’t care about that baggage. This is a fresh start. They can make their future whatever it is they want it to be. Its obviously just how I word it, and its that I believe in it. Just talking to these men and telling them, well I believe in you. And he said, you don’t know how nice it is to just have someone who doesn’t even know me believe in me. And hopefully they don’t go back. But if they do go back, hopefully we have changed their thinking just a little bit, so then maybe the next time around will be different.”* Once this relationship was established, however, the program experience for participants was often positive.

Recruiting mentors was also a program success. One staff person noted that, *“Recruiting mentors has been very successful thus far, but now that MTG is over, there has been more of an emphasis on recruiting mentees. This does result in less people in the program, and in fact, some mentors I haven’t even matched yet. But I believe in what we are doing, so it’s easy to recruit mentors because I can tell them clearly about what our goals are. I believe in it. I believe its important for these men to have others who believe in them.”*

**Employment Services was also a positive experience** for many participants, from the perspective of the Mind the Gap and Second Chance staff. One staffer noted that, *“It seemed like people really liked the Cognitive Skills classes and the weekly parenting group. They seemed to be well attended”* and another said, *“I hear a ton of great feedback about the cognitive skills classes from the participants directly, but I’d like to see more evaluations of it, because the curriculum isn’t as well known - but, it’s really working for us.”*

Overall, the **flexibility to customize the program based on the individual needs** of participants worked well for Mind the Gap staff. One person described it as, *“I don’t know if all three of the services are more or less equally important, but it came down to what that individual needed more of. Which was a great part of the program. For them, having three different staff people with three different areas of expertise meant the participant could sort of latch onto the person or the piece that mattered the most to them, whether it be the*

*employment person, the parenting person, or the mentoring person.”*

### **Focus on Self-sufficiency**

Staff agreed that for participants to succeed in the program, **change must come from within** and be at the direction of the participants themselves. One staff person said, *“It’s a mentality, for those who do well in the program. Those who can honestly say, yes I made a mistake, yes I paid for it, but now I want to change. I deserved it. Those guys who have the perspective of, they put me in there and I didn’t deserve it – they aren’t ready to change. And those guys who say they value their kids. They do well. It’s those guys who really want their sons and daughters to see a different dad. Its completely a mindset.”* Another staff person shared a story of a participant who was not ready to commit to the program, but noted also that even some contact with the program may plant a seed for the future: *“I tried to meet with one guy last week – he couldn’t even concentrate on our conversation or admit to having made a mistake he was ready to move on from. He wouldn’t even get off his phone during our meeting. And sure enough, he was a fugitive, and now he’s back in prison. He just wasn’t ready yet. But, if even that little bit of contact we had will hopefully make him think a little differently next time he comes out. And hopefully he will remember he can always come back and he can try it again.”*

Another staff person shared that, in their experience, it was extremely important for the participants to not only become self-sufficient, but to learn not to rely entirely on the program for all their needs: *“A lot of guys wanted to take advantage of some of the things we were offering. They became sort of co-dependent on some things, such as the bus cards. Some guys would come in and keep asking for more and claim they hadn’t received many, so we would have to go back to the computer and show them, ‘well, you have received many of them. Here are the numbers. You’re going to have to learn how to spend less on sneakers and invest more in bus cards.’ It isn’t a recurring problem, there’s just always that one individual who is always pushing the limits. But that’s the individual who 99% of the time are going to go back to prison. They haven’t learned how to be self-supporting and instead focus their attention on taking advantage of systems in order to get everything they want to get. But, then they want more. So those guys, they still have that convict mentality. And when you have that mentality, you can only get away with it for so long before your PO figures it out and sends you back. Or before you recommit a crime.”*

## Areas to Improve

Program staff identified several areas where, given more time and funding, they would change program practices in order to achieve stronger outcomes. In particular, this involved better coordinating program activities between Second Chance and Mind the Gap – though all were careful to note that it was perhaps more of a function of the *timing* of the grants than the actual operations of the programs.

