

# *Washington Post*

Thursday, August 23, 2007; B04

## **Report Faults Handling of Fathers; Group Urges Officials to Focus on Job Training, Not Penalties**

**By Keith L. Alexander, Washington Post Staff Writer**

D.C. officials take too punitive an approach toward fathers who fail to make child support payments, missing opportunities to help them take more responsibility, a public advocacy group contends.

The D.C. Applesseed Center for Law and Justice plans to release a report today that urges the city to focus more on job training and other programs for fathers who lack the means to support their children. The 300-page report is the result of more than two years of study.

The report suggests that officials could collect more money for families in the long run by giving fathers a stronger financial footing. It says the city should consider forgiving some debts in exchange for proof that the defaulting fathers are actively seeking jobs or more training that will enable them to make payments later. The study also encourages District officials to set aside some local jobs for fathers who have large amounts of overdue child support payments.

“We need to put child support on the table as one of the highest priorities of the District government,” said Judy Berman, co-author of the report. “Child support is a form of father involvement and helps a child feel valued.”

The District’s child support system involves about 65 percent – or about 77,000 – of the children in the city. That’s more than the number of children enrolled in the District’s public and charter schools combined, according to figures from the U.S. Census Bureau and the D.C. Office of the Attorney General.

Yet, the primary parent of fewer than one in four of the children in the system received payments last year. Many of the children are in low-income households. About 70 percent of those in the system are current or former welfare recipients, the report says.

The report urges officials to make a distinction between “deadbeat dads,” who have the financial means but do not pay support, and “dead-broke dads,” who are neither employed nor possess employable skills to make such payments.

Special attention must be given to low-income fathers who have trouble making payments and fathers whose criminal or substance-abuse backgrounds make it difficult for them to find jobs, the report says. It calls for the city to work with employment agencies.

Instead of incarcerating parents who fail to pay or revoking their driver's licenses, the report urges the city to consider electronic monitoring or weekend incarceration, which would give them time to work or look for a job.

Appleseed found numerous problems in the District's handling of child support cases. The city "falls significantly below" the national average on rates of establishing child support orders and collecting past-due payments, the group said.

The consequences are great, the report says, extending well beyond the home. "The fact is these children are unlikely to meet their potential in the classroom unless they receive the support they need from their parents," the report declares.

Appleseed has a history of studying critical city issues. In 2005, it issued a scathing analysis of the District's efforts to deal with the HIV/AIDS crisis. Within days of that report's publication, D.C. Health Director Gregg A. Pane fired the head of the city's HIV/AIDS Administration, saying new leadership was needed. The advocacy group's next report, due early next year, will examine the District's economic and educational policies and how they affect working poor families.

For the child support study, Appleseed – along with lawyers from the firms Crowell & Moring and Kilpatrick Stockton – interviewed 170 parents, child advocates, government employees and national experts.

The report focused primarily on delinquent fathers because the majority of single, custodial parents in the District were mothers. Also, those single fathers who have custody of their children are often better off financially than are single mothers, the report's authors found.

The Office of the Attorney General oversees the Child Support Services Division. The report recommends that the city devote more staff to the issue.

Benidia Rice, deputy attorney general and director of child support services, said her office began overhauling its system in 2000 and has made progress in getting delinquent parents to pay up.

Rice said her office is working with job training programs and examining alternative payment plans.

"We are always looking for improvements to our program," Rice said. "We try to look at every case individually and apply the appropriate level of enforcement."

### **Falling Behind on Payments**

Fewer than one in four fathers in the District are on track with child-care payments. .Nationally, slightly more than half pay the required support.

**THE DISTRICT (OF COLUMBIA)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Cases Receiving payments</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Amount due</b>	<b>Amount collected</b>	<b>Percent</b>
2004	92,847	17,683	19%	\$262.80 million	\$13.53 million	4%
2005	85,117	18,663	22%	\$378.61 million	\$14.88 million	4%
2006	77,651	18,071	23%	\$393.96 million	\$14.45 million	4%

**NATIONAL**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Cases Receiving payments</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Amount due</b>	<b>Amount collected</b>	<b>Percent</b>
2004	15.85 million	8.13 million	51%	\$102.36 billion	\$6.71 billion	7%
2005	15.86 million	8.30 million	52%	\$106.57 billion	\$6.99 billion	7%
2006	15.84 million	8.53 million	54%	\$105.42 billion	\$7.09 billion	7%

SOURCE: D.C. Applesed Center for Law and Justice | The Washington Post – August 23, 2007

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