

D.C. Court Helps Fathers Provide Emotional, Financial Support to Children



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Two men, who took a stand to play a greater emotional and financial role in the lives of their children, were celebrated at the H. Carl Moultrie I Courthouse on Fri., Jan. 23.

The courthouse crowd was not as large as the millions that witnessed the Presidential and Vice Presidential inauguration earlier in the week. Yet, like Barack Obama and Joe Biden, Reginald Watson and Willie Ellis, the first graduates of the newly established D.C. Fathering Court Program, did not achieve their success single handedly. The D.C. Superior Court, the Office of the Attorney General's Child Support Division and the U.S. Department of Justice supported Watson and Ellis through the program.

The D.C. Fathering Court Program is a pilot program designed to help men live up to their emotional and financial responsibilities to their children.

Today, men and women alike who have difficulty in meeting their child support obligations, now have a helping hand according to Benidia Rice, Director of the D.C. Attorney General's Child Support Division. However, participation in the program, as of now, is limited to ex-offenders, according to Rice.

With record unemployment in the District hovering at eight percent, increasingly fathers and other non-custodial parents experience difficulty in paying child support, whether or not they have conviction records.

Magistrate Judge Milton Lee, Presiding Judge of the Fathering Court Program, said he is proud of the first graduates but admits that the system is not perfect. According to Judge Lee, there were 77,000 active child support orders in the District in 2007.

With nearly 60,000 of these cases involving children who receive some form of government assistance, Lee said the services provided by the Fathering Court could be beneficial to all families receiving child support, not just the children of ex-offenders.

"Initially funding for the program from the Department of Justice and Department of Labor focused on re-entry," Lee said.

Under the Obama Administration, Judge Lee said he hopes the program will be open to all parents obligated to pay child support.

Lee said that the apparent advantage that women litigants generally have over men, particularly in child support and domestic violence cases, is another systematic challenge in the D.C. Family Court.

To address this challenge, the Fathering Court Program requires the participation of both the custodial and non-custodial parent and assembles a team of professionals to provide services to each case. Parents who were previously unable to get along tend to exhibit their best behavior while in the program, according to Lee.

The program offers a range of services including fathering classes, mediation services and parent and child counseling.

"When you have people who support you, you set a foundation that exists even when the people [there to help] go home," Lee said.

Ron Scott, director of the Fathering Court Program, is optimistic that this is just the beginning for the program and hopes that it will expand locally and nationally. "I think this should be a model for our country," Scott said. "We know people want to do the right thing, they just need help doing the right thing."



Magistrate Judge Milton (Tony) Lee, presiding judge of D.C. Superior Court's Fathering Court, gives remarks at event celebrating first graduates of Court's Fathering Program.

Photo by Dennis Shipley, Executive Office of D.C. Courts