### **Perfect Together, Not Alone**

One staff member defined the discrepancies between the two main program components as: *“The problem with Second Chance is that they together worked perfectly. But by themselves, they don’t work. The whole approach requires both, because together they are a strong force - especially because MTG offered pre-release relationships....You can go in and create a relationship with these guys that can follow into the streets, if you have all these connections with other resources in the streets that they don’t have. If you get them in the inside, it follows you to the outside. With the addition of Second Chance to this model, then, suddenly they had a whole group of people waiting on the outside. You have 5-6 people working on one individual.”* A different staff member summed up this point of view as: *“There were two different grants and they clearly weren’t speaking together when things were being developed.”*

This became most evident once Mind the Gap transitioned out, but Second Chance continued to operate. One staff member said, *“When the decision was made not to enroll any new people in Mind The Gap, that made a huge impact across the rest of the program. The last 20 people or so [in Second Chance] couldn’t be involved were kind of...more or less screwed out of the pre-release services that would begin before their came out, like the child support and fatherhood pre-release planning. Frankly, in the proposal for Second Chance, we said these people would be getting this kind of planning support. Basically, though, this is a good example of how having multiple programs running at the same time can be a problem at times.”*

A staff member working in a different area of programming also noted that their professional roles in Second Chance became more expansive once the case management component of Mind the Gap no longer existed in the same capacity: *“Now that MTG isn’t there anymore, it’s been a bit more difficult, as now employment specialists and mentor coordinators and others involved in the program are taking on the case manager entity. For instance, we are the people they are coming to now when a guy needs a housing referral or something like that. I miss having that case management role, especially when the contact with the guys was happening at Faribault first, and they were engaging with the guys and encouraging them to come when they were released. Now, we are basically recruiting participants as well – we go down there right before they get out, but we don’t have that relationship yet. We see them once, maybe twice. So that’s been pretty difficult. We don’t have that rapport that we had with Mind the Gap being there.”*

### **High Levels of Management and Administration**

There was also consensus among all of the staff interviewed that **there was a high level of management** and administration involved in the program that at times was a barrier. For instance, one staff member said: *“I think there were too many heads in the pot – too many*

*supervisors were perhaps involved. The organizational structure made it hard sometimes because there were too many people to have to go through to get things done. Not saying we don't all get along, but there's a lot of management I have to go through – I don't want to have to check in on small matters with two different managers if it's going to slow things down or be an inefficient use of time. Or, perhaps some of the positions in Second Chance could be reassigned under different divisions at the agency so that it could be more streamlined."*

Similarly, another staffer said: *"It's been a lot to have three directors and three managers across three different programs, I think that is not a good plan. It's been a good collaboration, particularly across the DMV division, having volunteer mentors working with reentry and FATHER project on the mission services part of GWES. So there's been a lot of excellent things that have come out of collaborating in that manner. There's no question about that. But then there's been several things that have come up, because no one person has the sense of, this is my program. I think that's something that hasn't been ideal.....[and] everybody has really different styles of how they track things, how they collect data, how their staff operate – so that part was made difficult."*

Yet, it was maintained that even though the administrative side of the program was at times heavy, this was **not seen as something that interrupted delivery of services**. For instance, one staff member said: *"There were too many managers. Because Second Chance had their own set of administration, as did Mind the Gap. Sometimes it would take some time to get things done BUT I don't think that it affected the guys in any negative way. There might have been some disconnect between us as a team, but the guys' immediate needs were always, always met. I don't think they ever even would have noticed this. Their needs were always met."*

### **The Need for Increased Coordinated Case Review**

It was also expressed by staff members that, in retrospect, **more Coordinated Case Review Meetings would have been held**. First, staff were clear on what they believed to be the strongest benefits of the Coordinated Case Review Meetings. As one person described it: *"We all had parts of the story – all the participants are more likely to tell us as individuals what we want to hear. And when we could all come together and things would come to light. In that sense I think those are important to have. And it's more important to get the direct service people who work with participants there than perhaps more administrative people."*

