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ARTICLES



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A DISGRACEFUL SYSTEM; THE L.A. COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT SYSTEM ROUTINELY RANKS LAST OF 58 COUNTIES IN A STATE NOTORIOUSLY NEGLIGENT IN COLLECTING CHILD SUPPORT.

It's heartbreaking and infuriating, the legions of lives ruined by a flawed, plodding and bureaucratically unfeeling child support enforcement system in Los Angeles County. It fails to collect support for nine out of 10 cases filed on behalf of children who enter the system; when payment is demanded, the target is sometimes a man not the father, which leads to fresh disaster. The chronic failures of the system range from lax management to a balky, costly computer system. The district attorney's office must be called to account, and county and state government must between them repair it.

"Failure to Provide: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis," a Times investigative series that ends today, documents horror stories of families losing their homes and forced into homeless shelters or onto welfare for lack of child support, though the absent parent could have been located in minutes. Written by Greg Krikorian and Nicholas Riccardi, the series also chronicles the ruin visited on mistakenly identified deadbeats, their wages garnisheed, their real families destroyed by a system that resists correcting its mistakes. The D.A.'s office is equally slow in finding real deadbeat parents, even when given pertinent, detailed identifying information such as Social Security numbers, addresses, employment history and telephone numbers.

Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti touts the more than \$ 230 million collected last year, but it amounts to a teardrop in the ocean of the county's huge volume of cases, more than in 40 entire states. Garcetti also blames delays on support workers overwhelmed by caseloads of more than 2,000 families. But the Board of Supervisors, suspicious of Garcetti's staffing and spending priorities, has not approved his request to double the number of caseworkers. Garcetti boasts of changes such as a new calling center scheduled to open this month, prompted by a damning Price Waterhouse audit last year that reported desperate parents calling hundreds of times before getting through. The district attorney also defends a \$ 55-million computer system that, even after being "fixed," still misidentifies fathers.

The L.A. County child support enforcement system routinely ranks last of 58 counties, according to the nonprofit group Children Now, in a state that is notoriously negligent in collecting child support and has no functioning statewide child support enforcement computer network, as required by Washington. The problem begins in Sacramento, because the state delegates this important, federally mandated job to county district attorneys. So the solution will have to start with the next governor and Legislature. First, they should ask some questions: Should prosecutors, who would rather put away murderers than track down negligent fathers and a few irresponsible mothers, remain in charge of this task? Is child support collection such a low priority, such a dead end that it attracts neither the best nor the brightest in any district attorney's office? If so, Sacramento should swiftly consider privatizing collection, taking control of it at the state level, as is done in other states, or delegating this important responsibility to another agency.

Some counties do a better job than L.A. County. Alameda, which includes Oakland, and Fresno, with a highly transient population, get better results. To increase accountability at the county level, Sacramento should provide greater incentives for accuracy, thoroughness and speed in child support collections, in the same way that the federal government rewards states that significantly reduce welfare caseloads and punishes those that fail to meet deadlines.

The Little Hoover Commission, in a critical 1997 report on the state's collection efforts, advised the Legislature that child support should be an inescapable obligation. It should also be accurately rendered. There can be no more excuses for the lack of accountability at the state or county level, no more tolerance for a system that fails so many children.

Copyright 1998 Times Mirror Company
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SERIES: Failure to Provide: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis. Last in a series.

**TROUBLES WITH COMPUTERS ILLUSTRATE CRISIS;
CALIFORNIA SCRAPPED A \$171- MILLION SYSTEM AND IS NOW REQUESTING \$312 MILLION FOR A
NEW ONE. THE SUPPLIER, THE STATE AND COUNTIES ALL GET SOME OF THE BLAME.**

BYLINE: NICHOLAS RICCARDI and GREG KRIKORIAN. TIMES STAFF WRITERS

For proof that California's child support program is in crisis, observers say, look no further than its calamitous experience with computerization.

After spending \$ 171 million on a system that has now been scrapped, California is requesting \$ 312 million from the federal government to replace it. That system, despite its eye-catching price tag, is intended to last only a few years--until still another system is designed.

"The computer failure and its aftermath clearly show that there is no control of California's child support program," said Leora Gershenzon at the National Center for Youth Law in San Francisco.

A decade ago, the federal government required every state to build a computer system to improve its child support collections. The mandate was especially important in California, because some counties were using archaic computers, and some only paper.

In 1992, California contracted with Lockheed IMS to build the computer system. And though administration officials say the system's failure was Lockheed's fault, a report by the state auditor found plenty of blame to be spread around.

"A cascade of events" led to the failure, the report said. Among them: The project was transferred, midstream, from the Department of Social Services to the state's Health and Welfare Data Center, an agency that the auditor found was not up to the task. Warning signals from quality control contractors and Lockheed itself were ignored. And the counties simply would not unify behind the system.

California child support director Leslie Frye maintains that the system was a "vendor failure" and refuses to discuss it, citing arbitration between the state and Lockheed since the contract was scerved last year. Gov. Pete Wilson's office did not return a call seeking comment.

Lockheed officials blame the system's failure on the state government's inability to control district attorneys.

"There just wasn't a strong, cohesive decision-maker at the state level," said Lockheed IMS Vice President Julie Sgazi.

Sgazi complained that the state employed six different project managers during the five-year project. Individual district attorneys insisted that they wanted the system customized to fit the way they handled cases--for instance, some wanted every case assigned to a specific caseworker, others wanted them scattered throughout the office.

The state terminated its contract with Lockheed in the fall of 1997.

"If you talk to people from other states, they refer to California as a black hole if their cases go there," said a congressional staffer who is involved in child support. "It's kind of fascinating that the state with Silicon Valley can't get a computer program."

It is what happened after the system was pronounced dead that critics say best illustrates the clout wielded by the district attorneys who oversee child support collections.

Prosecutors proposed that the state use seven different computer systems that the district attorneys would provide--rather than the single, unified system demanded by the federal government. The district attorneys' systems would be networked together.

After much battling in Sacramento and an appeal by the district attorneys that Wilson use his influence to secure their seven systems, the Legislature whittled the number down to four: the Los Angeles system, which the federal government had already paid for, plus three others. The proposed cost for that interim system and planning its eventual replacement is \$ 312 million.

The federal government, skeptical of any proposal for more than a single statewide system, has yet to sign off on the project.

"I see the D.A.'s wagging the dog," said Assemblywoman Dion Aroner (D-Berkeley). "This is a problem."

Frye, the state's child support director, said the new arrangement makes the best of a bad situation. "This is a fallback position," she said, referring to the fact that California faces millions of dollars in federal penalties without an operational computer system. "It's not the textbook way, it's not the first choice of anybody involved."

But it is proof, advocates say, that California's child support program is not only leaderless but driven only by political pressure.

"If these kids were voters . . . if they had some political clout, they would not be the victims of this year after year," said Barbara Grob, director of the Child Support Reform Initiative, a coalition of activist groups pushing to alter the state's program.

"Imagine if the Social Security system broke down tomorrow and senior citizens didn't get their checks," Grob said. "You can bet that they would get a computer system up and running."

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SERIES: Failure to Provide: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis. Second in a series.

FOR PARENTS SEEKING RELIEF, COURTS DON'T ALWAYS HELP; IN A HECTIC AND OFTEN BEWILDERING SYSTEM, JUSTICE CAN GET LOST AS D.A. PUSHES FOR VOLUME AND SPEED.

BYLINE: GREG KRIKORIAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

The crush begins early at the Commonwealth Avenue courthouse. But even if a bench or chair is empty, many people just pace, too tense to sit as they wait for their case to be called or their ex to show up.

The noise is constant: children screaming, couples arguing. The din breaks only when attorneys yell out names before ducking inside an office, file in arm, a bewildered-looking father or mother in tow.

