

# Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program

Road Test 1 | February 2020

**Prepared for:** Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services

**Prepared by:** MEF Associates

Kate Stepleton | Jordan Engel | Asaph Glosser





MEF Associates conducted this evaluation under a contract with the Sacramento Department of Child Support Services (DCSS). The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the DCSS.

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## Overview

The Digital Marketing grant program, sponsored by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, is a 24-month demonstration project with the goal of researching how digital marketing may help the child support program more effectively reach and serve families. In September 2018, OCSE awarded funds to 14 child support agencies to test digital marketing approaches and partnerships to reach parents that could benefit from child support services, and create or improve two-way digital communication and engagement with parents.

Sacramento County's Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) was one of the recipients of grants awarded. DCSS proposed testing the effects of a video advertisement on enrollment in the child support program, with the aim of increasing applications and case openings among custodial parents who are eligible for child support but not participating in the program. This report details findings from a descriptive study examining the implementation and effects of delivery via paid social media advertising. DCSS's hope was that the ad would lead to increased enrollments in the child support program among eligible custodial parents.

### Primary Research Questions

The research team sought to answer two related research questions:

- 1) Using social media metrics (e.g., views, link clicks), how did the ad perform?
- 2) Did paid social media advertising affect application or voluntary enrollment rates among custodial parents?

### Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation report is to describe the implementation of the first of three "Road Tests," each testing a distinct method for delivering a digital marketing message to single parents potentially interested in enrolling in DCSS services. These Road Tests each test a distinct delivery method of a video advertisement developed by DCSS. They are DCSS's first sustained attempt to engage potential customers through digital marketing. Results from this study will enable DCSS to understand the steps required to implement these approaches and to assess the viability of these approaches for future customer engagement efforts. In addition, this study describes the way in which DCSS used digital advertising platforms (i.e., Facebook, YouTube) to target certain demographics who are potentially eligible for DCSS services.

### Key Findings

This Road Test yielded several insights about the use of paid social media advertising to increase voluntary enrollments in the child support program:

- **DCSS's video advertisement was widely seen in Sacramento County.** During the study period (July 2019) the video ad garnered 641,825 impressions and 183,794 views.
- **The ad performed differently on the two social media platforms.** Far more Facebook users completed the desired action, following the link to the child support agency's website, compared to those viewing the ad on YouTube. This was likely a combination of DCSS (1) being able to better leverage targeting options on Facebook's platform and (2) because the Facebook campaign was designed to maximize clicks on the embedded link as opposed to video views on YouTube.

- **We do not know conclusively whether the placement of the ad drove viewers to submit child support applications and voluntarily open child support cases.** There were more applications during submitted during the study period (July 2019) compared to a year earlier, and the number of applications in July 2019 exceeded the monthly average in the preceding year. It is possible that the ad had a role in affecting this increase in applications and enrollments, but existing data are not sufficient to answer this question definitively.

## Methods

The study uses descriptive analyses of multiple data sources to address the main research questions. Data sources include detailed data on ad performance on the two social media platforms and analyses of DCSS administrative data.

- **Data on ad performance** allow for detailed description of the engagement with the advertisements, including the number of times the ad was watched in its entirety, the number of unique viewers who were shown the ad, the number of times the ad was shown, the number of clicks on the video, and the number of clicks on the link to the child support agency's enrollment page. These metrics include information on the demographic profile of the individuals engaging with the video.
- **DCSS administrative data** include information on the number of case openings in a given month, historical information on case openings, and demographic information about the individuals opening the cases.

These data sources allow for a nuanced description of the way in which the ads were deployed and the number of case openings during the study period. However, they are not sufficient to assess whether any change in the number of cases that were opened was caused by the campaign. This is the case for two reasons. First, the structure of the data does not allow DCSS or the research team to link the behavior of someone viewing the ad to the administrative data. In other words, there is no way to conclusively know whether a person clicking on the link embedded in the ad was the same person who opened the case. Second, the design of the study and existing data do not allow us to ascertain whether there are other potential factors (e.g., shifts in the economy, other outreach by DCSS, policy changes) that contributed to changes in parents' interest in opening DCSS case.

## Looking Forward

This is the first of three evaluation reports describing DCSS activities under the Digital Marketing grant. Subsequent reports will describe Road Tests focused on targeted email to parents potentially interested in enrolling in DCSS services and efforts to disseminate the video through partner agencies' social media channels.

