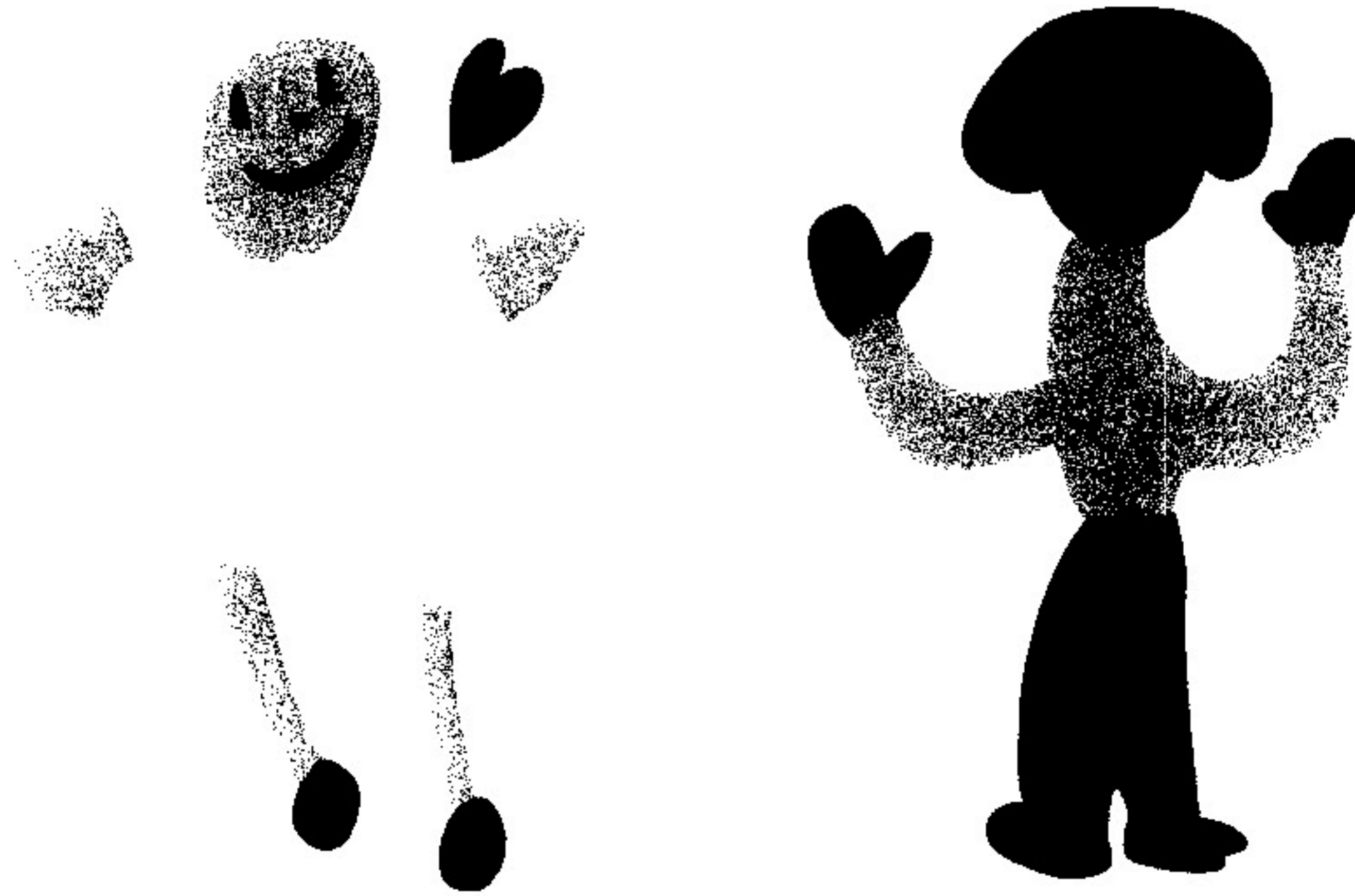


**THE
ABSENT PARENT
EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM
2007**



**STRENGTHENING
CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT
IN HARFORD COUNTY, MD**

THE ABSENT PARENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM HARFORD COUNTY, MARYLAND

HISTORY

The Absent Parent Employment Program (APEP) was started in 1986 with an agreement between the Circuit Court of Harford County and the Department of Economic and Employment Development (DEED). It was the first work search program for noncustodial parents in the state of Maryland. The agreement stated that noncustodial parents (NCPs) who were unable to meet their child support obligations due to unemployment, could be court ordered to participate in work search and counseling activities through APEP.