Another staffer described how the meetings can function to 'save' a participant from dropping out of the program or re-entering corrections: *"When a guy gets out of prison, there's a certain time when they are ecstatic. They are enjoying that high. But after they go up like that, they plateau. Low self esteem sets in. They start to exhibit behaviors that signal that they are going to recommit a crime. The signs are: racing thoughts. Scattered thoughts. The need to have everything "right now" instead of taking it one day at a time, being content with what they have now, being patient. They start having very low tolerance, especially towards their PO's or going to meetings. They want to get into a relationship right away. You start to see that. One case manager alone – its so hard to immediately respond to those signals. As a team approach, if we can identify that we're starting to see warning signs in this individual, as a team we can work to maybe go intervene so that we can help them to get back on track and avoid going back in again. Sometimes this could even mean a bit of an intervention that even involves the PO before he recommits a crime. So if we can identify that we all are seeing this, we can bring the PO into the conversation so the PO can also step in, and together we can all*

*give him a wakeup call so that we can all intervene. That would have been perfect for this program from the beginning. It ended up happening near the end of the program, but it took a little while to get it off the ground."*

When the CCR meetings did take place, there were also some **issues with confidentiality** and communication between different agencies. For instance, one staff member reported that: *"There were some issues where some staff members couldn't talk with CSO's about some clients because of paperwork and confidentiality issues that hadn't yet been addressed. And that was a little frustrating because we are all supposed to be on the same team. But that was fixed and overall – the more we more, the more helpful we can be."* Similarly, another noted that, *"CCR meetings were a little discouraging for some staff when they were expected to divulge a lot of information about the participants they were working with, but then at times weren't able to get the same amount of information back from other people in the meeting, especially due to a bit of a paperwork and confidentiality misunderstanding. And then, once it was all settled and information was going back and forth, there were only one or two CCR meetings left. I think it was sort of weird at first for some of the staff, so I think a way to figure that out earlier would have been beneficial."*

Overall, it was the recognition of the value of the meetings that led staff to express their wish for more Coordinated Case Reviews. For instance, one staffer noted that, *"I wish they had been more consistent. I think once a month is not asking too much, because things change so quickly for these participants. I have a few guys who are on their fourth or fifth phone number already, and I have known them for less than a year. Really, with this population, more CCR meetings the better. We are all busy. This true. But if it was always on the same day per month or something, pre-arranged, it would be really helpful."* Another staff member echoed this sentiment: *"In the beginning, what didn't work so well, because we were learning as we went, was the lack of communication between MTG and SC. IF we would have sat down and put our heads together and planned it out from the beginning, with all the managers present, we would have started having CCR meetings together on a weekly or monthly basis where we talk about each individual client. But the staff were so swamped at first - and I don't blame them – they are amazing employees, but they were stretched so thin with their jobs. So asking them to come in frequently and meet with MTG staff was kinda hard. So I believe management didn't push that hard enough, for us to meet as a group more often. I believe we would have lost less people. We would have been on top of everything."*

## **Perspectives from Partner Agencies**

To supplement the interviews with Mind the Gap and Second Chance staff, interviews were also conducted with representatives from outside agencies – Child Support and Adult Field Services (supervision, probation, or parole). Specifically, two child support officers and one probation officer were interviewed to gain insight to what they believed to be the biggest needs of fathers recently released prisoners, insight to what would help these fathers, and their evaluations of how their own positions intersected with the program activities of Mind the Gap.

### **Child Support Officer Observations**

CSO's noted that the largest technical change in their positions was to move Mind the Gap participants into a new caseload and to attend to those cases with Mind the Gap staff. As one officer described: *"I have a separate caseload number that's assigned to those cases. They receive special treatment....we automatically restore their drivers license if it was suspended for child support nonpayment. We evaluate their case for arrears forgiveness. We look to see if they owe any arrears to the state of Minnesota and if those arrears accrued as part of their incarceration – then I would probably forgive those. Just keep very close tabs on their employment situation and interact. We have monthly Coordinated Case Review meetings with the case advocate and the head of the FATHER Project, and periodic steering committee meetings."*

A CSO described the difficulties in working with this population as, *"We monitor cases, answer correspondence, make sure the income withholding orders are sent out when they're employed, make sure payments are coming in. That kind of thing. And record when they are terminated. And a lot of them terminate – leave their jobs and exit the program. We have a lot of...its kind of like a revolving door. We've had a few long termers, but most guys.....I would have to say most of them were not in the program long enough for me to actually modify their orders or work on arrears forgiveness. They would kinda come and go. Usually their duration was pretty short – just a few months. Although we have had some good long termers."* This CSO saw the contextual reasons for these difficulties: *"Although the recidivism rate is much lower for guys who have been in Mind the Gap. But a lot of it (services) end when they go back in, or they just drop out of sight. Or they're uncomfortable. They come from a background that is totally unlike what we're asking them to do, and it's a major sea change for them, and a lot of them can't handle it."*

