



Child Support Report

OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT

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'Did You Say Billion?'

National Offset Collections Boast Record-Setting Year

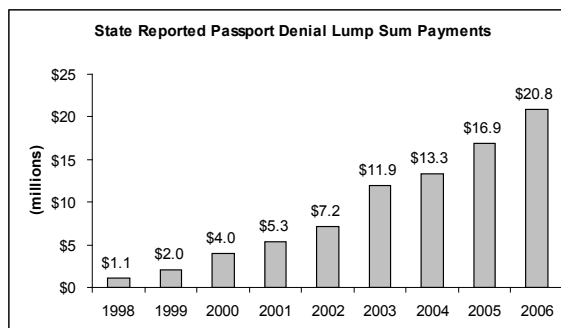
By **Brian Peeler**
OCSE

I love telling people where I work. Unless you have dealt with child support on a personal level, or you work in the industry, then it is unlikely you have heard of the Federal OCSE. Their response is usually a polite nod, a smile, and a comment along the lines of “Oh, that’s so nice.” The fun part comes when I tell them I work on a program within OCSE that collects over \$1.5 billion a year. Their eyes light up with attention, and they respond in one of two ways: “Wow!” or “Did you say *billion*?” I always answer, “Yes, billion with a *B*.”

Now, though, I have to change my response—but for a great reason! In 2006, the Federal Offset Program collected over \$1.6 billion (net). How much *over*? Not much, actually (\$239,060). But, in this case, it isn’t the size of the difference that matters; for the first time since 2001, we’ve broken the \$1.6 billion mark. In 2001, we collected \$1.65 billion.

However, that included \$262 million in off-sets from the special \$300 Tax Rebates paid out that summer. When you exclude the \$262 million from the 2001 collection total, the \$1.6 billion in net collections makes 2006 a record-breaking year.

Great things are happening with Passport Denial, too. States voluntarily reported almost \$21 million in lump sum payments from obligors whose passports were denied due to a child support debt. That’s a 23 percent increase over collections reported in 2005. The chart below shows the yearly collections voluntarily reported by States since the inception of the program. As a “numbers guy” who does a lot of reporting, I can honestly say that a chart can’t be any prettier than that.



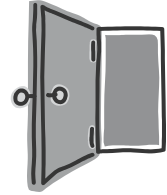
INSIDE:

- **Grant projects reach out to serve NCPs:**
Faith-based help in Louisiana page 2
Modification study in Michigan page 4
- **Future CSE professionals?** page 6

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Roy Nix, OCSE Chief of Federal Collections and Enforcement, credits these impressive figures to “several small enhancements to the collection programs, but small enhancements add up. I also believe that what continues to

See **BILLION**, page 8



Filling the Gap in Louisiana Faith-Based 'Door of Opportunity' Stays Open For Rural Noncustodial Dads

By Elaine Blackman
CSR Editor

The eye-catching brochure says it all: “A door of opportunity is open for you ... We want to help ... You are not alone ...” But it is five volunteers who bring these words to life for parents who participate in a rural Louisiana program called *Fill the Gap*.



Ernest and Cheryl Breaux work with a new Fill the Gap participant.

Under an ACF special improvement project (SIP) grant awarded last fall, the nonprofit Christian Community Council in Albany, LA, will continue to operate its 3-year-old Fill the Gap program through August 2008. This means classes, counseling, and employment help will go on for noncustodial parents behind in their child support who are referred to Fill the Gap by its partners—the State’s 21st Judicial Court District and the Amite District Support Enforcement Services Office.

The grant also will allow Fill the Gap to develop a database to help improve its efficiency, and a program manual to help encourage other

regions in the State to start similar programs.

“Fill the Gap offers the Court a problem-solving alternative to incarceration,” says program coordinator Cheryl Breaux. In turn, the volunteers provide updates to the Court’s Judge Leonora Estes and to child support staff on the progress of parents in the program. “We help participants develop credibility,” says Breaux. “By verifying whether the participant is actively seeking employment, for example, courts and child support staff can better determine whether a parent truly is not able to pay.”