# 1. Background

Sacramento County’s Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) was one of 14 recipients of grants awarded by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families to test digital marketing strategies to increase participation in the child support program. Over two years, grantees are mounting a range of innovative, digital approaches to engage parents and encourage child support involvement. Their efforts are guided by the *Learn-Innovate-Improve* (LI<sup>2</sup>) process, which calls for iterative testing and ongoing improvement of programmatic changes in human services (Derr, Person, and McCay, 2017).

Broadly, Sacramento County DCSS<sup>1</sup> proposed testing the effects of a video advertisement on enrollment in the child support program. At the conclusion of the project, the video will have been deployed in three “Road Tests,” each testing a distinct delivery method: (1) paid social media advertising, (2) targeted e-mail, and (3) sharing on partner agencies’ social media channels. The aim is to increase applications and case opening among custodial parents who are eligible for child support but not participating in the program. Specifically, DCSS hoped to reach single parents in this group who were experiencing financial struggles. Members of this population might include parents who could benefit from DCSS’s services but were unaware of their availability.

This report details findings from a descriptive study of the video’s first Road Test, examining the effects of delivery via paid social media advertising. The research aims were to describe (1) the implementation of the advertising campaign; (2) how the advertisements performed; and (3) whether the ads affected viewers’ engagement with DCSS. DCSS’s hope was that the ad would lead to increased enrollments in the child support program among eligible, custodial parents.

## 2. Intervention

The goal of the intervention was to increase online applications and voluntary enrollments into the child support program in Sacramento County. DCSS was responsible for conceptualizing the advertising campaign and developing all outreach materials. This included conversations with prospective child support clients, writing ad copy, producing a short video, and deploying the video on multiple digital platforms.

### 2.A. Development of the Ad

The content of the 30-second video ad was initially conceptualized following a focus group with five single mothers who were eligible to receive child support but were not participating in the program. Sacramento DCSS contracted with C<sup>2</sup> Research, a local marketing firm, to conduct the recruitment and focus group. C<sup>2</sup> recruited parents meeting the parameters of the target population (parents with minor children receiving CalFresh, MediCAL, or insurance subsidies without an active child support case). Participant feedback suggested potentially effective messages for compelling qualifying parents to open child support cases. Centrally, these messages stressed that parents are busy and that DCSS could help them acquire resources with minimal hassle.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, “DCSS” refers to the Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services. When referring to the California Department of Child Support Services, we will make the distinction clear.

DCSS focus group findings support some of the concepts found in a study of public perception of California's Department of Child Support Services, commissioned by the statewide agency (Ogilvy, 2018). Participants in the Sacramento DCSS focus group conducted for this digital marketing project possessed both accurate and inaccurate information about child support services. Most of them were unaware they could apply online or believed they had to gather extensive documentation prior to applying. Focus group attendees also explained how applying for child support could alter the already precarious relationship they have with their child's father.

Participants' responses indicated how their decision to apply or not apply for child support services is not an easy one. They understood the benefits of applying to the program, but they also feared the repercussions that this might have on the relationship with the other parent or their child's relationship with the other parent. Each prospective custodial parent expressed their frustration with not getting help from their child's other parent to cover costs of childrearing, but they also empathized with the other parent's lack of resources. Focus group participants also described juggling multiple obligations and a wariness about taking anything on that might be a hassle or further complicate their lives.

Informed by the state's commissioned study and the focus group, DCSS produced a [thirty-second video](#) featuring a mother moving through her morning routine, closing with her filing an application for child support online using her mobile phone. A voiceover commented, "As a parent, you do so much every single day.<sup>2</sup> You face many challenges just to make sure you're there for your child. We can't help you with everything, but we can help with your child support. You have options. Apply any time of the day from the privacy of your home." The ad linked to California's Virtual Online Application system (VIOLA), the web-based platform for applying to open a DCSS case.

## 2.B. Deployment of the Ad

Between July 1, 2019 and July 31, 2019, the video appeared as a paid advertisement on two social media platforms: Facebook and YouTube. On Facebook, targeted users saw the ad as a promoted post in their feed. The video played while embedded in the feed, allowing viewers to watch the ad or scroll past as they wished. Meanwhile, YouTube placed the ad before videos and required users to watch at least five seconds before their video began; after five seconds, users could click a button to "Skip this ad." The link to DCSS's VIOLA system was clickable throughout the Facebook ad; meanwhile, users who clicked on the YouTube ad were taken to the video's YouTube page, where they could find the VIOLA link in the video's description. Embedding the link in the YouTube ad was not possible, as YouTube only offers this option for channels that have amassed at least 100,000 views. DCSS did not have a YouTube presence prior to this Road Test, and as such had not accumulated any views.

