

Child Support Quarterly

A Publication of the Minnesota Child Support Program



Spring 1999

Head Start, child care collaborative assists families with more resources

Minnesota's child support, Head Start and child care programs are working to improve the lives of Minnesota children through a new collaborative effort to encourage low-income families to make use of all the resources available to them.

disseminate consistent and accurate information to parents.

A critical piece has been cross-training staff. Staff already refer families among the programs, but arming them with basic knowledge about each program's policies and procedures gives them more tools to encourage and empower parents.

For child support, the effort could mean increased use of child support enforcement services.

"It's very apparent to us that our presence is needed. We have to dispel a lot of myths about child support that have developed over the years," said Lorie Rehling-Anderson, project coordinator for the Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division.

Welfare reform heightens the urgency for some parents, who now are encouraged to go to work and become self-sufficient. Financial support through child support and child care assistance can make the difference for many of those parents.

By the end of the summer, the collaboratives should include 13 counties and Fond du Lac and Mille Lacs Indian reservations.

Head Start facts

- Basic funding comes from the federal government; state funding expands services to more children; communities provide in-kind support.
- Programs are administered locally by community-based nonprofit agencies.
- Programs are designed locally and may be center-based, home-based or a combination.
- Head Start serves children from birth to the age of compulsory school attendance.
- At least 90 percent of children enrolled in Head Start live in families with incomes at or below the poverty level.

The Minnesota Head Start, Child Care and Child Support Collaborative is calling upon staff in each program to improve communication and enhance referrals from one program to another.

Program representatives from four regions throughout the state meet monthly to educate one another and develop ways to

Partners meet challenge with new child support expedited process



Laura Kadwell
Director, Child Support Enforcement Division

I am happy to report that Minnesota child support professionals have worked side by side with legislators, judges and others to meet the challenges presented by the Minnesota Supreme Court's decision in the *Holmberg* case, which ruled that the current administrative process was unconstitutional.

The 1999 Legislature created a new expedited process within the

judicial branch that uses child support magistrates to decide child support matters. The legislation requires that the new system:

- be streamlined and uniform statewide and result in timely and consistent orders;
- be accessible to parties without the need for an attorney and minimize litigation;
- use limited financial resources cost effectively and
- comply with applicable federal law.

The legislation requests the Supreme Court to develop rules to implement the process. An Advisory Committee on the Rules of Child Support Procedure is drafting the proposed court rules. The current draft allows some uncontested matters to be resolved without a hearing, makes magistrates' orders final unless appealed and requires more attorney involvement than the current process. The

chief justice intends to have final rules issued by early June.

The state child support office is busy planning for the new process. We have identified critical documents we plan to have available by July 1. We will issue interim procedures and policies and conduct training. This will include an interactive video conference at the end of June with PRISM coordinators, lead PRISM-ers and county attorneys. Statewide training will likely follow.

The last several months have been challenging and rewarding. We are gratified by the strong commitment to child support that we have heard from all who have been involved in this very significant change.

We believe we will have a process that can serve Minnesota families. And we have forged stronger relationships with our partners in providing those services.

Collaborative, from page 1

Head Start helps families break the cycle of poverty by improving preschool-age children's health and social competence and promoting economic self-sufficiency for parents. The program provides health, education, parent involvement and social services to support parents.

"A cornerstone of Head Start is parent involvement," said Kathy

Burski, the Head Start program manager for the Lakes and Pines Community Action Council, based in Mora. Referrals from child support offices provide additional avenues for Head Start staff to involve both parents in a child's life.

Minnesota was one of six states receiving federal funding to initiate collaboration. The state is

applying for funding for a third year to take the project through September 2000. By the end of the summer the collaboratives should include Aitkin, Anoka, Carlton, Chisago, Isanti, Itasca, Koochiching, Kanabec, Ramsey, Mille Lacs, Pine, St. Louis and Washington counties and Fond du Lac and Mille Lacs Indian reservations.