This is the civil courthouse where child support orders are issued for children in Los Angeles County. Each month, hundreds of cases are processed, thousands of lives changed forever.

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A few miles away on Bauchet Street, across from the Men's Central Jail, is the other courthouse. The only full-time criminal courtroom in America dedicated solely to prosecuting "deadbeat" parents.

Commonwealth and Bauchet, as they are known, sit in judgment over families caught up in the largest county-run child support collection program in the nation.

This is a different type of judicial system, one that serves a crucial need but is quick to put people in lifetimes of debt and slow to correct mistakes. In these courts, justice sometimes gets lost in the relentless shuffle of paperwork.

Entering the System

The first stop for many in Los Angeles County's child support maze is the Commonwealth courthouse, on the 16th floor of an office tower overlooking a neglected park west of downtown.

"It is," said one veteran prosecutor, "an awful place to go to on a daily basis."

Because no criminal cases are heard, there are no metal detectors and only a handful of sheriff's deputies. But a squad of private security guards, guns strapped to their waists, stroll the narrow and crowded halls, breaking up the occasional quarrels between former spouses or, sometimes, first and second wives.

One parent--usually the mother--comes with hopes that the law will help her collect money to raise her children. Sometimes, she comes with a divorce order that needs to be enforced. Other times, such as when there was no marriage, she relies on prosecutors to establish the debt.

The other parent, usually the father, may come to court agreeing on the amount to be paid. But more often he tries to wriggle out of debts leveled against him, sometimes justly, sometimes not.

The majority owe some support, and even defense attorneys admit that plenty of them should be prosecuted for their failure to pay support.

"Absolute jerks," lawyer Benjamin Campos calls them.

But generally the men at Commonwealth are not stereotypical deadbeat dads, pulling up in a flashy car with a new wife on one arm and a high-priced lawyer on the other.

These men are overwhelmingly blue-collar workers who ride the bus or drive aging cars, showing up for court in jeans and a work shirt.

What happens to them in this system is sometimes as harsh as what happens to the families they owe.

Entitled to a court-appointed attorney only when paternity is at stake, the men almost always come to court alone because they cannot afford counsel. It can take months to get an appointment with the county-sponsored, free paralegal service.

When they arrive in court, many are already awash in child support debt. Their failures to answer summonses routinely lead to court orders--even if the summonses never reached them.

From that point on they are in trouble, with bills for delinquent child support quickly reaching thousands of dollars. But sometimes the accuracy of those bills cannot be relied upon.

"People get the bills and they're almost always wrong," said one prosecutor. "It's like a bank putting in a hypothetical balance instead of putting in your real balance."

So pervasive are the mistakes that even the courts have lost confidence in the government's accounting.

"The billing systems throughout the state of California are so highly flawed that no one can reasonably rely on them." Commonwealth Commissioner H.M. Webster told a father in July.

In court, these men square off against an office with dozens of prosecutors, who not only seek money for deserving families but are pressured by their bosses to speed cases through to secure more collections.

Prosecutors say they try to be fair but that their efforts often seem at cross-purposes with management.

"They want volume and they will reward people who do volume," said one prosecutor.

That causes much of the anguish at Commonwealth, said defense attorney Art Goldberg. "When your only interest is statistics . . . then you have a soulless, wretched system. And you treat people like they are worthless."

An Adversarial Relationship

In that quest for volume, there's little time to fix what some view as clear inequities.

Omar Moreno has been billed for more child support than he should under state law, and the district attorney's office knows it. But for more than a year the 35-year-old teacher's aide has been stymied in his efforts to set things right.

For two years Moreno regularly paid \$ 191 a month to repay the welfare system for an ex-girlfriend's child, whom he says he never gets to see. The debt weighed so heavily on Moreno and his wife that they declared bankruptcy and moved in with his mother.

Moreno knew he couldn't survive without dramatically changing his life. He took a part-time job so he could get his degree from Cal State L.A. to increase his earning potential and deal with his obligation.

He wrote letters to the district attorney's office asking that his bills be lowered while he was studying, but got no response.

Then Moreno got his opportunity—he was summoned to Commonwealth in a routine effort by prosecutors to raise his payments. Once Moreno arrived, however, prosecutors discovered that his payments should be lowered because he was earning less.

The agency decided to send Moreno home without a decrease because, they said, he had not filed the proper paperwork. Moreno said no one explained what he had to do to get the decrease.

Moreno began missing payments, and his debt grew. Earlier this year Garcetti's office seized his tax refund and took—improperly it turned out—more than half his paycheck. His family, which now includes an infant son, got its meals from food banks.

When Moreno returned to court for help, he was told his income was too high for free legal assistance.

"I think they don't understand my situation," Moreno said. "We'll keep on going like this until the point where maybe we will not find a way to survive." Added his wife, Ana: "We have this obligation. But he needs an opportunity to improve his life. . . . If he can't improve his life, what hope awaits our baby? He will have no hope."

Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti has publicly said his prosecutors will try to help fathers handle their debts. But Wayne Doss, director of the child support unit, said that in cases like Moreno's it is up to fathers to help themselves.

"It is not our obligation to represent this person in court, OK?" Doss said. "And maybe a lot of fathers don't like it—but in the end it is still an adversarial legal system."

Critics say that adversarial relationship often more resembles the bullying of opponents unschooled in legal intricacies.

"For some reason, the concept of the Bill of Rights does not register with the D.A.'s office of Los Angeles County," said attorney Sam Wasserson, who earlier this year challenged the county's practice of billing some men for child support even after it has proof they are not the fathers.

Former Deputy Dist. Atty. Jackie Myers said she left the office in 1996 because "I felt we were being told to do unethical, very unethical things."

Those "things," she said, included processing orders for judgments without even reading the material to justify such a court action. District attorney's operatives, she said, were given a clear directive: "Don't read it, just sign and get the orders through the system. . . . They were bringing them to court in boxes."

To keep cases moving, Garcetti's office has challenged court commissioners who objected to his methods.

Twice in the past three years, Garcetti's office has refused to let prosecutors appear before one of the commissioners at Commonwealth who had questioned its methods. When prosecutors refuse to "stipulate" to any of three commissioners at Commonwealth, that appointed judicial officer's workload vanishes. Eventually, the commissioner, who assumes the duties of a judge, has no work.

In 1997, Commissioner Victor Reichman refused to routinely sign off on Garcetti's support orders and questioned whether defendants had been notified about their court dates. The response: Prosecutors were told not to appear before Reichman.

"They didn't want anyone to challenge their authority," Reichman said, "and I felt that as a judicial officer, I couldn't prostitute the office and sign judgments that were defective."

Reichman was transferred from Commonwealth to hear cases in another downtown court that occasionally handles child support matters. Garcetti's office eventually agreed to procedures similar to those sought by Reichman.

Before Reichman, there was Commissioner Althea Baker, who at one point fined Garcetti's office for not returning improperly collected money. Soon, prosecutors abandoned her court as well.

Family support chief Doss said the decision to steer cases from specific commissioners originates with line prosecutors, but ultimately becomes office policy. Doss said neither he nor other administrators have acted improperly.

"What they were doing is abusing their discretion," Doss said of Baker and Reichman. "And we are not going to stand by and have people kick us around."

Baker, who was transferred to another court, has a different view. "I think they see it more as a game," she said.

Paul Gutman, the presiding judge of family law courts, said that despite the pressure from the district attorney's office, his judicial officers honor their principles.

"We are not there to help the district attorney's office increase its numbers," he said. "We are there to make sure equal justice is given."

Reluctance to Change Decisions

The child support courts are jammed, in part, because many times the district attorney's office is reluctant to alter its earlier decisions. If a father wants his bill lowered or a mistake fixed, he must often go to court.