The other Child Support Officer interviewed for this report described a similar experience: *"They're out for about two or three months, and then they go back. Most of the time - some of them stay out and then we go back and we get a new order for support and hopefully they comply with us. But a lot of times there's no contact whatsoever - there never has been and there never will be. They just never contact. And if we can verify an address for them, we can set up a court date. If they don't show up, then the order gets set back to where it was before they went to prison - and sometimes that is very, very high since its based on that income level. Sometimes, it's just based on nothing. Sometimes, it was based on the guy not showing up at all, so they weren't always true to form or great orders before they went in to prison. But because that's what it was set at, it goes back up because they didn't DO anything about."*

Child Support Officers noted the struggles their Mind the Gap cases faced. One officer described it as: *"[The biggest need] is for us to meet them where they are. Because where they are is so different from where we are. And I find that out more every day. They come from a background that I cannot imagine. A background of abuse, of neglect, of desertion. Living in the underground culture all their lives, they don't know anything else. They don't know how to be a father. They have never had to report to any appointment in their lives, so showing up for work is difficult. Even coming to appointments with me, they're routinely 20-30 min late – or a week late. It's just trying to bridge that enormous gully – I don't even call it a gap – it's a gully."*

Both officers described the ways in which they worked with fathers who had been incarcerated as having different needs than non-incarcerated fathers. For example, one said: *"We do the quick and dirty stuff, like giving them back their drivers license right away. Because if they don't have a gazillion dollars worth of fines they owe to the state and they can drive, it's important for them to have transportation. But as far as everything else, yeah, we wait for the dust to settle. A lot of them don't have stable housing and that is key. You can't work effectively if you don't have a place to live."*

Officers also felt that the child support obligations are the biggest challenge facing previously incarcerated fathers because of the multitude of barriers they face when trying to regain control of their child support case. This officer said: *"Child Support is the most difficult. The financial obligation, the upbringing, the culture – a lack of understanding of what it means to be a parent. I think the parenting groups help a lot because if you can connect more with your children you're more likely to want to help them financially. A lot of times, though, the mom won't let them see the child. Or if they don't have an order for visitation, it's impossible for them to. Sometimes, the mom will say – I'll let you see the child. But then I want you back. I see that a lot. Much manipulation on the part of the mothers – from what we hear and we only hear one side – but a lot of it seems pretty valid."* The other CSO noted, *"Many of them have never paid child support. They get that first paycheck and there's a big chunk of it missing...they get upset. 'Well, what happened to the money?' There are a lot of misconceptions out there. Many guys don't think they owe child support unless their child is on public assistance. There are a lot of rumors and myths and underground stuff – total distortion of the facts. Which is part of the reason why the county has a black eye in the eyes of these guys as well. So hopefully it worked a little bit to make them feel a tiny bit more positive about us. Technically we are a collections agency – but we don't have to look or act like one."* This officer also summarized this sentiment as, *"I think they care and I think a lot of them want to be fathers, but they don't know how to be fathers - or at least our concept of fathers, what we say."*

### **Changing Perceptions of Child Support Officers**

Both CSOs also had a strong agenda to change the perception of the Child Support System and its officers in the minds of program participants. One CSO described this as, *"Our primary goal remains to collect support for their children, but we can do things to help the guys so they can pay. And that's my goal. Just not come at them like 'WE ARE THE COUNTY.'" And we're just working it through just one guy at a time. When I first get up and do my orientation, I say – I don't bite. Call me anytime! And I've got guys who tell me their perception of the county has changed as a result of working with me. I like to think I've had a little bit of positive impact. And we are encouraging other people from the office to come in and participate and get to know the guys is sort of a down and dirty level – like sitting in on their*

*parenting groups and just hearing what they have to say. To see our faces and hear our voices. That's what they need. They need to see us smile."*

