

State focuses on ways to help New Mexico families

SANTA FE — Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and the New Mexico Human Services Department are celebrating August as Child Support Awareness Month, recognizing and saluting all New Mexico parents who support their children and encouraging those who have difficulty meeting or are failing to meet their child support obligations, to reach out for assistance.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way state government serves its constituents, but we remain as vigilant as ever even with less face-to-face interaction in the areas of family and child welfare,” Lujan Grisham said. “New Mexico is committed to delivering solutions that support New Mexico families and investing in more paths to economic security and stability.”

The Child Support Enforcement Division collected a record amount of child support obligations during the last fiscal year, with \$155.8 million.

“That is an increase of 24% in collections per child served through the program,” Human Services Secretary David R. Scrase, M.D. said. “Some of the increased collections were the result of the CARES Act stimulus funding, which resulted in child support payments being made, debts being paid, and families getting the resources they need to survive during these difficult times.”

In addition, some of the state’s modernization initiatives that began last year are resulting in more consistent payments families can rely on, rather than debt-driven enforcement actions that push parents away from their obligations. Prior to any contempt enforcement action, each case must be reviewed for the non-custodial parent’s ability to pay.

One of those initiatives includes a work-oriented pilot project in collaboration with the Department of Workforce Solutions. The STEP-UP project supports, trains and employs parents. It started in Sandoval County and has expanded to Bernalillo and Doña Ana counties, with statewide expansion planned over the next year.

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“Referring non-custodial parents to the STEP-UP project has resulted in job placement, resume-building, training opportunities, and certification for unemployment benefits,” Jeremy Toulouse, Child Support Division Director said. “All of those are opportunities for success in meeting child support obligations by the non-custodial parent, and regular payments that can be relied upon by the custodial parents and their children.”

The Child Support Enforcement Division also launched a long-overdue online payment option for non-custodial parents, as a pilot for those cases in the Sandoval County Child Support Enforcement Division office. Since June 15, 27 payments were made online for a total of \$7,847.89 in child support obligations through online payments.

“This option is making it easier for parents to meet their monthly obligation in a more convenient way and reduce a trip to the local child support office to make a payment,” Kari Armijo, HSD Deputy Secretary said. “Over the next few months, this online pilot project will be an (sic) available statewide.”

Finding more convenient ways to make child support payments is essential. The most efficient is through employer wage withholding, which last year comprised 58% of total collections. “Each year we thank employers as an important partner in the child support program,” Toulouse added.

Another customer friendly initiative implemented is expanded customer service center hours. Beginning last month, child support customers could reach a customer service representative from 7 am to 7 pm. Outside of those hours, there is a 24/7 self-service option for payment information, and an opportunity to request a call back.

“Improving the customer experience for the child support program is essential in improving the performance of those we serve,” Toulouse said. “More customer friendly options will be available to child support customers in the months to come.”

As in years past, August is also an opportunity for those parents who have been issued a bench warrant due to unpaid child support, to settle the warrant by paying the bond without fear of arrest. If an individual is unable to pay the full amount of the bond set by the court:

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A negotiated, reduced bond payment or a payment plan toward the amount of past due child support may be worked out with the consent of the parent to whom the support obligation is owed and the approval of the court that issued the warrant.

Non-custodial parents with a written job offer may also request to negotiate a lower bond payment with successful wage withholding payments.

Individuals having questions about any of the Child Support Enforcement Month activities may contact the Child Support Enforcement Division Customer Service Center at (800) 288-7207 from 7 am to 7 pm to speak to a representative, request a transfer to a caseworker, or use the self-service options available 24/7.

The 14 Child Support Enforcement Division field offices have limited lobby hours for cash-only payments during the hours of 10 am to 12 pm. Drop boxes are located at each of the offices to drop off cash or money order payments or documents.