"It's all a farce," Edward Gray said outside a courtroom where authorities admitted that he had paid too much child support.

A skycap at Los Angeles International Airport, Gray ended up owing some \$ 4,000 in child support because, several years before, his ex-wife had gone on welfare with their child. He never paid the amount, Gray said, because he was never notified that support was due.

"Had they sent me a letter, I would have paid, but I never got a letter . . . and they had my address," Gray said.

He did not learn about his child support debt until his 1995 income tax refund was seized, Gray said.

Eventually, after garnishing his paychecks and three income tax refunds, the district attorney's office said Gray's debt was resolved. But with the interest factored in, Gray paid far more than he originally had owed.

"What started out as \$ 4,400 ended up costing me more than \$ 7,000," Gray said.

In addition, the district attorney twice suspended Gray's driver's license and continued charging him even after his debt, including interest, was paid and his daughter, now 13, was living with him, Gray said. Although it has returned the overpayment, the district attorney's office is still taking money from his paycheck.

"They give it to you over there, boy," Gray said, shaking his head. "They give it to you."

Commonwealth is the last chance parents like Gray have of correcting sometimes grievous errors, putting an immense strain on some who must journey there.

Mary Smith must use a wheelchair and has \$ 6 to her name. Garcetti's office billed her for \$ 24,000 in child support for a son now living in Nevada. Panicked, Smith called prominent attorney Gloria Allred, who took the case for free.

Allred said she tried to resolve the case out of court, making repeated overtures to the district attorney's office, but got no response. Smith was left with no option but to leave her San Fernando Valley nursing home and appear at Commonwealth.

With the high-profile Allred by her side, Smith's case was swiftly cleared up.

"Talk about trying to get blood out of a stone," Allred said of the district attorney's office. "It's an organization without a heart, without any compassion, and without a sense of priorities, and we have a right to expect more. . . . Pursuing a case like this shows a system run amok."

Even when a case is at Commonwealth for the right reasons, moving at a pace common to any courthouse, the dynamics can be explosive.

Cathy Castillo and her ex-husband, Victor Casullo, got into an argument about custody issues in August while Commissioner James Copelan was trying to sort out the child support owed.

The commissioner would have none of it.

"It's time that you start putting these issues, these poison issues, behind you," Copelan said before ordering support.

From Civil to Criminal Court

If delinquent parents refuse to pay the debts established in Commonwealth, they can be hauled into the criminal court on Bauchet Street.

Some proponents of criminal penalties will say that there is no other way to get the attention of the worst deadbeat parents.

But as Los Angeles County's criminal prosecution program grows bigger each year, so can the problems--and mistakes--that threaten jail time for men with no hope of paying their obligations. Worse, sometimes the wrong man faces jail.

Ron Miller, 33, of Carson, was arrested June 6. He spent 26 hours in jail and four hours in court, even though it was another Ron Miller whom authorities wanted for failing to pay child support.

After spending the morning in court, Miller showed his driver's license to the bailiff and was released. He also was given a slip showing that he is not the delinquent Miller, should the issue come up again.

"They didn't apologize or anything," Miller said. "They figure they're doing OK because they let me go and I should be all happy."

For Commissioner John Ladner, who threw out Miller's case, it was an example of how his court manages to sort out an often-tangled system.

"We're not a typical criminal court," Ladner said. "It's not as black and white, good guys and bad guys, around here."

Most of the time, he says, things are right. The defendant needs to be scared into paying with the threat of jail. Usually Ladner puts the man on probation, promising jail time if he fails to live up to his obligation. Ladner estimates that only 10% of the people who appear in his court ever see jail.

Although Ladner said he believes that some criminal prosecution is necessary, a debate is raging over whether there are more efficient ways to collect support from the worst of delinquent parents. This at a time when Garcetti's office is filing more criminal cases than ever--6,500 last fiscal year. That is three times more than the rest of California combined.

"It's the only thing they do good," said Nora O'Brien, state director for the child support advocacy group ACES, or Assn. for Children for Enforcement of Support. "Money falls from the sky when criminal prosecution charges are filed."

She cited one case in which a delinquent father wrote a \$ 60,000 check after being arrested for not paying child support.

But even among child support advocates, views differ.

"Criminal filings are generally a sign of failure," said Paula Roberts of the Center for Law and Social Policy in Washington. "Generally the last thing you want to have to do is file a case. The point of the system is . . . to get child support."

And critics stress that the foundations of a child support system are in the civil courts where the debts are established. That is why people who are criminally prosecuted still must return to the civil courthouse on Commonwealth to alter their debts.

When Resolutions Aren't the End

Outside Commonwealth this summer, county probation officer Willie Bull wrestled with his child support nightmare.

Minutes before, he had attempted to resolve his case by coming to the courthouse to talk with a prosecutor. He still looked stunned as he contemplated her explanation that the only way to get his case heard was to pay a \$ 200 filing fee for another court date.

The district attorney's records, he said, show that he owed \$ 12,056 in child support from the period several years ago when his wife was on welfare for six months. The two are now reconciled and live with their daughter.

Although the welfare department closed its case, he said, the district attorney's office has kept its action against him open, piling on interest charges in the process. Bull said the agency told him that the monthly support obligation will stay at \$ 361 until he gets a new court order.

Before heading back to his office, he uttered a refrain common around the courthouses that preside over child support.

"Somebody," he said, "is not doing their job."

Times researcher Janet Lundblad contributed to this story.

About This Series

Sunday--The county's child support program may be the worst in the nation, driving families into financial ruin while hiding its problems through questionable bookkeeping.

Today--Trying to resolve child support problems proves to be a daunting task in a court system pushed by the district attorney's office to focus on volume and speed.

Tuesday--Weak state oversight of counties like Los Angeles has left California with one of the poorest child support systems in the country. Yet its leaders fight key reforms.

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX / INFOGRAPHIC)

Who to Call for Help

The following organizations provide free or low-cost advice on child support matters:

- * ACES (Association for Children for the Enforcement of Support) (800) 738-2237
- * Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law (323) 939-2174
- * Lawyers for Family Support (323) 852-1475
- * Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (323) 801-7991
- * Levitt and Quinn Family Law Center (213) 482-1800
- * My Child Says Daddy (323) 296-8816
- * Neighborhood Legal Services (800) 433-6251
- * SPUNK (Single Parents United 'N Kids) (562) 984-2580

To Comment

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SERIES: FAILURE TO PROVIDE: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis. First in a series

FAILURE TO PROVIDE: LOS ANGELES COUNTY'S CHILD SUPPORT CRISIS; ADDING ERRORS; COMPUTER SYSTEM THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO DRAMATICALLY BOOST COLLECTIONS HAS INSTEAD PULLED SOME PARENTS INTO A NIGHTMARE

BYLINE: NICHOLAS RICCARDI and GREG KRIKORIAN, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

At the heart of Los Angeles County's problem-plagued child support program is a \$ 55-million computer system that has not lived up to its billing and all too often fingers the wrong man.

Stocked with questionable data from old files, the new system has failed to measurably improve collections but has turned slight errors into ruined lives.

Antonio Alvarez is one who felt the heavy but mistaken hand of the district attorney's office.

Last December, Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti's office sent the North Hollywood man a computer-generated bill for \$ 25,000 in unpaid child support for three children whom he could not have fathered. He had never met their mother.

Despite repeated trips and calls to Garcetti's offices, Alvarez could not get the problem fixed. Meanwhile, the agency put a lien on Alvarez's house and emptied his bank account. His car was repossessed. Alvarez's wife and two children abandoned him, believing he had led a double life.

"I thought it was the American dream," Alvarez said. "I had my own property. I had my own car. I had a savings account, checking account, everything--then boom!"

When after eight months Garcetti's office admitted that its computer had assessed the wrong Antonio Alvarez, it sent him a form letter with no apology.