### 2.B.1. Targeting

To maximize cost effectiveness, DCSS targeted the ad to potential viewers thought most likely to find the content relevant. These viewers included lower-income parents living in Sacramento County. As such, targeting was largely focused on likely viewer demographics (e.g., those without graduate degrees), where potential audience members lived, and interests suggesting that they were likely parents (e.g., searches for baby products). However, the degree to which ads were targeted to specific audiences varied. The targeting strategy used by DCSS when purchasing ads allowed for greater specificity on likely user characteristics on Facebook compared to YouTube. Facebook

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<sup>2</sup> Video viewable at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guVCnWnj14g>



targeting is typically a function of user-provided data used to populate profiles along with the ways in which users engage with content on the platform. YouTube, which is owned by Google, draws user data from information gleaned from search histories and information provided by users across Google’s broader suite of services (e.g., Gmail, YouTube, News). Table 1 summarizes the audience targeting parameters specified on each platform.

**Table 1.** Audience Targeting Parameters for Road Test 1

	Facebook	YouTube
Include:	Location: Sacramento County, CA Age: 18-65+ Interests: Family, Parents	Location: Sacramento County, CA Topics: Family & Relationships, Legal, Social Services Audiences: Family-focused lifestyles & hobbies, Parents, Baby & Children’s Products
Exclude:	Education Level: Master’s degree, professional degree, or Doctorate degree	<i>No exclusions</i>

## 2.B.2. Bidding Strategy

Social media advertising campaigns can be designed to achieve a range of different results, such as maximizing impressions, views, or clicks within a given budget. Both Google and Facebook employ an auction model to establish how prominently an ad is displayed compared to the many others vying for the same audience. Advertisers specify how much they are willing to pay for each impression, view, or click, and the platforms use this information, along with data about the ad’s relevance to the audience, to determine when, where, and how often to show the ad.

DCSS built each campaign to pay a maximum of \$100 per day, for a total of \$3,000 per social media platform over the course of a 30-day campaign. On each platform, DCSS had to set a bidding strategy to dictate how the daily budget would be spent; this bidding strategy affected how each platform deployed the ad.

The bidding strategy for the YouTube campaign was set to maximize views. As the VIOLA link was not embedded in the ad itself, it was not possible to establish a bidding strategy that maximized clicks. With maximum cost-per-view (CPV) bidding, DCSS pays for video views and other video interactions, like clicks on the ad, whichever comes first. With a CPV strategy, DCSS was able to set the maximum they were willing to pay each time the ad was viewed. Although the maximum CPV was specified, Google only charged what was necessary for an ad to appear on YouTube, as determined by Google’s ranking of audience and performance metrics.<sup>3</sup> The actual CPV was much lower than the specific maximum, but the cost still averaged \$100 per day throughout the campaign. In total, the YouTube campaign cost \$3,040.07.

For the Facebook campaign, the bidding strategy was set to maximize link clicks. DCSS was able to set the maximum they were willing to pay each time the ad was clicked, linking directly to VIOLA. DCSS was only charged when someone clicked the link. The Facebook campaign did not exhaust the full budget, as spending \$100 per day would have required showing the ad to the same people in the designated target population too many times. The total cost of the Facebook campaign was \$2,390.90.

<sup>3</sup> Google ranks ads according to how relevant the ad is to audiences and performance metrics like view rates. The cost of each ad placement under a CPV bidding strategy is the amount needed to rank higher than the next-ranked advertiser.

## 3. Methods

The following section presents the project's research questions and details the methods used to evaluate them.

### 3.A. Research Questions

To evaluate the effectiveness of the social media ads, the research team sought to answer two related research questions:

#### **Research Question 1: Using social media metrics, how did the ad perform?**

Social media platforms offer several ways to analyze who viewed an advertisement and the extent to which viewers engaged with it. In addition to describing demographic features of the audience, these metrics include impressions, reach, views, and link clicks. Of particular interest are data describing how well the ad was targeted to its intended audience and which members of the audience completed the desired action: clicking on the link to the online child support application.

#### **Research Question 2: Did the ad affect engagement with DCSS?**

Beyond enticing viewers to click the link to the child support application, the aim of the ad was to compel eligible custodial parents to apply to open a child support case. DCSS hypothesized that the ads would lead to increased online applications and voluntary enrollments in July 2019 relative to July 2018 and the average number of monthly applications over the previous year. Ideally, one would be able to track how many viewers of the ad began and followed through with an application. However, this was not possible in the current study.