Fill the Gap got its start when Breaux’s husband, long-time Pastor Ernest Breaux, pursued his interest in fatherhood issues and noncustodial parents and put together a curriculum to start a fatherhood program in his church. He looked at the barriers that noncustodial parents regularly face in his part of the State, including limited employment and employment opportunities, lack of education, and lack of life skills, such as how to find a job.

Then he introduced himself to Judge Estes, who welcomed his help.

“The Breaux’s started Fill the Gap three years ago out of the goodness of their heart,” says Judge Estes, adding that she didn’t have a program like theirs she could turn to before. “The program focuses on whatever they can do to help the noncustodial parent find and keep employment ... and they have great respect from the local business community.”

Fill the Gap’s 10-week secular curriculum begins with an interview. “We look at their his-

See FILL THE GAP, next page



In front of the Tangipahoa Parish court house are Fill the Gap's Cheryl Breaux, left, and Ernest Breaux, with Judge Leonora Estes, 21st Judicial District Hearing Officer, second from left, and Teresa Bass, Support Enforcement District Manager, Amite District.

tory, see if they have literacy problems, criminal backgrounds, learn about their children and their relationship with the other parent," says Cheryl Breaux, adding that "many parents who come into the program have experienced life trauma, lack necessary life skills, and are confused about court processes and child support. ... So we listen and let them tell us their story."

From there the volunteers develop a plan of action together with the participant that includes "what we need to do to bring them into compliance." The plan may begin, for example, with the participant needing to apply for forms of identification.

The curriculum's weekly classes serve as an interactive support group for parents and address a variety of topics, such as self-esteem for parents and their children, how rejection can affect life choices, and issues surrounding parenthood.

Breaux brags about her company of volunteers, including husband Ernest; Tammy Rottmann, a mom with baby at home, who attends court sessions; Emmy Trammell, a midwife who helps teach the classes; and Breaux's mother, Evon Stevens, who helps with data input and contacts area businesses "to expand employment opportunities for participants, or perhaps to ask an employer to take a second look at a participant's application," says Breaux.

She also boasts about the program's success rate: As of April 2006, 79 percent of the 19 Fill the Gap participants in 2004 are in payment status, as are 75 percent of the 44 participants in 2005.

The Breaux's hope Fill the Gap will set an example for others, and also will expand to include parents in the 22nd Judicial Court District. Mostly, they are passionate about the program's mission and encouraged by its success:

program's mission and encouraged by its success:

"We're here to help them over the hump, to help them make better choices in life," says Cheryl Breaux. "But what really keeps us going is when we see changes in the parents. We can see something click when they walk out the door. ... Some parents even ask to come back—and bring a friend."

Teresa Bass, Support Enforcement District Manager, is thankful that "Fill the Gap has provided assistance to noncustodial parents who want to make the effort to be a part of their children's lives."

Judge Estes, too, is thrilled with their work. "It's been a wonderful program. We can always count on them." *CSR*

Fill the Gap volunteer Emmy Trammell conducts a class.



Michigan Project Examines Modification Services to Incarcerated Parents

State Court Administrative Office
Michigan Supreme Court

Prisoners who owe child support often find themselves facing an insurmountable—and uncollectible—debt upon their release. In early 2006, Michigan Supreme Court’s State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) wrapped up an OCSE special improvement project (SIP) grant that studied modification of prisoner support obligations.

In Oct. 2004, SCAO found that 13,000 inmates housed with the Michigan Department of Corrections owed \$350,000,000 in past-due child support. Over half had obligations that continued to change every month.

SCAO Family Services Division Director Daniel J. Wright said that “by the economic standards that normally apply to parents, most prisoners qualify as indigent. The numbers show that, while incarcerated, prisoners have virtually no possibility of generating enough income to meet their support obligations; experience shows that, when released, most are unable to repay any sizeable debt.”

Project coordinator William Bartels added, “Faced with this predicament, many ex-prisoners avoid and resist cooperating with the child support program. Even worse, they become further alienated from their children.”

The Prisoner Support Adjustment Project compared several review and adjustment processes, as well as technology that allowed prisoners to participate in modification hearings. It allowed prisoners to initiate modification of

their support orders by: 1) sending a request to the friend of the court (Michigan’s local IV-D child support agency); 2) completing and filing simplified pleadings (sent with easy-to-understand instructions); or 3) requesting representation by cooperating law school clinics at Michigan State University and Wayne State University.