"They just destroyed our marriage, and with a letter they're going to fix it?" said Alvarez, 34, who ultimately convinced his family to return.

Despite stories like Alvarez's, Garcetti recently called his computer "the very best automated system in the nation." But some workers who must use it disagree.

"Believe it or not, the computer system . . . really makes a lot of work for us," said one longtime caseworker. "We are constantly putting out one fire after another."

The county's most recent report shows that the computer is barely keeping pace with collections expected without the multimillion-dollar technology. It was supposed to do much better.

A decade ago, Los Angeles' size and clout led to its selection as the only county in the nation to receive federal funding for a new child support computer system.

The original cost estimate was \$ 24 million, but the price tag soared to \$ 55 million by the time the Lockheed-designed system was turned on in February 1995. It costs about \$ 16 million to run the system each year.

From the start, there were problems. An early glitch led to 18,000 checks being routed to welfare offices instead of to parents. A state evaluation of 42 randomly selected cases found that 30% contained errors.

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Caseworkers were flooded with complaints but were ordered not to publicly talk about the errors.

"Please be sure employees are not saying to the public derogatory remarks about how the system is functioning," said one memo to managers. "Even if it's true, do not further aggravate the public by making any comments."

Garcetti's office says the problems have been fixed--although two weeks ago it acknowledged processing an average of more than 350 mistaken identity cases monthly.

"I am not going to say the entire system is a bust," said one longtime caseworker, "but it sure as hell is a lot less than what we hoped. . . . The system has so many problems that we would be better off just hand-writing information."

Despite the horror stories, Garcetti's office has resisted pressure to improve the computer system.

The county auditor-controller's office in 1996 proposed an inexpensive audit to test the accuracy of the data. The audit would have cost \$ 25,000, which Garcetti's child support office refused to pay despite a \$ 2-million surplus.

Last year, the Los Angeles County Grand Jury examined Garcetti's child support operation and again recommended an audit of the computer system.

Said former grand juror Hank Cox, who chaired the committee that examined the child support operation: "A lot of people aren't getting what they are supposed to get, and that includes the most defenseless part of the population--the children."

Some employees of the child support bureau agree.

"When I saw Garcetti and Wayne Doss . . . talking about how good the computer was working, I just laughed," one caseworker said. "Then I thought about all the mistakes and just felt bad."

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SERIES: FAILURE TO PROVIDE: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis. First in a series

SUNDAY REPORT; IN 9 OF 10 CHILD SUPPORT CASES, D.A. COMES UP EMPTY-HANDED; DESPERATE FAMILIES WAIT FOR MONEY THAT DOESN'T COME; MANY TIMES, WRONG PEOPLE ARE TARGETED. GARCETTI VOWS TO IMPROVE THE SYSTEM.

BYLINE: GREG KRIKORIAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Every day, hundreds of thousands of youngsters depend upon the Los Angeles County district attorney's office to collect the child support they urgently need. But the agency is as dysfunctional as many of the fragmented families it is entrusted to serve.

Failing on many fronts, Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti's family support bureau is driving some parents and children into deeper financial crisis, creating an even greater sense of frustration and helplessness in their lives.

California's legislative analyst ranks the district attorney's operation the least effective in the state. Some critics call it perhaps the worst in the nation in collecting money for needy families, the vast majority of whom are subsisting on welfare.

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Despite a \$ 100-million budget and powers rivaling the Internal Revenue Service, the Bureau of Family Support Operations collects nothing in nine out of 10 cases. When it does, some parents--mostly fathers--are squeezed to the point of economic ruin.

So much hostility has engulfed the operation that Garcetti will skip Saturday's annual county child support forum because of death threats, organizers were told. Last year he was roundly booed.

In an interview, Garcetti defended his office's performance and said he is dedicated to improving a system that serves more children than are enrolled in the entire Los Angeles Unified School District.

"We are doing a better job than at any time . . . in the collection of child support. Period," Garcetti said. "But I think the more important question is, 'Am I satisfied?' and the answer is no. I am not satisfied. I came in as D.A. 5 1/2 years ago, and I committed to my staff here and to the community that I would make . . . the L.A. County district attorney's office effort in child support second to none in the nation. And I don't think we are quite there yet, but we are getting very close."

An investigation by The Times, based on hundreds of interviews and thousands of pages of documents, found otherwise:

- * Parents entitled to child support often wait years before the district attorney's office moves aggressively on their behalf. Collecting current support in only 7.6% of its more than 500,000 cases last fiscal year, children can reach adulthood without seeing a penny.

- * To mask its poor collection rate, Garcetti's office last year took the unprecedented action of closing more than 240,000 cases, saying in virtually every instance that it could not locate the delinquent parents. But frontline workers say that only nominal efforts to find them were made, depriving thousands of children of support. Also, in a continuing effort to keep the caseload down, workers have been instructed to keep cases shut even when welfare recipients provide new information about the location of nonpaying parents. One former district attorney's official has alleged that documents were falsified to make the operation appear more successful.

- * Although Garcetti has said child support is among his top priorities, he left hundreds of lower-level caseworker positions vacant, slowing efforts to locate parents who owe money. In two of the past three years, he used funds pledged for family support services to cover overspending in other areas of his department. Moreover, one of every four dollars is spent on administration, a rate well above units elsewhere with better collection records.

- * In many cases in which it does collect money, Garcetti's office uses hardball legal tactics and has imposed insurmountable financial burdens on fathers, many of whom are poor and unable to hire attorneys to seek judicial redress. In some cases, the district attorney's collection unit has assessed men it knows are not the real fathers. Critics say the agency pursues such heavy-handed practices because it receives incentive funds for virtually every scarce dollar it collects.

- * Officials have left as much as \$ 25 million in collected child support payments sitting in interest-bearing accounts because, among other reasons, they contend that the intended recipients could not be found. But The Times found several parents simply by looking in telephone directories and public records.

National child support advocate Paula Roberts makes it her business to track the success of programs throughout the country. She has one word for Los Angeles' performance: "Dreadful."

"All I can tell you," she said, "is that the older I get, the less certain I am there is a heaven but the more hopeful I am that there is a hell. Because between the parents who walk away from their kids and the bureaucrats who have nothing but excuses, I can only hope there is divine retribution."

Within the family support bureau's scattered offices--from the Antelope Valley to the South Bay--some caseworkers say they have long felt uneasy about the conduct of their agency. But many add that they have been fearful of risking their careers by speaking publicly.

"At least now," said one veteran caseworker, requesting anonymity, "management will change its ways and maybe things will be better for the public. Not only for the children's sake but the parents' . . . because we are destroying lives left and right."

The Long Wait for Relief

Collecting child support, although undeniably troublesome, is a relatively straightforward process.

In California, the authority to collect support rests with county district attorneys. Cases are opened when single parents seek help or, automatically, when they apply for welfare.

To collect support, the district attorneys must first locate the "noncustodial" parent, establish his or her genetic relationship to the child and then secure a support order in court, unless one has been obtained through a divorce.

This clears the way for collections to begin, often through garnishing wages. In California and other states, failure to comply can trigger criminal prosecution.

Garcetti and Wayne Doss, who heads the family support bureau, boast that child support collections during the 1997-98 fiscal year reached a record \$ 257 million and that criminal charges were brought against some 6,500 allegedly delinquent parents.

Although those numbers are encouraging, they do not tell the whole story. Last fiscal year, the most recent for which complete figures are available, the district attorney collected current support on less than 8% of the child support cases. When factoring in past-due collections, the number rises to 12%, still far below the national average of 21%.

The picture is even bleaker in cases in which parents receive public assistance. The district attorney's office, according to the most recent state report, recovers only about five cents of every welfare dollar spent supporting single-parent families--a rate so bad that California's legislative analyst recently ranked Los Angeles last in the state.