### 3.B. Data

The research team used several data sources to address the above research questions.

#### **Facebook and Google Analytics**

Copious data describing ad performance are available through Facebook's Ads Manager and Google Ads. YouTube is a Google-operated service, and ads placed on the platform are managed through Google Ads. While many of the metrics for Facebook and Google Ads are similar, there are some minor differences. Table 2 defines key social media analytics terms and highlights variation in definitions by platform.

**Table 2.** Social Media Advertising Analytics Terms by Platform

	Facebook	Google (YouTube)
Views	Number of times the ad was watched in its entirety <sup>1</sup>	Number of times the ad was watched in its entirety or interacted with
Reach	Number of unique viewers who were shown the ad	
Impressions	Number of times the ad was shown; may include multiple placements per user	
Clicks	Number of clicks on any part of the post (e.g., on the DCSS page name, the video, or the link to VIOLA)	Number of clicks on the video ad as it played before a user's video
Link Clicks	Number of clicks on the link to VIOLA	<i>Not measured by Google; data captured by ClickMeter</i>

<sup>1</sup> In addition to 30-second views, Facebook also tracks 3-second and 10-second views. This document reports 30-second views for the purposes of comparability between Facebook and YouTube ad performance.

To the extent demographic information about users is available, Facebook and Google analytic data allow these metrics to be broken down by audience characteristics like gender and age.

### ClickMeter

As noted in Table 1, Google ad analytics used in the campaign did not capture how many users clicked the link to the online child support application in the description of the ad. Instead, the link itself was trackable through ClickMeter, a third-party service, which recorded each time the unique link from the video was clicked. DCSS created discrete links for both the Facebook and the YouTube ads so it was possible to distinguish which clicks came from which source.

### Administrative Data

The research team used administrative data from DCSS's information management system to answer the second research question, whether child support enrollments increased with DCSS. Records from June 2018 through July 2019 were available.

## 3.C. Analyses

To describe how the ad performed (Research Question 1), the research team ran descriptive statistics on analytic data from Facebook and Google. The team explored impressions, views, and link clicks within and across audience demographic groups; the team then calculated the final cost per link click on each platform.

To explore a possible link between the ad and program enrollments (Research Question 2), the number of applications submitted to the online system (VIOLA) and the number of newly opened cases in July 2019 were directly compared to July 2018 and the year between July 2018 and June 2019 to calculate percentage differences.

## 4. Findings

This section summarizes findings from the first Road Test. As noted above, there are substantial limitations of the research design that prevent us from making firm conclusions regarding the effect that the ads had on application rates. Instead, these findings help illustrate the nature and extent of engagement with the advertisement and offer some insight as to whether the campaign coincided with changes in enrollment rates.

## 4.A. Advertisement Performance

As noted above, there are multiple ways to measure engagement with digital media. This section describes the nature of this engagement across the two platforms.

### 4.A.1. Impressions

The deployment of the ad across Facebook and YouTube resulted in two patterns regarding impressions. Specifically, while the overall number of impressions was far larger on YouTube, we have substantially more information about the characteristics of users who viewed the ad on Facebook.

