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Welfare law formula 'doesn't support the family' Agencies want to let mothers getting benefits keep more child support

December 18, 2013 | Dawn Turner Trice

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Say you're a noncustodial father in Illinois whose child's mother depends on government assistance. Say you've been mandated by court order to pay child support and the Illinois Division of Child [Support Services](#) is garnishing your wages.

In Illinois, the state gives no more than \$50 of a father's monthly child support payment to a mother who's receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or welfare benefits. The rest of the father's payment goes to the state to pay back what it has paid out in public aid.



G. Sequane Lawrence, director of Chicago's Fathers, Families and ...

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G. Sequane Lawrence, director of Chicago's Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities Demonstration Project, says this may seem fair enough to some folks — the government gets to recoup taxpayer dollars — but it's often discouraging and even demoralizing to the fathers who come to his agency trying to change their lives.

"We tell our fathers, 'You have to support these kids. We don't believe in deadbeats,' "said Lawrence. "And they say, 'OK.' And they go to work because they want to be responsible, and let's

say they make \$15 an hour, which is pretty good for these guys. They can end up not seeing 65 percent of their money" depending on the number of children they have to support.

Lawrence said most of the fathers could handle this if the money were going directly toward their children.

Early next year, Lawrence's healthy communities project and the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law will be among several agencies mounting a legislative campaign to increase the portion of child support that goes to the family without it affecting welfare benefits.

The goal is to provide a greater incentive for fathers to work and give their children a lift, however modest, out of poverty.

Pam Lowry, director of the state's Division of Child Support Services, said that although she couldn't comment on the merits of a campaign to change the way child support payments are distributed, she believes in Lawrence's efforts to help fathers engage financially and emotionally with their children.

"We're thrilled to be working with Fathers, Families & Healthy Communities," Lowry said. "I consider their approach to be one of the most exciting ones I've seen in my 20-some-odd years of public service because we believe in and support responsible fatherhood."

Margaret Stapleton, community justice director at the Shriver Center, will be drafting the legislation with input from fathers at the healthy communities project. She said it's not yet clear how much of an increase the agencies will push for the "pass through," or the amount of child support that passes to the families.

Right now, the federal government allows the states to pass through up to \$100 a month for one child and up to \$200 a month for two or more children without it affecting welfare benefits.

Stapleton said that child support is a federal/state program that has evolved in a way that has made it more family friendly.

"It used to be that all of the court-mandated child support payments went to the government and the mother got welfare benefits," she said. "But in the 1980s, the federal government decided that there needed to be a greater incentive for fathers to work, so some of the child support money began to be funneled to the family."

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Stapleton said that in the beginning, if the government assistance a mother received was more than the child support the father provided, the state kept the child support payments. But if the child support was more than the aid, the mother would be cut off from government assistance.

In Illinois, the mother gets no more than \$50 regardless of the number of kids she has or the

number of fathers paying child support.

"We're talking about low-income dads," said Stapleton. "So the fact that they're paying, let's say, \$125 and the family is only getting \$50 along with the (welfare) grant, which is not a lot of money, it still leaves the average family (receiving benefits) living at less than 30 percent of the federal poverty level.

"One father told me that he was doing the best he could. But, he said, 'My kids are still shabby.' "

In 1999, when President Barack Obama was an Illinois state senator, he was one of the sponsors of a bill that would have increased the amount of child support that families could receive from \$50 to two-thirds of the child support paid. The bill passed the legislature but was vetoed by then-Gov. George Ryan.

Lawrence said most of the men at the healthy communities project are low-income dads whose average age is about 34. He said the average father has three children. About 60 percent of the men have been incarcerated.

"You can argue that he shouldn't have had these kids," said Lawrence. "But the problem right now is that this formula doesn't support the family, nor does it create an incentive to work."

Lawrence said child support isn't just about money, but creating an environment where the fathers are engaged in their children's lives in myriad ways. He said he understands that some people might be concerned that taxpayers are getting short shrift if fewer child support dollars are going back to the state.

"But if these fathers are supported, we can change our communities," he said. "You can change the trajectory of low-income families. We're arguing that we can save society a lot of money by investing more in these children now."

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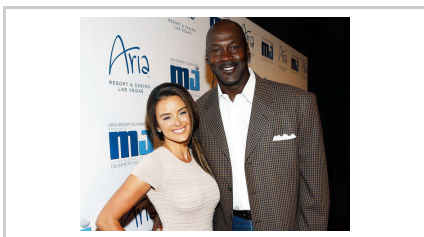
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