The CSO's noted that this is a long-term process. As one put it, *"realistically, child support has for years been the same way. Its never had a good reputation. And its not going to turn around just like that."* Yet, the CSO's noted their own efforts in changing this, even when it seems to be ineffective: *"I'm just trying to put across child support as positively as I can on the phone, and to try and be understanding, and to try not to be condemnatory. They don't want to hear that and don't need to hear that. They are required as part of participation in program to check in with me once a month. [Do they?] No. Regardless of positive conversations they've had with me, those old tapes start to play again. You know, 'the county is bad, etc.' So a lot of them are very reluctant."* The other CSO echoed this tension: *"It's really hard for the CSO's because technically we are not supposed to be for the custodial parent, we are supposed to be a neutral party. Well, that's not a possible thing to do a lot of the times. You can't play both sides of the fences and try to be on both sides. But I think the agency as a whole is reaching out more and looking more at the issues of people and the barriers they have to stuff. so I think that is getting better. Instead of just going in and putting in orders, I think the agencies are looking at more issues now. It's a pretty recent thing."*

### **Changing Child Support for Previously Incarcerated Fathers**

Both CSO's also noted that the **broader context around incarceration in relation to child support is changing** nationally and locally. As one CSO described it, *"I think the change is coming from a national trend - incarceration is a real hot topic right now. I think there just more agencies and more people taking about it and looking at it and saying, look this guy has never in his life worked. How can he pay \$340 a month in child support? So I think because its the new thing to talk about it and do - things are changing."*

The other Child Support Officer gave some specific examples of how changing child support policies are becoming more accommodating to the specific needs of previously incarcerated fathers: *"The review process can take several weeks to several months. I had drafted the order, the attorney changed, I had to get it redone - the red tape is endless. The attorneys are busy, so it takes them a few weeks to get it back to you, and then the hearing needs to be scheduled, and that's usually a few months out. [Does this start when they are released?] They should, technically, had their order set to \$0 when they get in. and when they get out it's a question of reestablishing - and there's no rush on that. But unfortunately, when we stop child support when they are incarcerated - which is all good, we must do that - but there is built in language in most of the child support orders to reinstate child support 60 days after their release. I generally tell them - I'm not into that 60 day thing. If they don't have an order that reinstates in 60 days, I can say, well, I'm going to give you 3-4 months to settle into a new job. Once you're settled into that job and it looks like you're going to stay, then we can settle into that support."*

Child Support Officers were also open to some criticism of current practices around previously incarcerated fathers. One noted that standard practices around reestablishing payments, *"gives them no time at all. But it's the accepted practice in this county - it's the standard order for incarceration modification. Regardless of employment. David came and spoke at an in-service last week, and one of the agents who is responsible for modifying orders asked him how long we should go before we reestablish - and he said, minimum six months."*

*Because the guys may go in and out of three or four different jobs in that time, and if they're not, then they'll lose their house"*

When asked why sixty days was the standard, the CSO replied, *"That is just how we've always done it, I guess. And we are now – with our new knowledge and experiences, because of projects like this – we are looking at changing that. We are under the county attorney, so they would have to review any changes. But it's just been the standard language, and I frankly don't know how easy it would be to change it. If I could I would put in no reinstatement language – there's a way to do that. If you just set the order to zero dollars, you don't have to say it reinstates at a certain time, it's just that when the person gets a job, you review the order, check out the income, and set a realistic order based on his actual ability to earn."*

### **Child Support Officer Evaluations of Program**

Because of their continued contact and involvement with Mind the Gap, the Child Support Officers interviewed for this report had insight into how the program was operating. One CSO said, *"I think the Goodwill Easter Seals services are excellent. The employment, mentoring especially. Mentorship is a huge thing, I think. And the parenting education. I sat through a parenting class. I really do think they are becoming more emotionally invested in their children. They just didn't know. There's a lot of ignorance out there. They have just not been taught. They didn't grow up with dads. They didn't know how to parent. They need good examples for them to follow."*

The other CSO really appreciated the way in which Mind the Gap opened up lines of communication between CSO's and their cases: *"I think the physical contact with CSO's is good. I think it would be even more helpful if it came from the child support agency AND with the nonprofit case managers – if we came at it together, as a more united front. Saying, we are BOTH here, this is what's happening, this is what you need to do. I think the physical contact means so much more than phone contact even. When we're physically talking to them I know that helps out more because they actually see a face, they see a person, rather than, 'this is your friendly lady in the sky.'"*