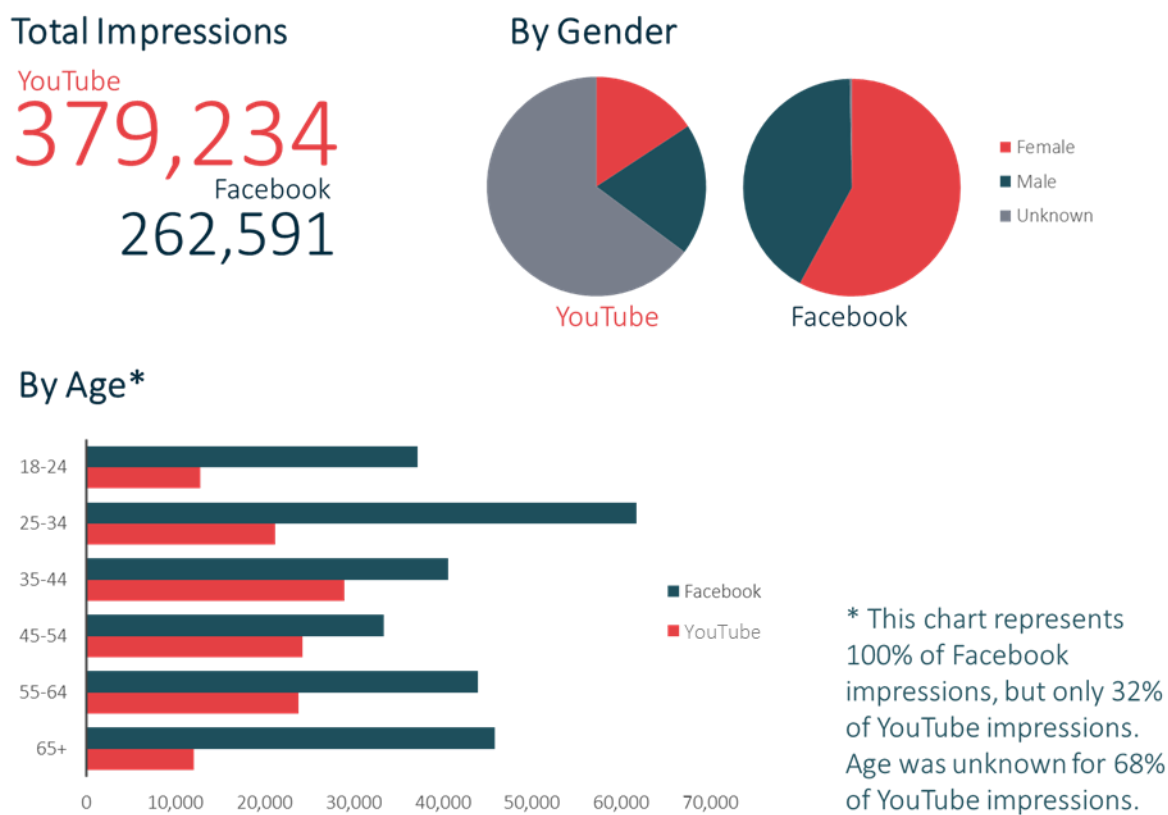


Figure 1. Impressions

YouTube showed the ad 44% more than Facebook, with 379,234 impressions over the course of the campaign compared to 262,591 impressions on Facebook. However, Facebook’s ad appears to have been far more targeted. A substantial majority of the ad’s impressions on YouTube were associated with users of unknown gender (65%) unknown age (68%), and users with both unknown age and gender (63%). In contrast, less than 1% of Facebook’s impressions were associated with viewers with unknown gender,<sup>4</sup> and the ages of all viewers are known. Figure 1 presents information about the ad’s impressions on both platforms.

<sup>4</sup> Facebook offers users 56 gender options, so this unknown percentage includes users with a known gender that is not female or male.

### 4.A.2. Views.

As was the case with impressions, the YouTube ad garnered far more views than the Facebook ad. Here it is important to keep in mind how the ads are presented. On Facebook, users can at any time scroll past video ads in their feeds. There is no minimum required watch time. Conversely, if an ad is shown on YouTube, the platform requires users to click to skip to their desired content. The more active interaction needed on YouTube to bypass the ad may have resulted in the higher rate of views compared to Facebook.



Figure 2. Views

Google analytics reported 178,215 30-second views,<sup>5</sup> whereas Facebook had 5,579 30-second views (Figure 2). For every 1,000 impressions, the YouTube ad had 470 views and the Facebook ad had 21 views. Demographically, people who viewed the ad were similar to those who had impressions; as such, age and gender distributions for people who viewed the ad are not presented here.

### 4.A.3. Link Clicks

Despite high levels of viewership and impressions, data suggest a relatively small number of individuals clicked the ads or the links embedded within them. Over the course of the campaign, the Facebook advertisement generated 2,425 link clicks to VIOLA. Meanwhile, ClickMeter reported seven link clicks<sup>6</sup> from the YouTube ad to VIOLA throughout the campaign. Importantly, as noted above, the link to VIOLA from the YouTube video could only be accessed from the link in the description on the ad's YouTube page. The advertisement itself received 672 clicks, directing users to the page on which the video was posted.

