

Nebraska ranks No. 6 nationally in collections of child support payments

By Sarah Schulz

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Nebraska is consistently ranked in the top 10 nationally for child support payment collections.

Nearly 70 percent of child support in the state is paid, said Thomas Pristow, director of Children and Family Services at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

In recognition of August being Child Support Awareness Month, Pristow released information about child support in Nebraska.

“Parents who pay child support help build their children’s sense of security, confidence and trust, resulting in better outcomes in school, health and parental relationships,” he said. “During Child Support Awareness Month, we thank parents who meet both their parental responsibility and financial obligation to support their children. We encourage parents who are behind on child support payments to contact DHHS’ Child Support Enforcement to find ways to become current on payments, which not only helps their children but it also lowers costs for taxpayers.”

He said unpaid child support follows parents their entire life, and enforcement can involve the withholding of income, even including possible garnishment of a parent’s Social Security checks after retirement. The growth of interest also is added to unpaid child support, and driver’s licenses may be suspended or passports revoked. In addition, professional or recreational licenses could be suspended, or garnishment of tax returns and bank accounts can occur, according to Pristow.

“Child Support Enforcement stands ready to work with parents to develop a plan to consistently pay their child support,” he said. “We are here to treat both parents fairly, and we have a dedicated staff that is committed to ensure all children receive an equal opportunity for success in life.”

Parents may contact DHHS’s Child Support Enforcement at (877) 631-9973 or (402) 441-8715.

“The most important part of child support is that children are impacted as little as possible when each parent takes their responsibilities seriously,” Pristow said.

In Hall County, Barbara Dunn, the child support enforcement attorney, said the office has always had a good collection percentage.

In 2011, 89.77 percent of the 3,579 child support cases in the county had orders for payment in place. Of those cases, 68.26 percent were being collected in 2011 and just over 70 percent of cases in arrears were being collected, she said.

“It’s a struggle,” Dunn said. “It’s a constant struggle.”

The slow economy, undocumented workers and the high immigrant population can all be “strikes against” the county when it comes to collecting child support, she said.

“Some of the people don’t work, or they can’t find a job,” she said. “Our caseworkers are very dedicated.”

There are five child support enforcement caseworkers in Hall County. They each have 700 to 800 cases and they work hard to track down people who owe money and to find sources of income so they can pay their child support, she said.

There is a law that allows the state to withhold child support from a person’s wages and that has helped “tremendously,” she said.

“The automatic withdrawal is a huge collection boon,” Dunn said. “They don’t spend it if they don’t see it. Withholding makes a big difference.”

However, Dunn said she often has to remind payees that, even with automatic withdrawals, it is still their responsibility to look at their checks and make sure the money is being taken out. They also need to contact the child support enforcement office if they change jobs, she said.

Blaming the state for not withholding support from paychecks is a common practice in court, she said. Another excuse for not paying that Dunn hears regularly is that the custodial parent won’t let the non-custodial parent visit the children.

“Visitation and custody is a separate issue from child support,” she said. “It comes up a lot. ‘She won’t let me see my kids, so I’m not paying.’ Well, I’m sorry but the kid still needs to eat. They still need a roof over their head. Child support is court ordered.”

According to the Nebraska Child Support Payment Center, a division of the state treasurer’s office, Nebraska ranked third in the U.S. last year for the percent of child support payments received electronically.

A report released by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement showed that electronic funds transfers in Nebraska accounted for 70 percent of all child support payments from employers, direct payers, interstate payments, and unemployment insurance payments. States with higher electronic funds transfer rates were Pennsylvania at 79 percent and Indiana at 77 percent. The national average was 56 percent, according to the state treasurer’s office.

“The Nebraska Child Support Payment Center has been at the forefront of adapting technology to improve the efficiency and security, as well as to lower the cost, of receiving and disbursing child support payments,” Treasurer Don Stenberg said in a written release. “Significant efforts have been made over the decade to encourage non-custodial parents and their employers to submit payments electronically and to encourage custodial parents to receive payments electronically as well, reducing the expense of paper, printing, and postage.”

Troy Reiners, director of the Nebraska Child Support Payment Center, said the percent of payments received through electronic funds transfers averaged about 70 percent for most of 2011, but jumped to 74 percent in December 2011 after the Social Security Administration began remitting child support payments through electronic means on behalf of its recipients.

Nebraska law requires employers with more than 50 employees to submit child support payments on behalf of their employees through electronic means. Fifteen other states and territories also require employers to remit child support payments electronically, according to the treasurer’s office.

In 2011, the total amount of child support payments coming into the Nebraska Child Support Payment Center electronically was more than \$186 million. The most common ways of making electronic payments were Automated Clearing House credits and debits, credit cards, and online bill pay. In addition, more than \$101 million came into the center in 2011 through checks and other paper payment methods, according to the treasurer’s office.

According to federal incentive measures, the following states are listed, in order of rank, with their percentage of current support paid.

1. Pennsylvania 83.9
2. North Dakota 74.6
3. Iowa 71.7
4. Wisconsin 70.6
5. Minnesota 70.5
6. Nebraska 69.7
7. South Dakota 69.0
8. Massachusetts 68.2
9. Vermont 68.0

10. Wyoming 66.6

Source: Nebraska Child Support Enforcement finance administrator