When Catherine Sanford applied for welfare in 1996, she viewed it as a desperate, stopgap measure in the hopes that the district attorney's office would swiftly find the father of her 2-year-old daughter, a married man who owned a business. She said she was inspired by news accounts of Garcetti's resolve to crack down on deadbeat dads.

The stakes were high: She was losing her house.

On her welfare application, Sanford named the girl's father and provided his home and work addresses, as well as his Social Security number. As required, welfare officials notified the district attorney's office to begin the collection process.

"I believed that God would take care of them," Sanford said of her daughter and a second child. "And he does. But his timing is different than mine." So was the district attorney's.

The case languished, and Sanford's life crumbled.

The child support bureau initiated a complaint against the father but did not begin court proceedings. Sanford soon lost her Altadena home and was forced to move her family into homeless shelters while working part time as a security guard.

Last month, she got word that the district attorney's office had secured a payment order in her case, although she is still waiting for the checks.

"I gave them all the information that was needed," she said, "and they still stalled."

The district attorney's office acknowledged that it had been improperly slow.

Sanford's case was practically a model of efficiency compared to Shanae Young's. When her case was referred to the district attorney's office, her son was 9 months old. Today he is 12, and Young has yet to receive a cent in child support.

Young told the district attorney's office that the boy's father was in the Air Force, information easy to confirm with a single call to the military. Yet no action was taken. Young said she repeatedly complained. The response, she said, was usually the same: As long as you're collecting welfare, why worry?

Because Young did not aspire to a life on the public dole, she sought the help of child support advocates. This summer, after a decade of waiting—during which she got off welfare on her own—the district attorney's office finally initiated court action.

"Something could have been resolved . . . if they had really took the time and worked on it," Young said. "It could have been done in a month. I'll give it even two or three months. But 10 years? . . . It's not fair to the children. It's not fair to the parents who are taking care of them."

Family support director Doss said the bureau has lost Young's complete case file and does not know why it has dragged on. In the past several years, he said, it has been complicated by defense tactics.

Several former and current caseworkers said the unit's caseload is so staggering—bigger than that of 40 states—that they spend more time tracking paperwork than parents who owe money. Continuity and efficiency is impossible, they say, because cases are shuffled from one employee to the next, with no one having continuing responsibility.

Too often, the workers said, cases are prioritized not by which are the oldest but by who yells the loudest, be it a parent who is due support or someone who thinks they have been billed excessively. "We only work the ones who holler," one veteran worker said.

Former Dist. Atty. Robert Philibosian learned firsthand that the system responds to a hard, well-placed nudge.

When his cousin was erroneously billed for \$ 43,000 in back child support and was unable to resolve the mistake, Philibosian said he picked up the phone and demanded immediate action.

"They took care of it because I hounded them. But what happens to the poor schlump out there who can't call me for help?" Philibosian said.

"It has been such a mess for so long," he said of the agency, "that they just don't know what to do with it."

Little Room for Compassion

The amount of monthly support that parents are ordered to pay is determined by a state formula based on their earnings. Sometimes, however, that sum may be too much to handle, especially if the parent's economic status worsens. District attorney's employees complain that because the system is built on money and statistics, there is little room for compassion.

This has prompted some workers to quit in disgust.

"I just couldn't stand what they were doing to people," said ex-Deputy Dist. Atty. Elisa Baker, who resigned in 1995 and now, with another former prosecutor, runs a paralegal service for indebted parents.

"I got a call from a homeless shelter and was told that I had put a man and . . . his four children out on the street because I had put an enforcement order . . . for 50% of his income. I was devastated," Baker recalled. "That was the beginning of the end for me, because I think that was the first time I was in touch with the ramifications of what I was doing."

Complicating matters, some parents do not learn that they owe money until their bill has grown to thousands of dollars. They say they were never notified that actions had been taken against them.

District attorney's records show that, in 53% of cases, prosecutors have not directly served court summonses to parents being sued.

Instead, agency officials consider the process initiated if a summons is left at a parent's last known address. Although this process is standard in civil law, the consequences in child support cases can be devastating. In several cases, they claimed to have served men who were in fact in jail.

Roughly 70% of parents billed for child support are not in court when paternity is established and their monthly obligations set. Certainly, many of these noncustodial parents simply choose not to appear. But many others say that the first time they learned they had missed a court date was when their wages were garnished.

No one knows how many men are wrongfully pursued for child support, though the district attorney's own records show that on average more than 350 a month are incorrectly named as fathers.

Some men who fail to appear in court—whether purposefully or not—find themselves caught in a painful trap: They are not the fathers of children they have been ordered to support. But because they were not present to contest paternity, they are held liable for the payments.

Although Garcetti says his office has made a few exceptions, he stands by the policy.

"This is within the law," Garcetti said. "This is not a law that applies simply to child support. This is a law that applies to all civil judgments."

Although true, some of Garcetti's own prosecutors say it is unfair to burden legal novices with lifetimes of debt just because it's legal.

"If we convict someone wrongly in the criminal justice system, we do everything we can to undo that mistake," said Deputy Dist. Atty. Stephen Cooley. "It is a matter of ethics, pure ethics."

Added veteran Deputy Dist. Atty. David R. Ross, a top official with the California District Attorneys Assn.: "From a criminal prosecutor's standpoint, if we know the guy is not the father . . . to hold him responsible is patently unfair."

A state appellate court, ruling in the case of a man ordered to support a child he did not father, stated that "someone in the district attorney's office has lost sight of the paramount duty to seek justice."

Garcetti's office led an unsuccessful effort to persuade the state Supreme Court to reverse the ruling, but did succeed in having it "depublished." It cannot be used as precedent in similar cases—like that of Bert Riddick, a \$ 50,000-a-year computer manager who is now effectively homeless.

In 1991, an old girlfriend identified Riddick as the father of her newborn child. When the summons arrived for Riddick to appear in court, his fiancee was so enraged she hid the paperwork, producing it only days before the hearing as Riddick was about to leave on a business trip.

"In hindsight, I blew that chance by not appearing in court that day," Riddick acknowledged.

When the district attorney's office began garnishing his wages, Riddick frantically called the agency and was told there was nothing he could do.

Soon his car was repossessed. He, his now-wife Angel and their son were evicted from their apartment. Angel applied for welfare when she became pregnant with the couple's second child in 1995.

"I felt kind of like 'The Fugitive,' where you're running and you didn't even do anything," he said.

On Valentine's Day of that year, Riddick was arrested for failing to pay child support. He spent three days in jail. Criminal charges were dropped when a blood test proved he was not the child's father.

But the civil court judgment requiring him to pay child support remained in effect.

This year, the district attorney's office began taking nearly half his paycheck. Unable to afford an attorney, Riddick went to court on his own to beg that the debt be lifted. With a prosecutor arguing against him, he lost.

Riddick then sent a desperate appeal via e-mail to Garcetti, but he received a letter from the office saying the court judgment would stand.

For financial help, Riddick turned to his retired parents, living on Social Security, who maxed out their credit cards for him. It wasn't enough. In June, when the Riddicks' gas was shut off, they had to microwave water to bathe their children. They gave their two beloved dogs to the pound.

This summer, the family was again evicted.

On a steamy August night, Bert Riddick pondered the mountain of debt lying ahead of him and the future of his family as he hefted their belongings into a borrowed van. For now, they will stay with his wife's relatives.

"I don't know if you're a religious man," Riddick said to a visitor, "but say a prayer for us."

He then broke down in tears.

Methods Are Questioned

Stung by years of criticism by advocacy groups and others, district attorney's officials have taken decisive action to improve the agency's performance--on paper, at least. Its methods, however, have been questioned.