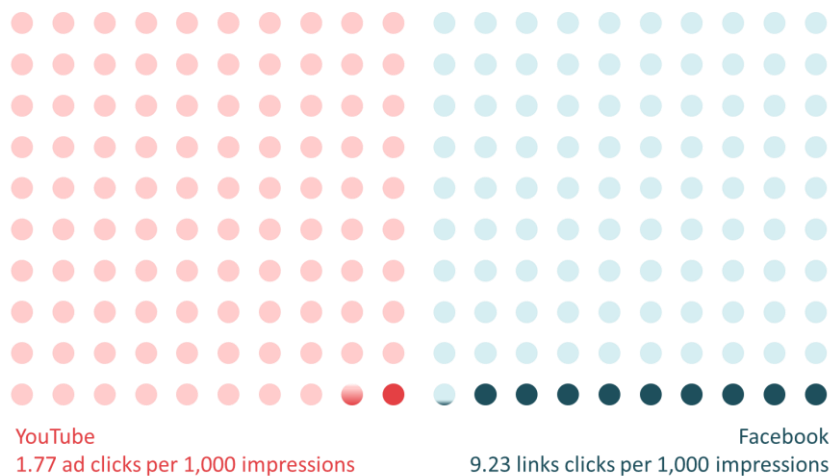


Figure 3. Click Rates

<sup>5</sup> YouTube views include interactions, or clicks on the ad, occurring before the full 30-second ad played.

<sup>6</sup> ClickMeter reported eight additional clicks from bots and spiders; these have been removed from the reported total.

Figure 3 illustrates the click rate for each ad. For every 1,000 impressions, the Facebook ad generated 9.23 link clicks. With far more impressions and far less engagement, the YouTube ad had substantially lower click rates. For every 1,000 YouTube impressions, the ad itself received 1.77 clicks; meanwhile, 1,000 impressions translated to only 0.04 link clicks to the VIOLA website.

#### 4.A.4. Cost

The average cost per link click for the Facebook advertisement was \$1.11, and the average reported cost for each click on the YouTube ad itself was \$4.52. Note, the YouTube cost ratio reported is for clicks on the advertisement, not link clicks to the VIOLA website. If we calculated the cost for each link click to VIOLA from YouTube, the cost per link click would be substantially higher (\$202.67).

## 4.B. Applications and Enrollments

As noted above, the available data are not well-suited to directly assessing the effect of this digital marketing campaign on the opening of new child support cases. However, we compared case openings in the month in which the campaign occurred to case openings in the prior year. These comparisons found relatively small differences in applications and case openings. Figure 4 presents the number of online applications and voluntary case openings in July 2019 and each month in the preceding year.

Compared to July 2018 and monthly averages in the year preceding the Road Test (July 2018 through June 2019), DCSS saw a higher volume of VIOLA applications submitted and more enrollments. If the ad had the desired effect, we would expect to see increases in both online applications and new case openings in July 2019 compared to these other time periods. July 2019 had more VIOLA applications and more voluntary case openings than any month in the previous year. Compared to July 2018, there were 25% more VIOLA applications submitted and 9.4% more voluntary case openings in July 2019. This amounted to 24 additional new case openings in July 2019 compared to July 2018. Similarly, compared to monthly averages in the previous year, there were 27% more VIOLA applications submitted and 37% more voluntary enrollments in July 2019. While these results suggest the potential that the digital marketing efforts may have resulted in increased applications, the evidence is far from conclusive. While July 2019 had more VIOLA applications than both July 2018 and June 2019, monthly VIOLA applications had been increasing since April 2019, and the increase in case openings between June 2019 and July 2019 may have been expected. Throughout the previous year, there were not recognizable trends, so the increase between July 2019 and July 2018 may not have been expected. DCSS did not conduct any additional efforts to increase application submissions between July 2018 and July 2019, but changes in application and enrollment numbers may be a function of other factors unrelated to the test.

Changes in VIOLA applications may best reflect changes due to the advertisement, as presumably a viewer of the advertisement would create their application once they clicked the ad's link to VIOLA. However, voluntary enrollments do not all come from VIOLA applications. Voluntary case opens by custodial parents may come from VIOLA applications, in person applications, or referrals from other states or countries.

