

Rachel Flum: Child support helps families leave welfare

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ABSENT IN THE RECENT public dialogue about single mothers receiving cash assistance is a look at the fathers and their obligation to support their children. Little mention is made of the Rhode Island Office of Child Support Services (OCSS), a valuable resource that helps ensure that parents provide the financial support to which their children are entitled.

The Office of Child Support Services is a cost-efficient system that serves roughly 66,000 Rhode Island children. OCSS provides two important functions: helping Rhode Island families by locating absent parents and establishing paternity, establishing and enforcing child support and medical support orders for families, and referring non-custodial parents who are not working to jobs and/or job training; and collecting money to reimburse the state for some of the costs of health care and cash assistance provided to children.

Although OCSS is available for a nominal fee to all Rhode Island families who seek its services, the majority of families served have previously received cash assistance through the Family Independence Program (FIP), the state's welfare program, or are currently receiving cash assistance. In 2006, the Office of Child Support Services distributed over \$24.5 million to low income working families who formerly received FIP, a group that makes up 53 percent of the child-support caseload

Receipt of regular child support payments helps custodial parents make ends meet and leave welfare. Studies have shown that parents with regular child support payments are more likely to find work faster and to stay employed longer than those who do not. Child support supplements low earnings and helps families weather a job loss or other financial crisis. In addition, child support reduces welfare use — families who receive child support are more likely to leave welfare and less likely to return. Families are also less likely to turn to cash assistance when child support is available.

The average child support obligation for children enrolled in FIP is \$252 per month, while the average support obligation for families not receiving FIP is \$331 per month. Families on FIP receive only the first \$50 of the court ordered support paid by the non-custodial parent each month. The remainder goes to the state and federal government to reimburse the cost of FIP benefits. Currently, only 10 percent of FIP families receive this \$50 "pass through" payment. As of Oct. 1, 2008, to encourage states to pass through more to the families, the federal government will waive its share of payment, up to \$100 for one child and \$200 for two or more children. Rhode Island should take advantage of this opportunity to increase the amount of money that children receive from their non-custodial parent.

Investments in child support services are extremely cost effective. In 2006, OCSS collected and distributed \$55 million dollars while only spending \$12 million. In other words, for every \$1 the state spends, it distributes \$4.58 in child support and medical support to families or as state reimbursement for FIP and Rite Care costs. In 2006, the state collected approximately \$5 million in reimbursement for Rite Care and FIP.

Over the past year, OCSS lost 29 staff, close to 30 percent of its employees, because of retirement, unfilled vacancies and the recently required layoffs. The result is that child-support workers have at least 1,500 cases each, with some carrying as many as 2,100 cases.

Prior to the reduction of staff, Rhode Island already had the highest case/staff ratio in New England and consequently the lowest rate of orders established. OCSS also has an antiquated computer system which hampers its work and an inadequate phone system which isn't sufficient to serve customers. OCSS could do an even better job of collecting child support for Rhode Island's children and adding money to the staff coffers if it had sufficient staff and infrastructure to carry out its important responsibilities.

Policy makers should take a much closer look at OCSS as part of the solution to decreasing welfare, improving financial security for poor families and increasing state revenue.

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