CSO's also had some suggestions for how to improve this collaboration even more. One suggested, *"I think it needs to be a little tighter reined. I can't tell you how to do that, but - not to use it as a punishment, but that agencies shouldn't give out lots of things, like bus cards, if you're not going to even try to make payments, or at least to just deal. It doesn't mean that they gotta pay, but they have to have a little bit more compliance or contact with them. Just to be a little bit more involved in it."* One CSO also was careful to note the difference between participating in Mind the Gap and technically making child support payments: *"I know there are some individuals in the program that the staff really consider to be successful. But, we cant consider them a success at all because they didn't do anything with us."*

### **Parole Officer Observations**

One Parole Officer was interviewed to understand how their work with previously incarcerated fathers was impacted by Mind the Gap. The Officer described this as, *"We have caseloads of 75 or 85. It's hard to get a lot of one on one time. But when they go to Mind the Gap it gives another professional person a chance to work with them, both in groups and 1:1. That most effective if we can work together collaboratively. I would say the first 30 days, if you can have a meeting all together, it works well. Sometimes, the offenders doesn't even show up,*

*but it gives me some time to talk with program staff so that we can articulate which guys have more of a commitment level. Usually what I see is, there's definitely a correlation with low levels of commitment to the program right away and not finishing the program."*

From the perspective of the Parole Officer interviewed, **employment is the most important factor to what many PO's consider a successful transition.** As it was explained, *"Job programs are fine, but guys lose their interest in that really quick. We have a lot of programs out there that offer things like: resume writing, interviewing skills, etc. But what these guys NEED is a job. a job they have to report to at 8 and leave at 430. If you can get a guy a good job, the probability of him succeeding on supervision is number one."* Yet, the officer also noted that programs need to be flexible in order to meet individual needs: *"Programs have to be tailor made for each offender. Everyone has different issues, these are human beings not widgets. SO each offender has personalized areas that each need their own attention. Not attending to these things can lead to parole violations."*

Similar to what the Mind the Gap staff reported, the Parole Officer also felt that true positive change on behalf of the fathers **relied heavily on those fathers personal motivation**, but continued to focus primarily on employment as the key mechanism for change: *"If you get someone to work, they won't be using drugs and alcohol as much. They can't show up drunk or high. They'll be around other positive, working people. They can make child support payments. And if they guys really don't want to work even after being given several opportunities, they might not be ready for change yet. So you need to really capitalize those guys who want to change....I would say about 30% of my caseload doesn't want to work and they don't want to go to school. I think there should be a class in prison that really addresses this. We have to reverse what they've been told, what they've learned. I don't know why some of these guys don't want to work. The prisons do a remarkable job - they give these guys a lot of opportunities. And I do see some positive changes for some of these guys in terms of employment. But it would be nice to see some of the in-prison employment programs do more. Education is a bit part of this, but it should be pounded into their head that employment is the most important thing. We have too many people that have been enabled by the system and don't think they ever need to work."*

Along these lines, the Parole Officer was particularly concerned about programs that enable participants in a manner that prevents them from becoming independent from services. As the PO described it, *"The worst thing you can do to these guys is enable them. And what I've seen over the years - if someone is having issues, you need to address the issues or they will only get worse. The programs need to keep it real and keep people at a high level of accountability if you want a high level of success. You have to be very careful when dealing with people who have been in prison - they have often learned behaviors of manipulation and coercion."*

Also in a similar vein, the Parole Officer was **concerned about the accountability of programs.** As it was explained, *"Having accountability for programs is important because we need to know if they are actually working. If a guy fails a program because he picked up a new felony, that's a fact. If he genuinely completed all the components of a program, then it should be reflected. I've seen some programs say a success is keeping someone out of jail or prison for a year. What kind of a success is that? Did he work? Did he pay child support? Is it really "successful" if it's only measured by only NOT committing a new crime?"*

