

Ensuring Fairness in Child-Support Services

The Grand Jury investigated how child-support payments are monitored and tracked by the Sonoma County Department of Child Support Services (DCSS). These payments were formerly administered by the District Attorney (DA).

Our investigation indicates that management of child-support payments has improved since DCSS assumed responsibility of the program in 2002. Internal DCSS analysis led to changes in the management of child-support payments that made the process more sensitive to the concerns of parents and all other parties involved. Further steps must be taken by DCSS to ensure that everyone affected by the child-support system is well served.

Reason for Investigation

The Grand Jury received complaints alleging mismanagement of child-support payment procedures for custodial and non-custodial parents. The complainants claimed that from the 1990s through the first half of this decade, the DA's office and DCSS were unresponsive to complaints regarding inaccurate and inappropriate child-support responsibilities. This lack of responsiveness resulted in detrimental credit records of program participants, among other negative consequences.

Investigative Procedures

The Grand Jury interviewed and investigated the following sources:

- Two complainants
- Director of Sonoma County Department of Child Support Services
- Chief Attorney for Sonoma County Department of Child Support Services
- Policies, services, and procedures within DCSS
- Documentation from complainants

Findings

- F1** DCSS did not previously have a system for clear documentation of child-support payments.
- F2** DCSS did not accurately monitor responsibility of health insurance for the supported children.
- F3** DCSS was not monitoring to see that custody arrangements were not violated.
- F4** DCSS did not previously accept and review all pertinent documentation for support-payment cases.
- F5** DCSS clients are intimidated by the court system.
- F6** Some DCSS policies and procedures were not clear to participants, nor were they communicated effectively.
- F7** Terminology that was offensive to some parents was dictated at the State level; such terminology has since been modified or changed.

Conclusions

Previously, child-support services were under the jurisdiction of the DA. Once the responsibility transferred to DCSS, shortcomings of the child-support payment system received the attention they required. While DCSS continues to improve management of this system, mechanisms are required to manage the system more effectively, and to address the concerns of parents.

Commendations

The Grand Jury commends DCSS for establishing a more clean-cut tracking system for documenting child-support cases. In the past, the department offered employees classes in sensitivity training, and parenting classes for clients. It also developed a non-custodial-parent training program to assist in understanding that the custodial and non-custodial parents are in a business-partner relationship. Additionally, DCSS has improved its bilingual and cultural services. It is also commended for converting the child-support management system to a computerized database.

Recommendations

- R1** DCSS should educate clients on court procedures and the workings of the child-support system.
- R2** DCSS should provide clear and thorough documentation of child-support payments to all parties involved.
- R3** DCSS should clarify and verify responsibility of health insurance for children involved in each case.
- R4** To minimize disputes, DCSS should evaluate and monitor client understanding of and satisfaction with its services. Client evaluations should occur after three months, nine months, and annually thereafter.
- R5** DCSS should appoint a neutral third-party ombudsman to ensure a fair process. This volunteer would ideally have a background in child-support issues.

Recommendations, continued

- R6** DCSS investigations should include written documentation or other corroborating evidence regarding disputed issues.
- R7** If budget constraints allow, DCSS should reinstate parenting classes. If this training cannot be funded, volunteer resources should be explored.

Requested Responses to Recommendations

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors: R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7

Required Responses to Recommendations

Sonoma County Department of Child Support Services: R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7