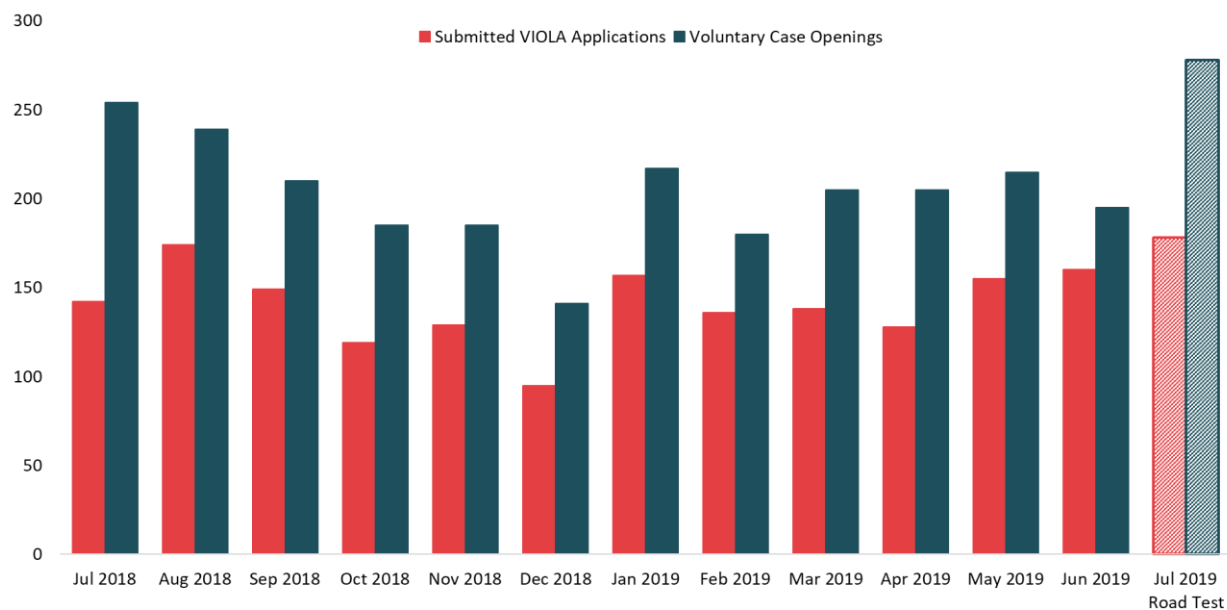


Figure 4. Applications and Case Openings

We compared the demographic distribution of July 2019 enrollees with July 2018 enrollees and individuals who had new cases opened between July 2018 and June 2019 to assess whether these groups differed along various dimensions. July 2019 enrollees were not significantly different from enrollees in July 2018 or in the year preceding the Road Test on age, gender, ethnicity, prior cash aid receipt, or MediCAL or CalFresh use at the time of application. For example, while the overall number of DCSS enrollees was higher in July 2019 compared to July 2018, the gender breakdown of each group of enrollees was similar. Table 3 presents descriptive demographic information about new enrollees in the child support program in July 2019, the month when the advertisements were shown.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Information about July 2019 Enrollees

	%		Mean		Standard Deviation		n	
	July 2018	July 2019	July 2018	July 2019	July 2018	July 2019	July 2018	July 2019
Gender							250	270
Female	84.80	84.44						
Male	15.20	15.56						
Race/Ethnicity							159	136
Asian	3.14	2.21						
Black	24.53	30.88						
Hispanic	25.79	26.47						
Native American	6.29	0.74						
White	33.33	34.56						
Pacific Islander	5.03	2.94						
Other	1.89	2.21						
Age			36.15	35.94	9.97	9.72	254	278
Number of unemancipated children			1.39	1.40	0.77	0.72	267	306

**Table 3.** Descriptive Information about July 2019 Enrollees

	%	Mean	Standard Deviation	n
Gender				270
Female	84.44			
Male	15.56			
Race/Ethnicity				136
Asian	2.21			
Black	30.88			
Hispanic	26.47			
Native American	0.74			
White	34.56			
Pacific Islander	2.94			
Other	2.21			
Age		35.94	9.72	278
Number of unemancipated children		1.40	0.72	278

## 4.C. Discussion

Data from the two social media platforms suggests that DCSS’s video advertisement was widely seen in Sacramento County in July 2019. Across platforms, the ad garnered 641,825 impressions and 183,794 views. However, the ad performed differently on YouTube and Facebook, with far more Facebook users completing the desired action, following the link to the VIOLA website. This is likely due to a combination of factors.

First, the campaign bidding strategy on Facebook optimized ad placement to gain link *clicks*, while the YouTube campaign was set up to maximize *views*. Although far more YouTube users viewed the ad, fewer were actively engaged by it, and the vast majority did not click on the ad or the VIOLA link.

Second, the campaign on Facebook’s advertising platform involved more refined targeting based on user data compared to the YouTube campaign. It appears that Facebook was more likely to show the ad to users for whom the content was relevant. Although DCSS attempted to target YouTube viewers whose web searches and browsing history suggested that they might be interested in the ad’s content, only 9% of viewers were identified in this manner. For most YouTube viewers, very little user data was available.

Third, the link to the VIOLA website could be clicked throughout the Facebook ad, while it only appeared in the description of the YouTube ad. Viewers of the advertisement on YouTube had to click the ad to be taken to the page where the video was posted, then they had to click the link in the video description. These extra steps may have deterred interested viewers. Even taking that into account, viewers of the YouTube ad appear to have been far less likely to interact with the video than were viewers of the Facebook ad.