The Officer had mostly positive reviews of programs like Mind the Gap, but kept the focus on the need for employment and the personal motivation of successful program participants. As was stated, *"I've had a few of them in mentoring and that is helpful. We need to identify which clients or offenders are really committed to change - who show up on time, who will fully participate, versus the ones who call in sick or miss a third of their mentoring sessions."*

The Officer did say that having **Mind the Gap was helpful in managing individual reentry plans**: *"POs and case managers can work together more in reentry and employment stuff. For instance, when they are making a plan, they need to be more specific than "I'm going to go out and look for work." Instead, I need to know, I am going out to Goodwill Easter Seals by a particular date. Having actual plans, dates, and reviewing if these goals have been met....Constant communication is so important. Programs don't have to be in a fancy building or anything like that. But there has to be something positive for these guys to look forward to. And the programs need to be about changing mindsets - some of these guys need to be reprogrammed on - what are their norms of life. Unfortunately, many of them are in prison because of poor role models, poor families, poor neighborhoods - not striving for school or jobs. And years of this - I mean, people have to say, I'm not going to think that way. They need to want to change. Commitment is a huge word."*

Finally, the Parole Officer interviewed here also had specific feedback about Mind the Gap and the way in which Case Managers worked with his cases: *"One thing David has done well is a really good smart plan. He throws together concrete objectives for the offender to do by certain dates. He makes it very easy. Like a blueprint. It gives them a blueprint on what they need to do - and if they do enough of those blueprints they are definitely making strides in the right direction. I don't have the time to do these kind of plans with my caseload - plus, because about a third of my caseload is currently in trouble. Which soaks up all of my time. The guys who are doing well are no work at all - but you never know which guys that will be. The programs can also be great for tracking people down - the accountability factor is great. It's been very helpful."*

## **Looking Towards the Future**

All of the service providers interviewed for this report had suggestions for how to improve fatherhood reentry programs. In particular, it was suggested that programs involve more pre-release planning, expand their levels of case management, train more people to work with the specific needs of recently released fathers, and filter some participants who successfully complete the program back in as mentors and volunteers.

### **Additional Pre-Release Services**

One Mind the Gap staffer suggested that, *“I would start training more men who have that passion. You don’t necessarily need to have gone to prison in order to have that passion or that commitment. But I would put two of those men in each institution in the entire state. And then I would get of them a team of men and women who would provide the other services that together, would do a lot of pre-release work, as well as be there in the streets as soon as the guy gets out. They would be able to clearly identify each individual’s needs for when they are back on the streets. Beyond just housing and the PO, because sometimes that’s all the DOC seems to really care about. They don’t want to deal with everything – just an address. But, lets deal with safe, secure housing. And lets deal with child support. And not just automatic repayment, but instead getting him to build a relationship with child support before he leaves prison so that when he is out, his case is already being worked on. Lets connect them with an employment consultant once they are out – but let’s plant the seed on the inside by having him work on some things that will prepare the path for when he gets out. So overall, that this individuals’ chance of success can just be higher.”*

Another staffer noted that even though corrections has a particular set of desirable outcomes, programs should maintain a holistic focus that offers a flexible array of services to accommodate the diverse needs of individuals. In addition, these services should begin as early as possible. For instance, one staff member said: *“Another thing we see is that in the DOC, pre-release planning is just a choice. Let’s work with the DOC and make it less of a choice – lets shave some days off if men are making real, dedicated progress toward preparing for their release. Lets shave a day or a half day off of their sentence for the things that they do. Its true you don’t want to reward people for things they have to do, but I can guarantee you in the long run, it’s going to help that individual and its going to save the taxpayers a lot of time. If we start in the inside and plant those seeds, there’s a better chance of success on the outside. Let’s put more money and more attention in to the pre-release. Starting to work on release plans earlier and earlier – a year before release, even.”*

The Parole Officer interviewed for this report had a similar sentiment: *“I think if it’s in the institution, if they make a commitment while still inside, they will follow through with it. The ones who come out and have a taste of freedom, sometimes they’re a bit more reluctant to see it through. So it should start before they get out to get some level of commitment. There’s a lot of people out there who need services - why waste our time on people who are not going to change? I think these programs should be mentioned even at the intake - and then once they branch out to other institutions, case managers should really always mention what programs are out there.”*

### **Increased Case Management & Overall Program Expansion**

Overall, staff expressed their desire to continue the program and expand it to other facilities. As one staff described it, *“I wish we could have more prisons because some guys*

would come in looking for services but they were from other institutions. We would send them to other resources, but it was still a disappointment.” Another staff member said, “For the amount of intensive support the participants received, there were just too many guys. I always wished that we would have been able to send more people from the program going into the facilities – having the employment support consultant and the mentor coordinator go in before release and explain what they do. I do know this would have taken a lot of staff time to send all those people down to Faribault, but if it were feasible, it would have been great.”