APEP expanded in 1988 when the Department of Human Resources (DHR) committed state funds to enhance the existing Harford County Program. In 1991, DEED became the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation (DLLR). APEP is presently administrated by DLLR and funded by DHR.

PURPOSE

The goal of APEP is to assist noncustodial parents in obtaining employment, enabling them to meet their child support obligations. This, in turn, improves the collection rate of delinquent child support payments and reduces state assistance costs. APEP also monitors the NCPs to ensure they are being diligent in their work search efforts. APEP endeavors to help NCPs to understand the need to meet their child support obligations as well as counsel them on related concerns. APEP is a liaison between the NCP and the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) as well as an enforcement tool of OCSE and the Circuit Court.

SERVICE TO APPLICANTS

Most participants are referred to APEP through the monthly show-cause court. The NCP is summonsed to court to "show-cause" as to why the court ordered child support obligation is not being met. If the reason for non-payment is unemployment, the judge can court order the NCP to the program. Anyone with a Harford County child support order is eligible to participate. An APEP counselor is present near the courtroom and can perform initial intake at that time. The NCP is given an appointment to report to the APEP office located within the Bel Air Workforce Center.

The initial APEP office visit involves reviewing and signing program guidelines, assessing the NCP's skills and experience, and discussing employment barriers and child support concerns. The NCP is expected to visit the office once a week

until employed. Four applications for employment must be completed each week. A worksheet with detailed information on the week's work search must be submitted. Worksheets may be verified to ensure applications listed were actually submitted. Failure to participate as required may result in a bench warrant.

APEP counselors try to convey that, not only are they monitoring the NCP's work search efforts for OCSE and the court, but they are also trying to assist the NCP in his quest for employment in order to provide for his children and himself. Counseling during weekly office visits may include issues such as support and visitation concerns, employment barriers, addiction problems and personal issues. These discussions may reveal other areas of needed assistance such as referrals to rehabilitation services, education/GED services, visitation programs, support modification programs, job skills training programs and work credit programs. APEP counselors also discuss job search strategies, application and interviewing techniques, create resumes, and make referrals to prospective employers. NCP's are taught to use the Maryland Workforce Exchange computer system within the Bel Air Workforce Center.

The NCP's progress is tracked, and OCSE caseworkers are apprised of his efforts. When necessary, APEP gives testimony in court as to the NCP's progress. When the NCP becomes employed, the employment is verified and the information is forwarded to OCSE for a wage lien.

APEP also accepts volunteer participants. These are NCPs who choose to enter the program on their own. They are not court ordered to participate but have a Harford County child support order and would like to take advantage of the services offered. Volunteers are encouraged to visit weekly but are not required to do so.

WHY APEP SUCCEEDS

There are two key elements, which contribute to this program's success. The first is the program's design. Punitive measures for noncompliance are necessary in working with a population whose profile includes poor judgement, poor work ethics, unsteady work histories, and criminal records. Clearly these characteristics are indicative of a population with little regard for ordinances. Court ordered participation is helpful but it must be enforced. Without enforcement, the court order is impotent. APEP effectively uses bench warrants as a consequence to noncompliance. Failure to obey the court order that mandates APEP participation can result in a bench warrant request. The Circuit Court Judge signs the warrant and the Harford County Sheriff's Department arrests the non-participant. He then must go before the Judge at a bench warrant hearing. This method has proven very effective over the years. Compliance rates increase when bench warrants are used in conjunction with the court orders.