Workforce Center helps dad pay support

After months of evading his child support obligation, Waite Park noncustodial father Randy Winters was tired of working for cash and hiding. He called the Stearns County Child Support Office and told Tammy Larson, the on-call child support officer, he wanted to be

involved with his family in spite of his current unemployment.

Child support staff referred Winters to the area workforce center, Stearns-Benton Employment and Training Council. Within days, he enrolled in its training program, and in weeks was hired by Donlin's Mill Work of St. Cloud.

Now he makes child support payments regularly through automatic income withholding.

"Our communication was key to building trust and cooperation," said Jim Leigh, Winters' child support officer. Leigh also talked with the custodial mother. "At first she wanted us to follow through with contempt, but I convinced her to allow us time to enable Randy to pay his support. My time was well spent," Leigh said.

"The main thing I learned is that I have to make a personal effort," Winters said. "Jim gave me the confidence I needed."

Winters' success prompted the



Jim Leigh (left) and Tammy Larson, Stearns County child support officers, are working more closely with their local workforce center to help noncustodial parents find work and pay child support.

child support office and workforce center to begin working more closely together to help other noncustodial parents find employment.

Before referring Winters to the workforce center, Julie Ellis, the child support supervisor, met with center staff to discuss their services. Ellis and staff agreed if child support officers could get noncustodial parents to the workforce center, they would get parents into employment programs when possible.

Child support staff are now sending letters about the workforce center to noncustodial parents who have an order for support based on imputed income and no known employer. They hope the letter will generate referrals and help some noncustodial parents find work.

"For us to collect support for children, we need to send a positive message that we have a common goal with the obligor—to become employed and stay employed," Ellis said.

"The main thing I learned is that I have to make a personal effort.

Jim gave me the confidence I needed."

Randy Winters
noncustodial father

"Night Court" gives parents options

Customer service is gaining more attention in child support offices nationwide. Amicable relationships between child support offices and parents can lead to fewer broken support agreements and higher collection rates.

Dakota County recently mounted its own customer service push to improve efficiency in an office where staff worked with approximately 11,000 cases to collect more than \$30.7 million in support payments last year.

Last fall, the office surveyed parents about how they view the services they received. Responses were both positive and negative, and are being used as a basis for changing some procedures.

A courtesy letter now goes out to parents if their case is reassigned to a new worker. The move has reduced confusion and complaints about staff changes, said Theresa Olson, a collection services supervisor.

This fall, county staff will pilot an informal, voluntary evening orientation session for parents who are apprehensive or concerned about the child support collection process.

In a related customer service effort, a work group of Dakota County child support officers is overseeing a "night court" pilot project as an alternative for working parents to attend administrative process hearings. In addition to

regular, daytime hearings, 5 p.m. hearings are held once a week at the county's West St. Paul office.

Staff plan to continue the "night court" pilot with the switch to expedited process through September. Then they will evaluate the pilot and other customer service initiatives.

The night court project also may ease the transition for parents moving off public assistance and into jobs.

"Two months into their new job, we'd have a court date for them to come in for a 10 a.m. hearing," said Linda Olson, another collection services supervisor. "It's nice to be able to offer options."

To make the best use of the extended hours at the facility, the staff also arranged for Dakota County's job resource room to be open on the same evenings.

Judy Bernier, a child support officer and member of the extended hours work group, said, "It gives the public an opportunity to see government as more flexible and willing to accommodate their needs."



James Gerbarter (left), an administrative law judge, and Lori Schnepf, court facilitator, staff the evening "night court" hearings for Dakota County child support cases.

"It (the evening hours) gives the public an opportunity to see government as more flexible and willing to accommodate their needs."

Judy Bernier
Dakota County
Child Support Officer

Minnesotans star in federal video



Gretchen Kewitsch is the Dakota County child support officer whose client is featured in the federal video.

A Dakota County custodial mom, who got help collecting child support through the national new hire data match, stars in a new video promoting federal initiatives. And Minnesota child support staff play supporting roles.

