
Enough is Enough B Reform the Child Support System Now

The recent troubles at the DuPage State Disbursement Unit (ASDU®) have brought child support into the public eye once again. They painfully illustrate how essential reliable delivery of child support is for Illinois families. It is important to realize, however, that the delays and confusion of the conversion to a central clearinghouse for payments are not the only problems with the state's child support system. It has been operating poorly for years, often with little public or political attention. It is time to devote the attention and resources necessary to fix the entire system.

The Illinois child support system's problems are rooted in its organizational structure-- an assembly line with functions and responsibilities spread across a half dozen public agencies (the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Illinois Department of Public Aid (AIDPA®), the Illinois Attorney General or the county state's attorney, the county clerks of the circuit courts, sheriffs, and circuit courts) and some private contractors. These agencies and contractors are usually located floors, buildings, or even miles away from each other, and are not linked by compatible computer systems.

Under this unworkable system, parents must spend hours trying to locate anyone with information about the status of their case. Custodial parents often receive contradictory information and no follow-through on their inquiries about such basic concerns as missing checks or cessation of desperately needed child support payments. Some non-custodial parents who make timely payments later discover that money is not going to their child, but has been credited to the wrong account or lost. Meanwhile, this same parent has been labeled a deadbeat® and has had other assets, such as income tax refunds, seized. These are just a few examples of the day-to-day struggles of parents trying to pay or collect child support in Illinois.

The lowest-income families are hit hardest by the failure of child support. Currently, the child support program offers little benefit to these families because they are allowed to keep only \$50 of support collected each month. The rest, an average of \$150, goes to reimburse the government. There is growing evidence that this archaic policy further hinders the state's ability to collect child support by decreasing the non-custodial parent's incentive to pay.

But there are solutions to these problems. In May 1998 the Chicago Appleseed Fund For Justice and the Chicago Council of Lawyers released their report advocating a wholly new model for child support collections. The plan was the product of a panel of experts chaired by retired Illinois Supreme Court Justice Seymour Simon and included representatives from 19 government agencies, legal services providers, community groups and private law firms.

This model urges that one centralized agency should be responsible for child support

services. This is in line with experts throughout the country who stress that child support functions should be centralized within a single agency. Indeed, IDPA itself acknowledged three years ago that child support enforcement responsibilities should be consolidated under one roof.

The Chicago Appleseed/Chicago Council of Lawyers model includes numerous other recommendations aimed at increasing the amount of child support collected. In an historic press conference held in May 1998, all of the major government agencies involved in Illinois child support, including IDPA, agreed to implement the recommendations of this model.

Today, Illinois has an opportunity to improve its child support system Bthe safety net for thousands of single-parent households B in three ways.

First, in a collaborative effort, Metropolitan Family Services, Chicago Appleseed and the Chicago Council of Lawyers have developed a demonstration project that would operate a model child support agency with all personnel under one roof. Serving 23,000 parents on Chicago-s southeast side, our demonstration project would test the viability of a single agency and correct any problems before our model is implemented throughout Cook County and Illinois. The SDU debacle illustrates the need for planning and testing. We offer IDPA a new model of child support collection enforcement along with the opportunity to plan and test its widespread implementation. We urge IDPA not to squander this opportunity.

Second, consistent with the Chicago Appleseed/Chicago Council of Lawyers 1998 report on child support, we urge the state of Illinois to establish an independent agency that will implement our child support model throughout Cook County.

Third, Illinois-s child support program must embrace policies that recognize the real-life circumstances of the families that depend on its services. The bulk of the child support collected, if not all, should go to the families instead of to the state.

No one can disagree that Illinois must fix its broken child support system. We offer IDPA, the Illinois legislature and Governor Ryan an opportunity to make meaningful reforms. The time is right to make dramatic changes in our system. Hundreds of thousands of Illinois mothers, fathers and children will thank you.

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