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## States Use a New Carrot to Collect Child Support

By Marilyn Gardner, Staff Writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Pay up now and avoid arrest. That's the preholiday message officials in Georgia are sending to parents who owe child support.

Beginning Dec. 1 and continuing for 10 days, a statewide amnesty program allows noncustodial fathers and mothers to catch up on back payments without punishment of fines or jail. Those struggling with financial problems can work out a payment plan.

"We think it would be a good thing if the money that's owed to many children in the state gets to them at this time of year," says Barbara Joye of the state's Office of Child Support Enforcement.

Encouraged by the success of a pilot amnesty program in Columbus, Ga., last month that yielded \$32,000, officials have sent letters to 6,000 of the state's most delinquent parents.

Across America, child-support amnesties in states and counties offer a way to collect unpaid billions from parents who either cannot or will not pay. Americans who are in arrears on child support owe an average of \$9,000 per case.

"It's an expansion of opportunities to assist noncustodial parents in doing the right thing," says Kay Cullen, communications director of the National Child Support Enforcement Agency in Washington.

In New Jersey, an amnesty week in September brought in more than \$1 million in payments, up from \$900,000 two years ago. The program targeted parents so delinquent in their payments that warrants are out for their arrest.

“They didn’t have to show up with a checkbook,” says Suzanne Esterman of the New Jersey Department of Human Services. “They just had to commit to starting to pay child support once again. They certainly found it more beneficial to their children to begin owning up to that responsibility, as opposed to having the threat of jail hanging over their heads.”

In New Jersey, 7 percent of those owing child support are women. Nationwide, mothers account for about 15 percent of noncustodial parents.

Those who owe money come from all economic groups. “We’re dealing with low-income families, and we’re also dealing with high-income families,” says Paula Tolson, a spokeswoman for the Maryland Department of Human Resources. “We’ve had some pretty affluent people who decided, for whatever reason, not to honor their child-support obligations.”

In two Maryland counties, Prince George’s and Anne Arundel, 826 parents paid \$168,000 during an amnesty in August. “We’ve done the 10 most wanted,” Ms. Tolson says. “It’s effective in some environments. But the family dynamic is complicated. You’ve got to use multiple strategies in reaching people.”

Those strategies include helping noncustodial parents find jobs. Maryland offers job development programs and teaches job-search skills. In Georgia, a Fatherhood Program provides job training and education for parents who are unable to pay because they don’t earn enough. “We help them to increase their earning power,” Joye says.

Whatever the strategy, advocates for children emphasize that child support goes beyond dollars and involves being part of a child’s life. New Jersey’s child support department has developed an advertising campaign with the tag line: “Child support – it’s not just money.” Says Ms. Esterman, “Advertising, along with outreach, has definitely increased collections over the last seven years.”

In West Virginia, an ongoing amnesty program allows the noncustodial parent and the custodial parent to agree to waive the interest due on unpaid support. If the debt is paid within two years, the interest is forgiven.

“For the few people who have taken advantage of it, it works very well, but not many have taken advantage of it,” says Susan Perry, commissioner of the Bureau for Child Support Enforcement.

Other amnesty programs have had mixed results. When Ohio’s Clermont County offered a month-long amnesty in July 2003, the effort received wide attention from newspapers and TV stations. “We were very pleased,” says Brenda Gilreath, deputy director of the Child Support Program. “We thought, ‘This is really going to be a success.’”

They sent 190 letters to noncustodial parents with arrest warrants, encouraging them to work out a payment plan during Child Support Month in August. But they got only 28 inquiries. Of those, six were granted amnesty. Staff members don’t know why the turnout was so low.

Still, Ms. Gilreath sees a benefit. “For those who were arrested in August, we could say, ‘We had an amnesty program in July – why didn’t you come forward and work with us? You had your chance.’”

Officials also find that benefits continue after the program ends. “A lot of times, when people stop paying child support ... they stop seeing the child. [Amnesty] creates an opportunity to reestablish that relationship,” says Brian Shea, executive director of the Maryland Child Support Enforcement Administration.

Children are not the only beneficiaries. Regular payment of court-ordered child support keeps some families from needing to apply for food stamps and welfare, benefiting taxpayers, too.

Emphasizing the importance of giving parents a second chance to pay without fear of punishment, Joye says, “Our purpose is not to have people arrested and go to jail. Our purpose is to make sure the children are provided for as the courts order. This is really all about benefiting children and strengthening families.”

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