A Child Support Officer echoed this: “I wish there were some way to monitor the guys immediately when they get out, because I don’t know that Parole Officers are the most positive thing, and I’m not sure if it would be practical to be able to do that but I think constant monitoring. Be on the phone with them all the time. Visit them. Much, much, much person to person contact. More than we have been able to do with this project. And I don’t know if that’s possible in anybody’s world. If I had endless funds, that’s what I would do. I would assign a case advocate that would work with just this one person, or maybe two people, and work intensively with them, and just be with them. Shadow them. Take them to job interview, do everything possible.”

### **Filter Participants Back In as Volunteers**

Staff also thought it was important to specifically train staff to work with men in this context, particularly as the population of previously incarcerated fathers continues to grow. As one staff member said, “I think the most important thing we can do next is train more and more men and women to do this kind of work.” One staff member who had contact with men in the mentoring program said, “I tell the mentees that I would love for them to come back and be mentors someday, when they are off paper. Because a lot of them think they are a waste to society, but they are not. They are viable people in this world. And I want them to change that attitude about themselves. So I encourage them to come back after their supervision is done and give back through the program.”

## **Future and Sustained Collaboration**

It was important to every person interviewed for this report that the connections created through Mind the Gap continue into the future. As one GWES staff member put it: *“There’s been so many relationships established with other agencies, child support, the DOC – that Mind the Gap hasn’t really died. It died in name, but it will continue to live on in the idea of it and the connections that were made. I am grateful for the entire Mind the Gap program. I just hope more agencies, more nonprofits, and more facilities jump on. I believe that we can help a lot of fathers, a lot of mothers, and a lot of families heal from the stigma of incarceration.”*

This was also true from the perspectives of the Child Support Officers. As one described it, *“Just the connections I’ve been able to make around the state. I’ve become involved with visiting the prisons for their transitions fairs, and I give an annual child support seminar out at Stillwater Prison as a result of the transition fair – as a result of being in Mind the Gap. So I’ve developed a lot of contacts within the DOC. And they are now more aware of child support. I sort of consider it like being an ambassador – to just put a face on child support. A lot of PR. Especially with the client base, because so many of them look at us negatively, and part of my job in Mind the Gap is to put a positive face on child support. And the Feds are pushing us more in the vicinity of looking at their dads and their circumstances and not being unrealistic with the orders. It’s all moving in that direction.”* This CSO also remarked that, simply, *“I thoroughly enjoyed working with Mind the Gap. I learned more than I ever thought possible. It’s a stepping stone into working more with previously incarcerated fathers.”* The other CSO interviewed for this study also had feedback on the program as a pilot: *“I don’t think that for the program’s first time out, though, we can really expect a lot. It can’t be measured by one time out. There’s a lot of different ways I would set things up, but by no means would I say this program was at all a failure. If we have a good outcome from at least one person, then I would consider the entire program a success.”*

Staff also had thoughtful responses to the future of the program. One person said, *“Two years is just where you get started with a project like this. Two years is when things start finally going well. It should have been a ten year grant. It just feels like now we were finally chugging along, and then, ok it’s been great, glad it was successful, now we are on to something else. But, for the participants, these are people’s lives. People’s lives. It just seems like something this successful should have the chance to keep going.”* Finally, one other staff member summarized their experience as, *“I so enjoyed working with everybody. I love bringing that hope back into people’s lives. Rekindling that hope. Telling them it’s ok. Telling them that we do have consequences to our actions but it’s alright. You’re going to be fine. Just keep moving forward. Of all the jobs I’ve had, this is by far my favorite one. It’s a great opportunity and I love being part of it.”*