We do not know conclusively whether the placement of the ad drove viewers to submit VIOLA applications and voluntarily open child support cases. However, there were more applications submitted in July 2019 than in July 2018, and the number of applications in July 2019 exceeded the monthly average in the preceding year. The same was true for enrollments: July 2019’s enrollments surpassed both July 2018 and the monthly average for the previous year. It is possible, then, that the ad had a role in affecting this increase in applications and enrollments. However, comparisons to prior time periods are an imperfect measure of the relationship between the deployment of the ad and DCSS applications. It is not possible to know with certainty whether the number of applications



submitted in July 2019 would have been higher, lower, or the same had the ad not been placed. There are any number of other factors, aside from the ad, that could also explain variation in application rates. These include shifts in the economy, other outreach efforts undertaken by DCSS or the state child support agency, shifts in broader media coverage of the child support program, changes in the nonmarital birth rate, shifts in how partner agencies and community organizations talked to their clients about child support, and many more. To fully understand whether this was the case, it would be necessary to digitally track users who were directed to the VIOLA website from the ad through the application and enrollment process.

Whether or not the increase in applications was related to the advertising campaign, it is important to consider the cost of this digital marketing strategy. All else being equal, if all 24 additional voluntary case openings could be attributed to the ad, each new enrollment would have cost DCSS \$226.29. The per-enrollment cost may have been lower if, as a result of other factors, DCSS would have otherwise enrolled fewer applicants in July 2019 than July 2018. However, as it is not possible to know how many new program participants enrolled as a result of seeing the ad, the per-enrollee cost may have in fact been higher. Moreover, these costs do not account for time spent developing the digital marketing materials, deploying them, and monitoring their implementation.

Finally, there are other factors that may have affected the ad's performance and its capacity to drive online applications and enrollments. It is possible that the video did not capture viewers' attention quickly enough or that its message did not resonate with them. Likewise, it may not be realistic to presume that watching a brief advertisement is enough to compel someone to apply for child support. The potential applicant may wish to learn more about the process before applying or may need more time to contemplate the decision to apply. This Road Test could not assess whether either of these factors was at play.

## 5. Lessons Learned and Next Steps

There are several lessons from this Road Test for child support agencies considering paid social media advertising to increase voluntary enrollments, outlined below. We close with a brief description of DCSS's next Road Test under the digital marketing grant.

### 5.A. Lessons Learned

This Road Test yielded several insights about the use of paid social media advertising to increase voluntary enrollments in the child support program:

- While paid social media advertising increases visibility and, possibly, awareness of a child support agency and its programs, it may not be able to effect a substantial increase in voluntary enrollments.
- If a child support agency pursues paid social media advertising, staff should think carefully about how to structure the campaigns. In particular, bidding strategies should be aligned with the desired action from audience members. Similarly, the ad itself should be designed to motivate the desired viewer action. For instance, if the ad's goal is to drive traffic to the child support agency's website, the link to the site should be conspicuous and direct.
- Likewise, staff should consider which platforms are most appropriate. The content of an ad promoting the services of a child support agency will be relevant to a particular set of viewers, and some platforms may be better able to target those viewers than others. In this Road Test, Facebook proved to be more capable of targeting users than YouTube. However,

additional exploration of each platform's targeting features and options for presenting advertising content to refine targeting may be worthwhile.

- To best understand whether paid social media advertising can increase voluntary enrollments in the child support program, it is necessary to digitally track users from viewing ads through the application and enrollment process. Data are needed to capture how potential applicants funnel through a set of steps, from viewing an ad to initiating an application and completing it.
- Child support programs should weigh the value they place on enrolling new cases and the costs associated with outreach via paid social media advertising.

## 5.B. Next Steps

DCSS will launch its second Road Test in December 2019, testing the use of targeted e-mail outreach to single parents who are not enrolled in the child support program and have applied for new Medicaid or SNAP benefits. Each week in December, the county Department of Human Assistance will identify new Medicaid and SNAP applicants who fit these criteria and deliver the video ad to them via e-mail. The e-mail will include a brief, clear message about DCSS's services and the embedded video, which recipients may choose to play. Using methods similar to those employed in this Road Test, the research team will analyze the e-mail campaign's performance and compare child support applications and enrollments in December with the previous year.

## References

- Derr, M., A. Person, and J. McCay. (2017). *Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives*. OPRE Report #2017-108. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.
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