Another program design feature is a follow-up court date. The court ordered participant is given two months to work with APEP. If he has not become employed, his case is reviewed with his OCSE caseworker. If deemed necessary, the NCP is given another court date. This allows APEP counselors to give testimony as to his progress. The impending court date serves as additional incentive to comply and obtain employment in a timely manner.

The program design also allows APEP counselors to develop a rapport with the NCP, which would be unattainable in a strictly punitive program. We do our best to help these individuals on several levels. We act as a liaison between the NCP and OCSE and the Circuit Court. We provide counseling on a variety of issues and refer them to additional assisting agencies when appropriate. We let the participants know that we will do everything we can to help them, but if they choose not to participate, we will not hesitate to request the bench warrant. Those who truly desire assistance understand this. We have many participants who return to the program at a later date on a voluntary basis because they know we will welcome them back and provide encouragement and assistance in their work search efforts.

The other key element that contributes to APEP's success is an outstanding interagency cooperation. Harford County's Child Support community has discovered the fundamental principle that program effectiveness directly correlates with the amount of cooperation with inclusive agencies. The Circuit Court Judge who presides over non-support hearings initiated APEP. He saw the need for job search assistance for the unemployed NCP. This same Judge currently holds monthly Child Support Task Force Meetings for the agencies involved in the child support process. In addition to the Circuit Court of Harford County being represented, the following agencies attend these meetings: The Office of Child Support Enforcement, The State's Attorney's Office, The Department of Social Services, Harford County's Sheriff's Department, The Parent Access Program and APEP. The goal of these meetings is to devise ways of making the child support process function more efficiently. The agency representatives discuss information updates and concerns. Each agency does its best to assist the other agencies attaining the common goal.

Another example of interagency cooperation is the Annual Child Support Workshop where all workers in the Harford County Child Support community attend. Agency heads review the past year's progress, speakers are invited to discuss relevant child support issues, attendants breakdown into work groups to brainstorm on current child support challenges, and people get to know each other.

STATISTICS

APEP's success has been measured by the percentage of NCPs who have obtained employment, and the amount of child support collected as a result of that employment. For 2007, the success rate was 80%, with 53 out of 66 participants obtaining employment. This translated into child support contributions of over \$137,625.

This program has had consistent success rates over the years and has proved a valuable tool to aid in delinquent collections. APEP has been credited with helping more than 1,600 people find jobs and pay nearly \$3,000,000 in child support.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

APEP encourages anyone wishing to replicate this type of noncustodial program to incorporate the elements of careful program design and interagency cooperation. All agencies benefit from their interdependency and individual successes. For more information on Harford County, Maryland's Absent Parent Employment Program, please call Julie McFillin, Wednesday – Friday, 8:00a.m. - 4:30p.m. EST at 410-836-4621, or contact by e-mail at jmcfillin@dllr.state.md.us and our address is:

DLLR
The Absent Parent Employment Program
2 South Bond Street
Bel Air, MD 21014

HARFORD COUNTY DEPARTMENT
OF SOCIAL SERVICES
OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT
ENFORCEMENT and

: IN THE CIRCUIT COURT
: FOR HARFORD COUNTY

Plaintiffs
Vs

Defendant

:
: Court No.:
: OCSE No.:

ORDER

It is hereby this 1 day of _____, _____ by
the Circuit Court for Harford County,

ORDERED that the Defendant shall report to the Absent Parent Employment Program (APEP) at least one time per week beginning immediately; and continuing until excused by APEP personnel. If at any time Defendant becomes unemployed, he/she shall report back to APEP. **Failure to attend as directed shall result in issuance of a bench warrant.** The Defendant shall return to court for a hearing on _____.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED THAT THE Defendant shall not change his residence without first reporting such change to the Office of Child Support Enforcement; shall appear in Court in response to any notice served upon him by mail, any peace officer or in any manner permitted by rule in connection with this Order.

Judge

APEP – 836-4621
2 South Bond Street, Second Floor
Bel Air, MD. 21014

YOU MUST CALL FOR AN APPOINTMENT WITHIN 2 BUSINESS DAYS