

Susan J. Phillips
Deputy Court Administrator
18th Judicial Circuit
2825 Judge Fran Jamieson Way, 3rd Floor
Viera, FL 32940

INCREASING TITLE IV-D CHILD SUPPORT COLLECTIONS: EVALUATION OF A PAY OR APPEAR PROGRAM

Receiving child support is an important nationwide and local issue that affects every parent who provides the family day-to-day care. A 1997 study reports 41% of child support cases in the nation remain uncollected. Billions of dollars are lost because absent or noncustodial parents are not supporting their children. This project evaluates an innovative court program called the Pay or Appear program for its ability to improve collection rates. In addition, evaluations of other programs and services associated with the Pay or Appear program are included in the study.

The major goal of the Pay or Appear program is to capture additional child support revenue by making noncustodial parents who fail to provide for their children accountable to the court. Toward this end, the Pay or Appear program established the following objectives:

- Ø Close monitoring of participants' payment patterns
- Ø Information and referral services to help parents overcome obstacles to payment
- Ø Strict enforcement measures for non-compliant parents

A case study method was used to evaluate program objectives. This in-

depth, analytical method provided the best means to explore complex interactions between agencies, and identify the major contributors and detractors to program success. Raw data on child support collections, a major outcome measure of program success, was available since the inception of the program. However, there was no formal examination or analysis of the data or the program before this study. A series of interviews with judicial officers and staff, and employees working in the area of child support enforcement provided the core data for this study. An analysis of official court records provided vital information related to outcome performance measures such as collection rates and time standards. A survey conducted of a random sample of program participants helped to identify the features they perceived as most beneficial to the program. The survey analysis measured key outcome variables such as higher payment collections and a behavioral change among program participants. Whether the program provided adequate information and referral and what impact the hearing officer's enforcement methods had on increasing child support collections were also evaluated. Customer service was reviewed as a measure of how well the court is doing its job.

Generally, the Pay or Appear program is meeting its objective of collecting additional child support revenue. A principal weakness in the program that prevents collection of more child support is the difference in methods of enforcement used by the hearing officers. The payment patterns and behaviors of the participants relate to the moral obligation to support their

children rather than simply the threat of incarceration and other forms of enforcement for failure to pay. The referral services provided to participants appear to be somewhat effective and relevant to increased payment rates. An additional outcome from the survey revealed the court is achieving customer satisfaction because a high percentage of program participants responded they were treated fairly during the court process.

The most important conclusion drawn from the research is that an innovative program is necessary if child support collections are to increase. The Pay or Appear program, and other similar programs discussed in this study, all reveal some measure of success. The following are the primary recommendations to enhance the current practices of the Pay or Appear program:

- Ø Include establishment cases in the program in addition to contempt cases
- Ø Closely monitor late payers and extend their participation in the program if they show less than reliable and prompt payment behaviors
- Ø Practice caution when automatically issuing writs on parents that have income deduction orders in place, but have yet to take effect
- Ø Execute timely enforcement if there is a failure to pay, and establish an expectation among payers that failure to pay will result in punitive actions by the court
- Ø Improve statistical record keeping and case monitoring to better understand the variables that impact compliance

Ø Develop a manual or implement formal guidelines for hearing officers to use that outlines strong enforcement methods and uniform adjudication methods

Finally, courts should develop an exit survey to administer to program participants before release from the program, and perform follow-up interviews six to nine months later. The responses will provide valuable information to the court about the functions of the program. The additional contact with participants would allow for more open and honest feedback than allowed by the initial telephone survey. Moreover, continued analysis would enable the court to keep its finger on the pulse on the program and further monitor its progress.

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