The project also matched Michigan Department of Corrections data with child support system data, and then provided lists of review-eligible cases to local friend of the court offices.

Only 20 percent of prisoners who received simplified pleadings actually filed a motion, and of those who could have requested representation by a law school clinic, only 25 percent did so. In contrast, the lists sent to friend of the court offices resulted in administrative reviews and modification in a majority of cases.

According to Bartels, “This project taught us several valuable lessons. The first was that, to the extent possible, do not rely on prisoners to seek modification of their child support obligation; we found that 75 percent of those cases get missed if you do. Second, utilizing administrative processes and only holding hearings when someone objects to a proposed modification was the most efficient way to review prisoner support obligations. Finally, the success of any project involving incarcerated parents depends on corrections officials’ assistance.”

Over 13 months, nearly 3,400 indigent pris-

See MICHIGAN, next page

Sharing an Affinity For Outreach

By John Clark
Region III OCSE

Region III OCSE and the Baltimore County Child Support Enforcement Office have teamed up to address growing concerns about how State and local child support agencies can benefit from successful programs that help incarcerated and ex-incarcerated noncustodial parents meet the financial and emotional needs of their children.

In this effort, the Baltimore office sponsored an *Affinity Forum* in December for representatives to discuss these crucial issues. The forum featured directors of eight effective projects, who presented their successes and lessons learned in working with incarcerated and previously incarcerated noncustodial obligors. These projects were successful in helping obligors surmount significant barriers and subsequently meet their child



support responsibilities. Attendees say they gleaned ideas that they could bring back to their programs.

Also, the University of Maryland School of Social Work and the Center for Law and Social Policy shared research on this customer population. In Maryland, for example, noncustodial parents with a prison record earned about half as much as those who had not been incarcerated.



In closing, Baltimore County Child Support Director Michael Helms said, “Ten years ago, a meeting like this would not have been possible. We have evolved in this program because we now realize that by helping the incarcerated and ex-incarcerated obligors, we are meeting the needs of the entire family unit.”

For more information, contact John Clark at jclark@acf.hhs.gov or 215-861-4067.

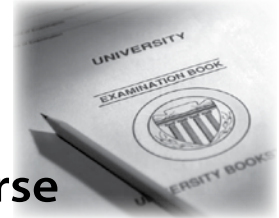
MICHIGAN, from previous page

oners’ support obligations were modified. In those cases, the average child support obligation of \$220 per month dropped to \$20 per month (most were reduced to \$0). This decreased the total monthly obligation in those cases by approximately \$700,000 per month, which, over one year, prevented the accumulation of over \$8 million in support and interest that otherwise would have gone unpaid.

In the past, prisoner support debts have only received minimal and negative attention. “States need to realize that these cases affect

several Federal incentive factors,” Bartels said. “By causing indigent prisoners to accrue support debts, States will expend important resources trying to recover largely uncollectible debts that could have been prevented. In the end, basing prisoner support obligations on the parent’s true ability to pay, benefits everyone: the child, the parent, and the child support program.”

For more information about this project, contact William J. Bartels at 517-373-5975 or bartelsb@courts.mi.us. For information about OCSE discretionary grants, visit: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cse/grants/> CSR



Focus on Potential

Princeton Students Study Future Course Of National Child Support Program

OCSE could support employment programs, *fathering* courts, nationwide implementation of modification programs for incarcerated noncustodial parents, grants to educate middle- and high-schoolers about child support, and partnerships with TANF to reduce the out-of-wedlock birth rate.



Seated from left: Dr. Hillard Pouncy, David Arnaudo, Commissioner Margot Bean, and Daniel Shea. Standing from left: Tiffany Bergin, Katie Lewis-LaMonica, Sian O'Faolain, Meaghan Petersack, Lauren Barnett, Hilary Billings, and Kalina King

These were among the recommendations presented to OCSE Commissioner Margot Bean and members of the staff by a group of Princeton University undergraduates on Jan. 10, after their semester-long study on strategies for improving child support enforcement.

Under the direction of professor and consultant Dr. Hillard Pouncy, the group's six juniors conducted the research as members of the University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs policy task force "Fathers, Child Wellbeing, and Child Support Enforcement." The two seniors served as advisors for the task force, and compiled their six reports into one.

