

The Child Support Enforcement Program: A Critical Investment for Children's Success

Executive Summary

The Rhode Island Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) operates the federally-mandated Child Support Enforcement Program. The program ensures that parents meet their obligations to support their children and pursues child support and medical support orders from non-custodial parents. In 2007, child support collections totaled \$78.5 million. OCSS distributed \$54.5 million directly to Rhode Island children. In addition, the state shared \$7.8 million in child support collections with the federal government as reimbursement for FIP cash assistance and \$2.5 million in reimbursement for RIte Care.

OCSS pursues child support and medical support on behalf of children who receive cash assistance through the Family Independence Program (FIP), RIte Care or child care subsidies. For a fee of \$20 its services are also available to families that do not receive public benefits.

In 2006, there were 58,082 child support cases. Close to eighty percent were families that were not currently receiving FIP cash assistance, although over half had received FIP cash assistance in the past. The average support order for these families, \$342/month, is a critical source of support. For a single parent earning \$9/hour, for example, child support represents twenty percent of monthly income.

In 2007, OCSS collected \$8.7 million in child support for children enrolled in the Family Independence Program, retaining \$7.6 million for the state and federal government. The balance was distributed to families receiving FIP cash assistance under rules that "pass through" the first \$50 of child support paid on-time by a non-custodial parent. An average of 1,686 families benefited from this policy.

In addition to establishing orders for child support, OCSS establishes orders for medical support. In federal fiscal year 2007, there were 14,928 court orders for medical insurance and 6,265 orders to pay for medical coverage. OCSS collected and shared with the federal government \$2.5 million in cash medical payments collected from parents whose children receive RIte Care and distributed \$728,762 in medical payments to families to offset the cost of private health coverage or other medical expenses.

OCSS also has a number of initiatives for non-custodial parents, including referral for job placement and training for those who are unemployed or underemployed and facilitating a process for incarcerated parents to modify or suspend support orders to reflect current ability to pay. In addition, the Child Support Enforcement Program is responsive to the needs of custodial parents who are victims of domestic violence through engagement with the Domestic Violence Advocacy program.

State investments in the child support enforcement program are extremely cost effective. The federal government reimburses sixty-six percent of administrative expenses. In 2007, the cost of the program was \$11 million with \$3.7 million from general revenue. For every dollar the state spent, it collected \$5.65 in child support and “cash medical” to distribute to families or reimburse the state and federal government for cash assistance and medical assistance.

The Child Support Enforcement Program in Rhode Island is not as well staffed or funded as in other New England states. This may account for the fact that Rhode Island’s rate of establishing child support orders lags significantly behind that of neighboring state even though Rhode Island is on par with other states in establishing paternity and collecting payments.

Recommendations:

- Increase the establishment and collection of child support and medical support orders by increasing investments in infrastructure and staffing.
- Improve protection for all victims of domestic violence by extending the services of the Domestic Violence Advocacy Program to parents applying for RIte Care.
- Increase the standard of living for children receiving FIP cash assistance by increasing the “child support pass through” to the amounts encouraged by federal law.