The video, "The Changing Landscape of Child Support," produced by a contractor for the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, is an overview of child support services with information on initiatives such as new hire reporting, parent locator service and the case registry. The video demonstrates how the tools can positively affect child support collections.

Stephanie Dudley of Farmington and her two sons agreed to work with the video production company. The crew spent a day with the family, filming her at the grocery store, Target and at home. The boys, ages 5 and 7, are shown getting off the school bus.

Phil Dahlseth, Dakota County child support supervisor, and Gretchen Kewitsch and Jennifer Gustafson, county child support officers, are also featured.

Dahlseth, who has more than 25 years of child support experience, said making the video was "just another day in child support." He is more excited about new hire reporting, which matches new employees nationwide with child support obligations.

"It is nice to see faster hits and money coming in a lot quicker since new hire reporting was put in place. I hope the video encourages workers to be more responsive to interstate cases and serving employers," Dahlseth said.

Staff from DHS' Child Support Enforcement Division also appear, explaining how the initiatives, including the child support payment center, operate.

"The video demonstrates how national new hire, federal parent locate service and the federal case registry provide both employer and personal information," said Joe Banken, a DHS program advisor, who was interviewed for the video, along with Greg Pochling and Robert McDowell, from the Child Support Payment Center.

Other videos

These federal videos are also available:

- *"The ABCs of Child Support Employer Overview"*
- *"Child Support in the Courts"*
- *"Financial Institution Data Match"*
- *"Voluntary Paternity Acknowledgment Hospital Staff Training"*
- *"New Hire Reporting"*

Contact Molly Crawford at (651) 215-6279 or molly.crawford@state.mn.us for copies.

Father poster honored

The father poster, featured in the Winter 1999 *Child Support Quarterly*, has received a Northern Lights Award of Merit from the Minnesota Association of Government Communicators. The annual contest recognizes excellence in government communications.

Dunkelberger receives award

Kay Dunkelberger, operations manager for DHS' Child Support Enforcement Division, is one of the members of the federal case registry team that recently received the Health and Human Services Secretary's Award for Distinguished Service. Secretary Donna Shalala presented the team the award at a Washington, D.C., ceremony.

PRISM nears Y2K compliance

The Department of Human Services (DHS) staff has fixed the code on 99 percent of PRISM data to ensure that the child support computer system is ready for the year 2000 (Y2K). (Y2K problems can develop when computer programs that use only two digits to identify a year read 00 as the year 1900.)

DHS is working with counties to ensure that all state-owned, county-based workstations are Y2K compliant. DHS is mitigating Y2K risks for PRISM connectivity by replacing nearly all county-based personal computers with compliant equipment. For more information, visit the DHS Y2K website at: www.dhs.state.mn.us/its/y2k.

MFSRC conference set

The Minnesota Family Support and Recovery Council (MFSCR) will hold its annual conference at Madden's Resort in Brainerd, Oct. 17 to 20. The conference, "Y2K: Yes to Kids," will preview workshop themes for the "Minnesota Family Ties" Child Support Summit in January 2000. Registration information will be available in July. For more information, call Sandy Zarembinski at (612) 348-5050.

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444 Lafayette Road North
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155-3846

Staff

Molly Crawford
Lisa Wilder Larson
Karen Smigjelski
Danette Thiers

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Dads Make a Difference recognized

Dads Make a Difference was recently honored as the program of the year by the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting.

For more information about the youth peer education program, contact Dads Make a Difference, University of Minnesota Extension Service at (651) 704-2061 or at: www.dads.umn.edu.

Domestic violence training set

All child support and financial workers, along with state and county supervisors, employment services staff and MinnesotaCare staff are required to attend domestic violence and sexual abuse training this summer. Cornerstone Advocacy Services and its subcontracted domestic advocates will hold regional training sessions from June through September. For training, staff should follow their agency's regular registration procedures.