John Erlinger, a former high-ranking analyst in the agency, told The Times that while working in the office in 1993 he witnessed employees falsifying records before their review by state officials. He said that files were doctored to make it appear that more action had been taken on cases so government funding would not be risked.

"There were millions of dollars involved," Erlinger said. "I look at it as high crimes and misdemeanors. It wasn't a little thing. . . . They were doing it for lots of money."

Two knowledgeable sources, requesting anonymity, said they also were aware of the practice.

Denying any wrongdoing, district attorney's office administrators say the allegation amounted to nothing more than a disagreement over the interpretation of state regulations. They dismiss Erlinger, who retired in 1995, as a disgruntled ex-employee and say an internal investigation found that no policies had been broken.

The district attorney's office also has been chastised for inflating the number of noncustodial parents it claims to have located. During 1995 testimony before the county Board of Supervisors, agency officials said that its new computer had led to an astonishing 1,051% increase.

They failed to reveal, however, that most of that rise resulted from the computer counting some debtors more than once, a revelation that drew a rebuke from California authorities who oversee the state's child support collection programs.

One of the office's most dramatic moves to polish its reputation and silence its critics came last year.

In one sweeping action, child support officials programmed their computer system to shut every case that met federal criteria for closing cases. The vast majority were dropped because the delinquent parent could not be located for three consecutive years. By dropping more than 240,000 cases from its active files, the district attorney effectively told hundreds of thousands of children nothing could be done for them.

"This is a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' proposition," family support chief Doss said of the case closures. "If we keep the cases open, child support advocates say, 'Look how badly they're doing.' If you close the cases, they beat you over the head for closing the cases. . . . It's a shame because, I think, that ought not to be the focus of performance measurement. But it is . . . and we never made any pretense that the effort involved, at least in part, was a response to that evaluation process."

Although other counties and states close cases, the magnitude of Garcetti's move was unprecedented in California.

As required by law, the district attorney's office sent notices alerting custodial parents that their cases would be closed unless the office heard from them within 60 days. The agency says it did not track how many notices reached the intended families.

After the case closures, the office was deluged by outraged parents who, when seeking status reports on their cases, learned they had been shut.

One worker said she personally reopened hundreds of cases that were closed because of computer errors or because minimal efforts had been undertaken to find parents. In some instances, parents had not only been found but were paying support.

"Because our system is so bad," the caseworker said, "you have a lot of kids out there doing without. It's a very big number. It would have to be in the thousands at least, or maybe the tens of thousands."

Current and former employees allege that one reason the office did not know the whereabouts of many noncustodial parents was that the information may have ended up in the trash. Bundles of unopened mail, including letters and government correspondence that would have opened cases, have been periodically tossed, they say.

During last year's massive case closures, the family support unit left "boxes and boxes and boxes of correspondence from custodial parents" unopened, according to a former employee, who added: "I can't begin to tell you how horrible it was."

It also has been difficult for needy parents to telephone the unit with information. District attorney's records show that at the time of the wide-scale closures, only 1.6% of callers were getting through.

The push to close cases--and improve the district attorney's numerical standing--has continued beyond last year's purge. This year, more cases have been closed than opened, records show.

"The mind-set is on numbers," said the former employee, "not people."

In welfare cases closed because the delinquent parent could not be located, a training bulletin tells workers not to reopen the cases even if new information is provided on the whereabouts of the missing parents. When shown the directive, Doss said he had been unaware of it and acknowledged that it was inappropriate.

One casualty of the push to keep caseloads down is La Shan Ettress, 32. She was told her case would remain closed because she was collecting welfare—even though she provided the district attorney's office with information on how to find her child's father.

"I told them . . . That doesn't make sense. You asked me all these questions about him and I gave you all this information and now you are telling me you are going to close my case?" Ettress said.

Today, she said, she raises her 6-year-old daughter on a \$ 456 monthly welfare check, plus \$ 202 in food stamps, while the child's father, who owns a business, pays no support.

"It is totally unbelievable," Ettress said.

Karen Cowen knows the feeling.

Last year, Garcetti's office closed her case, saying the 51-year-old who now lives in Emmett, Idaho, had received all the money she was owed for child support.

But the agency's own records show that it had collected nothing on her behalf—an amount she said should have totaled about \$ 41,000.

"I never got a dime," said Cowen, whose daughter will soon turn 27.

Doss said the case would be reopened.

Federal regulations require that the government search three years before it can close a case on the basis that an absent parent cannot be found. The district attorney's office didn't come close in the case of Ava Marie McGee.

Only months after turning to the agency for help in increasing the support she was receiving for her children, McGee received a letter stating that the father could not be found and that the case was being closed. This despite the fact that McGee told the office her former spouse had not changed jobs and lived down the street from her.

After McGee protested, Garcetti's office acknowledged that it had located her ex-husband, who had been paying child support for seven years through payroll deductions.

The district attorney's entry into the case, however, only worsened McGee's hardship. Checks that had once arrived on time came sporadically because they were sent to the district attorney to be forwarded to her. In addition, they were for the same amount as before, not the higher amount for which she had sought the district attorney's help.

More strapped than ever, she asked the agency to back out—a request triggering more tumult. The district attorney's office informed her ex-husband's employer that the child support case had been closed and that the order to garnish her former husband's wages had been withdrawn.

Suddenly McGee was left with no child support at all. Only after the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles intervened did Garcetti's office have the support payments reinstated.

"For the last seven years, I got my checks on time. The minute the district attorney took over the case, my checks were . . . missing," McGee said.

The district attorney's office says McGee today has received all the money due to her. But by her account, she still is owed about \$ 600, a lot for someone struggling with heart problems and raising three growing children.

Doss acknowledges that the office erred in initially attempting to close McGee's case, but defended the eventual outcome of her case.

"They are completely incompetent," said Legal Aid attorney Jane Preece, who handled McGee's case. "They do not solve problems at the basic level. Ever."

Holding Back the Money

Although Garcetti has said he wants the success of the child support unit to be a hallmark of his administration, he has allowed job vacancies in the family support unit to run as high as 25%. In two of the last three years, he used nearly \$ 6 million allocated for child support operations to cover overspending in his criminal division.

That money could have hired more than 200 caseworkers.

When asked about using child support funds to offset spending elsewhere, Garcetti denied doing so. After child support director Doss corrected his boss, Garcetti blamed county "bureaucrats" for stymieing his hiring efforts.

Last fall, after an independent audit found that more caseworkers were urgently needed, county supervisors were in no mood for excuses.

"I don't understand why you are the only department that has these problems," Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke told Garcetti. "Every other department can find people."

Since then, under intense scrutiny, Garcetti's office has aggressively hired caseworkers. Today, the office's staff is almost double the 789 workers he inherited when elected in 1992. Garcetti points to the beefed-up staffing as proof that he has made child support a priority.

But some family support workers question the way in which the district attorney uses his considerable resources. He spends more per case than any of the four other California counties with the largest child support caseloads—Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego.

Some of those high costs can be attributed to Garcetti's emphasis on hiring expensive deputy district attorneys instead of lower-paid caseworkers or clerks.

"They're just doing things which are very expensive and not necessarily effective," said Leora Gershenson of the National Center for Youth Law. "They are focusing on aspects . . . that do not give a very big bang for the buck."

For years, questions also have arisen over the millions of dollars in child support collections allowed to accumulate in interest-bearing accounts. At times, the balances waiting to be paid out have soared to more than \$ 25 million.

District attorney's officials say a large amount of that money is owed to parents who cannot be found. Under state law, if a family cannot be located, the money must be refunded to the paying parents after six months. But Doss says the county prefers to continue looking for the parents.

Despite years of questions about the accounts from child support advocates, it was not until The Times raised the issue that Garcetti called a news conference in August to announce that \$ 6 million was available for about 4,800 parents whom his office had been unable to locate.