To initially learn more about the issues that OCSE faces, the group met last fall with Commissioner Bean and David Arnaudo, Director of Community Outreach. That's when the project's challenge crystallized: How can the national child support program move forward to reduce its caseload and even prevent parents from entering into the child support enforcement system?

From there, the juniors chose specific issues to explore, and worked during the semester with OCSE staff members and other experts in the field. Topics included: co-parenting programs, incarcerated parent programs, automation, child well-being metrics, transitional employment models, and "a more preventive educational model to really round out a comprehensive look at what [the program] can do to better serve its population," said senior Daniel Shea.

Shea's interest in child support stems from his junior-year study on prisoner reentry, which honed in on unrealistic child support obligations as a barrier to successful reentry, and on fostering responsible fatherhood. "Given the demographic shifts in American society ... and the important role of marriage and parental involvement in child well-being ... successful family/parenting initiatives are critical to the well-being of future generations of American children, especially those from disadvantaged and underprivileged backgrounds," said Shea.

Might these students pursue a profession in the child support field? "We could only hope that's the case," said Pouncy. "Maybe not today, but at some point ... they would want to work in the government. By working with professionals in the field, students get a look at what they could become." — *Elaine Blackman CSR*

Region VII ACF, Partners Spread Holiday Cheer

By Sherri Larkins
Region VII OCSE

The Administration for Children and Families, Kansas City Regional Office has a long tradition of serving the community through our cross-office Community Connection Volunteerism Committee (CCVC). Our mission is to promote volunteer opportunities by creating partnerships with service organizations and others working to enhance the quality of our communities.

The CCVC seeks to identify projects and partners that reflect ACF's mission of serving children and families while offering volunteer activities in which all office members can participate.



During the December holidays, we selected three projects. The recipient of our first effort was the family of a National Guardsman serving in Iraq. We provided gifts of clothing and toys to the family of five children and their mother and a care package for the military member.

Our second activity involved providing volunteers at the Cross-Lines Christmas store, a resource that provides low-income families an opportunity to select clothing, food, and gifts for their holiday needs. For our final project, we created a care package for a member of the military serving in Afghanistan.

Sharing the spirit of the season with others in our community certainly enhanced our holidays as well. *CSR*

In Focus

Child Support Portrait of a Grandma



Shirley Alley, who has raised her grandson since 1997, at 11 months, holds a lump sum payment of \$28,000 in back child support, handed to her by Delaware Child Support Enforcement Division Director Charles Hayward, left, on Dec. 18. "She knew she was picking up a check, but she had no idea for how much; she was shocked," says Hayward. At the event, Alley let reporters know that the boy suffered from lack of not only monetary, but emotional support from his parents. (His mother had been unable to raise him.) The Division began work to intercept payments from Alley's grandson's father some time ago, but it was thanks to an intercept of the father's application to refinance a mortgage on a house in West Virginia that he sent the Division a check for \$35,000. (The Division earlier had sent Alley a check for \$7,000.)

SUBMIT A PHOTO: This space will spotlight photos from events related to the child support program. To be considered for publication, please e-mail a high-quality photo taken in the last 3 months to the editor: elaine.blackman@acf.hhs.gov.

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BILLION, from page 1

make these programs so successful is our close working relationship with our State partners. We communicate at every level and examine virtually every detail of the system, which I believe increases collections. I congratulate the States and appreciate their hard work.”

After consulting my crystal ball (even us numbers guys sometimes need a little help), I will go out on a limb and say that 2007 will be another record-breaking year for Federal Offset. Something States should keep in mind is this year’s Telephone Tax Refund. As covered in IRS news release IR-2006-137, dated Aug. 31, 2006, most Americans will receive an extra \$30 to \$60 in their refund this year. Many people will file tax refunds simply to claim this credit. (Per the article: “The IRS is creating a special short form [1040EZ-T] for those who don’t need to file a regular return.”)

Perhaps next year I will be able to tell folks that I work on a program that collects over \$1.7 billion per year! *CSR*

Correction

In last month’s *Child Support Report*, a name in a photo cutline on page 4 was spelled incorrectly. It should have read: Dave Hogan, consultant for Maximus

Child Support Report

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