The district attorney was flanked by two women who were given money they had been owed for years--including one who said her case had already been closed. Garcetti also announced that the names of other women due money would be posted on the Internet.

A Times researcher, armed only with some of those names, easily found three parents by searching phone and other public records and then calling to verify identities.

"I don't think the district attorney tried very hard to find me," said Charline Bowersox, 66.

The children for whom she had sought support are now grown, with youngsters of their own. Bowersox has been listed in the phone book for 30 years, ever since she left La Puente for rural New Hampshire.

Without the child support she was owed, Bowersox said, she relied on welfare to raise her three children in a rundown house that, on occasion, had no running water.

"I'm glad they've got a bank account," she said of the district attorney's office. "I'd like to see the money in my bank account."

A separate account for overpayments holds money for people like Javier Alvarez.

The 53-year-old Harbor City machinist diligently paid child support for 18 years. Even after his first daughter became an adult, the district attorney's office continued to take money from his paycheck, he said. The office even took from the disability payments he received when an industrial accident put him out of work, sending his family into poverty. When he called the district attorney's office to straighten things out, Alvarez said, caseworkers hung up on him.

Two years ago, a court commissioner ruled that Garcetti's office owed Alvarez more than \$ 6,000. He said he has yet to be reimbursed.

"If I take something from someone and don't pay for it, I have to give it back. But not Child Support. . . . This is my own money. This is not right."

After being contacted Thursday by The Times, the district attorney's office sent Alvarez a check for \$ 4,500, saying it appeared that the rest of the money had reached him. But Alvarez said that was the first check he had gotten from the agency.

At least Alvarez got some of his money.

Last year, Juan Melara, ill with cancer, asked a social worker in Wilmington to help him resolve a child support case.

"It was bothering him because he was trying to leave everything in order," nurse Mary Mungia recalled. "He knew he was dying and wanted to make sure his new wife would not be left with any financial problems."

The nurse called longtime child support advocate Sue Speir, who contacted Garcetti's office to find out what Melara owed.

A month later, Speir said, she got an answer: Melara had actually overpaid, and the district attorney's office said it was trying to get money back from his ex-wife.

The news came too late.

"He died before anybody in the D.A.'s office got back to him," Speir said. "He died thinking he still owed them money."

Times researchers Janet Lundblad and Paul Singleton contributed to this series.

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX / INFOGRAPHIC)

Many Children, Little Support

L.A. County's child support system by the numbers:

1 In 5: Estimated number of county residents affected by child support system.

58: Rank out of 58 counties in state in overall performance, according to legislative analyst's office.

8%: Percentage of cases on which current child support is collected.

40: Number of states with fewer cases than L.A. County.

760,000: Estimated children affected.

81%: Percentage of cases that involve families on welfare.

Note: Numbers represent Los Angeles County during the 1998 fiscal year.

Sources: Los Angeles County district attorney's office, legislative analyst's office.

How L.A. County Stacks Up

Comparison of Los Angeles County with six other California counties, including Sierra County, which leads the state in many support categories:

RECOVERY RATIO

Percent of welfare dollars recovered through child support collections by district attorneys:

July 1996-June 1997

Los Angeles: 5.4%

San Diego: 13.8%

Orange: 19.4%

San Francisco: 19.4%

Fresno: 20.9%

Ventura: 27.5%

Sierra: 44.8%

LOW RETURNS

Dollars collected in child support for every dollar spent by county district attorneys on collect it:

July 1996-June 1997

Los Angeles: \$ 2.11

San Francisco: \$ 2.33

Ventura: \$ 3.29

Sierra: \$ 3.81

Fresno: \$ 4.06

Orange: \$ 4.21

San Diego: \$ 4.26

Source: State Department of Social Services, Los Angeles district attorney's office.

Who to Call for Help

The following organizations provide free or low-cost advice on child support matters:

- * ACES (Assn. for Children for the Enforcement of Child Support) (800) 738-2237
- * Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law (323) 939-2174
- * Lawyers for Family Support (323) 852-1475
- * Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (323) 801-7991
- * My Child Says Daddy (323) 296-8816
- * Neighborhood Legal Services (800) 433-6251
- * SPUNK (Single Parents United 'N Kids) (562) 984-2580

To Comment

For readers wanting to comment on these stories, e-mail: child.support@latimes.com

Times Web site bulletin board: <http://www.latimes.com/child.support>

About This Series

Today--The county's child support program may be the worst in the nation, driving families into financial ruin while hiding its problems through questionable bookkeeping.

Monday--The task of trying to resolve child support problems proves daunting in a court system pushed by the district attorney's office to focus on volume and speed.

Tuesday--Weak state oversight of counties like Los Angeles has left California with one of the poorest child support systems in the country. Yet its leaders fight key reforms.

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SERIES: Failure to Provide: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis. Last in a series.

COUNTY, STATE BOTH GET BLAME ON CHILD SUPPORT

BYLINE: NICHOLAS RICCARDI and GREG KRICKORIAN, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Los Angeles County's child support failure is just a piece of a much larger puzzle.

The entire state of California for years has languished near the bottom of the nation in many categories of collecting child support. This year alone, an estimated 3 million children statewide will go without the money they are owed.

As the largest and by most measures worst county in California in collecting support, Los Angeles is blamed by many for pulling the state down in national rankings. But the only way to truly change Los Angeles' performance would appear to be to restructure the entire state system.

That prospect, for now, seems unlikely.

Past efforts to reform the state's child support system have been largely blocked by the powerful county district attorneys, whose agencies receive millions of dollars in incentive payments from the federal government.

"The question here is not whether the line workers and the local D.A.'s are working their tails off," said Assemblywoman Dion Aroner (D-Berkeley). "But it doesn't seem to change how we're doing. At some point you say maybe we have to totally revamp what we're doing."

Please contact Larry McSwain if you would like to receive the WR Daily Report by e-mail or if you have questions about articles found in this publication. (lmcswain@acf.dhhs.gov (e-mail) or 202-401-1230(voice)).

State officials charged with running California's child support system say that, although the program is still in need of improvement, it is moving forward after years of neglect.

"The future's brighter than it's ever been," said Leslie Frye, head of the state's child support office, which oversees the way district attorneys collect child support in their counties.

Not everyone at the state level agrees.

Tough Laws, Weak Record

California's watchdog Little Hoover Commission last year issued a scathing report on the child support program, noting the irony of a state with some of the toughest child support laws in the nation having such a poor track record.

"In recent years, the child support program has been bolstered by considerable federal and state legislation," the report said. "But given the possibilities and the imperative, the progress is anemic."

Another report, released Monday by a coalition of child support advocacy groups, says that although the amount of support collected has grown in the past five years, the amount of uncollected money has increased far more dramatically--from \$ 3 billion in 1992 to \$ 8.2 billion as of 1996.

"Overall, the state's child support program remains near the bottom of the nation, failing far more children than it helps," said the report issued by the National Center for Youth Law, the Child Support Reform Initiative and Children Now.

Those who want to reform the state's child support system can choose from several models across the nation.

Some states, like Texas and Florida, rely on a single agency to collect support--the attorney general and department of finance, respectively. Others, like Minnesota and New York, split the responsibility between several county agencies and rely on another bureaucracy in the state capitol to coordinate.

In some states, child support is a largely administrative process. In others, like California, it is run by county prosecutors who put the process in more of a judicial framework.

All states have one thing in common: They do not collect nearly enough of the money owed to children.

"Child support is not an easy business," said Robert Doar, who runs New York's program. "We are dealing with money and family, and those things will make people do the most mean-spirited things. . . . We have to have realistic expectations about what we can achieve."

Some states, however, are better than others for a variety of reasons, experts say--usually a mixture of demographics, management and structure.

Critics say California--especially Los Angeles County--lags in all three.

"California has one of the worst systems in the country," said Columbia University professor Irwin Garfinkel, a leading child support scholar. "The system is so localized . . . so county-based, it's almost like going from one state to another, and that probably by itself accounts for the relatively dismal performance."

The states that are most successful tend to have strong, centralized coordination, even if each county operates independently, said Michael Kharfen, a spokesman for the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

In its report, the Little Hoover Commission found that is not the case in California and contended that the Department of Social Services was "rewarding excuses rather than results."

The rewards come in the form of federal funds that flow to California from the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Last year, spending by district attorneys across the state increased faster than the child support they distributed.

The Little Hoover Commission and the state's legislative analyst have criticized as deeply flawed the way the state Department of Social Services has for years evaluated the child support efforts of California's district attorneys.

Even if a district attorney's office failed its performance evaluation, it still could receive millions in federal dollars. Los Angeles County, for example, failed every performance evaluation until last year. Yet between 1995 and 1997, according to an analysis by the National Center for Youth Law, the amount of federal money it received rose eight times faster than its collections.

The reason the state does not take a harder stand is because it hopes to work with the district attorneys to help them better provide for the children they serve. Although Frye said the approach has succeeded, advocates counter that it has undermined accountability by allowing systems like Los Angeles' to collect from parents in only a fraction of their cases, without penalties or consequences.

In Los Angeles, the district attorney's office collects support from the noncustodial parent in fewer than 8% of its 500,000 cases.

"It is a massive failure of the whole regulatory structure," said Betty Nordwind, executive director of the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law in Los Angeles.

"Where is the state? Where are the feds?" said Nordwind, who also chairs the county's Family Support Advisory Board. "How come this program, which is one of the largest in the country . . . has been allowed to get this far in life with an 8% collection rate?"

The Legislature changed the evaluation process this year, focusing on each county's performance in collecting child support to reimburse the welfare system.

Other efforts to reform the system, however, have died.

In each of the past three years, child support advocates had bills introduced in the Assembly or the state Senate to move control of child support programs from the district attorneys to another government agency.

Some years the bills simply died without a hearing. In other years, proposed reforms were killed after strong opposition from the California District Attorneys Assn., which has a child support lobbyist.

"You can't get enough people who want to take on the district attorneys," said Assemblywoman Debra Bowen (D-Marina del Rey). "It gets derailed before it ever gets voted on."

Los Angeles lawyer Gloria Allred, a longtime child support advocate, said, "I can't really account for why district attorneys want to hold onto it, except to say I've never seen an elected official give up power. . . ."

"If I had a system that didn't work, I'd want to fix it or turn it over to someone else."

Alternative Strategies

It is not just a question of mismanagement, some say. Prosecutors simply may not be the best people to handle the sensitive issue of child support.

"They're set up to hunt down and punish people who have broken the law," said Michele Salinger, a staff attorney at Levitt & Quinn Family Law Center in Los Angeles, which helps indigent parents deal with the district attorney's child support office. "I think this problem is so bad and so broad right now that it needs a somewhat finer touch."

Even some former district attorneys concede that the program should be moved.

"The D.A.'s office wasn't and isn't set up to do collections," said former Los Angeles Dist. Atty. Robert Philibosian, who advocates privatization.

Prosecutors say they should keep the program because they can run it best.

"We strongly believe that the further away you remove it from local control, the worse the service is going to get," said Sacramento prosecutor Jonathan Burris, president of the California Family Support Council.

At least now, said San Diego County Dist. Atty. Paul Pfingst, voters can hold someone accountable for the child support program. "There has to be an elected person whom the public can kick out of office rather than a bureaucracy far away that history has shown us doesn't care."

Accountability Measure

The district attorneys this year, however, were instrumental in killing a measure that could have provided more accountability for their child support operations.

Assemblywoman Aroner introduced a bill to create an appeals process for mothers or fathers who believe that their child support cases were botched by district attorneys. It was a move suggested by the Little Hoover Commission in its 1997 report.

The district attorneys organization opposed the bill, arguing that untold thousands of parents would complain. It estimated that the process would cost millions of dollars, a contention Aroner's office disputes.

Prosecutors also argued that an appeals process would have been redundant.

"You right now have that same process existing in the court," Burris said. "If the court process is unfriendly, if they think it's not usable by people, they have to fix that process."

Despite opposition from district attorneys, the bill gained wide support in the Legislature and was passed on a bipartisan vote, backed by a unique lobbying partnership between fathers' and mothers' rights groups.

But last month, Gov. Pete Wilson vetoed the bill, saying child support was already adequately monitored by the state and federal governments and did not need additional oversight.

Now, said Leora Gershcnzon of the National Center for Youth Law, a backer of the bill, "we have to start from scratch next year."

Times researcher Janet Lundblad contributed to this story.

About This Series

Sunday--The county's child support program may be the worst in the nation, driving families into financial ruin while hiding its problems through questionable bookkeeping.

Monday--Trying to resolve child support problems proves to be a daunting task in a court system pushed by the district attorney's office to focus on volume and speed.

Today--Weak state oversight of counties like Los Angeles has left California with one of the poorest child support systems in the country. Yet its leaders fight key reforms.

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX / INFOGRAPHIC)

Whom to Call for Help

The following organizations provide free or low-cost advice on child support matters:

- * ACES (Assn. for Children for the Enforcement of Support) (800) 738-2237
- * Child Support Paralegal Services (213) 387-2727
- * CORE (Congress on Racial Equality) (213) 252-1996
- * Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law (323) 939-2174
- * Lawyers for Family Support (323) 852-1475
- * Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (323) 801-7991 * Levitt & Quinn Family Law Center (213) 482-1800
- * My Child Says Daddy (323) 296-8816
- * Neighborhood Legal Services (800) 433-6251
- * SPUNK (Single Parents United 'n Kids) (562) 984-2580
- * Vincent Family Law Center (213) 365-6085

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Trying to Improve the System

Among the many bills on child support introduced in the Legislature each year are ones that some advocacy groups say could reform the state's beleaguered program. This is what has happened to some of those bills in the past three years.

1998

Bill: AB1961

Objective: Create child support appeals process, as recommended by Little Hoover Commission. Give parents who think their cases were mishandled another recourse.

D.A.'s Stance: Opposed

What happened: Passed both houses, vetoed

Bill: SB1410

Objective: Establish incentive pay program for district attorneys as recommended by legislative analyst's office using new statistical measures to better link incentive pay to actual performance of the child support program.

Please contact Larry McSwain if you would like to receive the WR Daily Report by e-mail or if you have questions about articles found in this publication. (lmcswain@acf.dhhs.gov (e-mail) or 202-401-1230(voice)).

D.A.'s Stance: None

What happened: Passed and signed by Gov. Wilson

Bill: AB2094

Objective: Transfer child support program to state Franchise Tax Board, which collects twice as efficiently as all D.A. offices statewide.

D.A.'s Stance: Opposed

What happened: Died in Assembly Judicial Committee

1997

Bill: AB2093

Objective: Transfer child support program from judicial process to administrative process as favored by some advocacy groups who believe it would be more efficient.

D.A.'s Stance: Opposed

What happened: Died in Assembly Judicial Committee

Bill: AB907

Objective: Transfer entire child support program to state Department of Social Services. Some advocates believe this would be more efficient.

D.A.'s Stance: None

What happened: Stalled in Senate Judicial Committee

Bill: SB396

Objective: Eliminate process for giving incentive pay to D.A.s. Critics say the process rewards D.A.s despite negligible improvements in their work.

D.A.'s Stance: None

What happened: Passed

1996

Bill: SB235

Objective: Transfer child support program to unspecified administrative agency for greater efficiency.

D.A.'s Stance: Opposed

What happened: Died in Senate Judicial Committee

Sources: National Center for Your Law, Assembly staff