

Spotlight on: The Polk County Child Support Agency

The Polk County Child Support Agency collected nearly \$4 million last year in child support.

August is National Child Support Awareness Month. This recognition started in 1995 by President Bill Clinton, who wanted to emphasize the importance of supporting our nation's children. To ensure America's continued focus on child support and paternity establishment efforts, President Clinton then officially proclaimed August as National Child Support Awareness Month. Because of this special recognition, the County would like to provide you with some insight into how the Child Support Agency helps Polk County families, and the impact the Agency has on the County overall.

The Polk County Child Support Agency is committed to providing services to families in receiving financial assistance from both parents through establishment and enforcement of child support orders, and the establishment of paternity. The Agency administers the State of Wisconsin's child support program for Polk County consistent with those mandates found in the Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, and Wisconsin Statute Sections 49.22 and 59.53(5) and (6) state mandates.

The Agency provides many different services to families:

- Paternity testing to establish a father for every child;
- Establishment of Court Orders and Enforcement of those Orders to collect payments of child support;
- Establishment of Court Orders and Enforcement of those Orders to provide children with Health Insurance;
- Establishment of Court Orders for Intergovernmental cases and Enforcement of those Orders;
- Locating of absent parents; and
- Enforcement and Collection of Foster Care and Kinship Care reimbursements.

The Agency provides such services to those parents and legal custodians of children who apply for and receive public assistance benefits from the State of Wisconsin and other states. The Agency also provides such services to those parents and legal custodians who apply for child support services yet receive no public assistance benefits. Some examples of collection and enforcement activities include processing of income withholding notices, intercepting income tax refunds and unemployment benefits, seizing banking accounts, garnishment of per capita payments, and prosecuting court cases to impose contempt and jail sentences.

The very first step to establish a child support order is to confirm that paternity has been established for the child(ren). If paternity has not been established, the process to establish paternity may be completed a few different ways. One way is by having two



adult parents file a Voluntary Paternity Acknowledgement form with the State Vital Records Office. If a parent is not sure who the father may be, or, if one of the parents is a minor, they would need to complete the genetic testing process through our Agency. This is a service our Agency provides as we have two Specialists who are trained and certified as genetic testing facilitators. If you are receiving public benefits (aid), you will be required to have a father listed on the birth certificate in order to keep your benefits. The Polk County Child Support Agency is proud to be in the top 1% of the State with our Paternity Establishment rate.

Along with establishment of paternity, the Agency establishes and enforces the collection of child support. Working in child support can be a rewarding yet difficult job; oftentimes dealing with families that are in crisis and need of financial support. Despite perceptions in the community, the Child Support Agency's job is not to get the most money we can from a paying parent. As an Agency, we must follow guidelines that have been set by our legislators. These standards are the basis for all child support orders set in Wisconsin. The formula is designed to ensure children are supported financially by both parents. These guidelines are the same for either parent who is ordered to pay support. It may come as a surprise that many women are ordered to pay child support, just as men are. Deviation from the guidelines may be agreed upon by the parties, or from the court, under special circumstances.

In the past few years, the economy has had a major impact on many of the families to whom we provide services. Lack of employment opportunities and high costs of health insurance can make payment of child support difficult during economic downturn. The Agency works with payers who are faced with reduced earnings, through no fault of their own, to obtain an Order that allows them to provide for their children, and themselves, during these difficult times.

One of the new mandates the Agency is required to enforce is the Health Insurance initiative, which is part of the Affordable Care Act. This initiative requires the Agency to establish health insurance orders requiring one or both parents to carry health insurance that will cover the child(ren), and reduce the need for Medicaid, which is a taxpayer expense.



What happens if you do not pay your court-ordered child support? The agency must follow the guidelines that are set by the State of Wisconsin during the enforcement process. These consist of enforcement warning letters, driver's license suspension, recreational and professional license suspension, credit and lien docket reporting, and after three months of non-compliance the Agency can consider and file for an Order to Show Cause – Contempt. At this point, an individual who has been ordered to pay has failed to do so or has not responded to the above listed warnings. At a contempt hearing, the Judge may order the individual to serve up to six months in the county jail. This is a civil, not a criminal process. The courts do not always like to put individuals in jail, as this removes an individual from the workforce, and does not get money for the child(ren) coming through to the other parent. Some inmates are able to take advantage of Huber privileges. This means that they may leave the jail in order to go to work, but they must then return to jail when their work shift ends. Unfortunately, there are cases where a paying parent has their longest, uninterrupted work history when they are in jail with Huber privileges.

If an individual is over \$5,000.00 in arrears, or owes this in past support, has failed to follow the contempt process, then the Agency has the option to send the case to the District Attorney's Office and ask for criminal charges to be filed, and request a criminal warrant be issued for arrest. This is the last step the agency will take in order to collect support. By this time, the focus shifts from obtaining compliance to punishment. Again, this is a last resort step to take as sending an individual to prison does not help the child receive money.

To help educate the youth of Polk County, and to help foster an understanding of the mandates on paternity establishment, child support orders, and being minors in the justice system, our Agency was one of the first agencies to develop and present the "There Goes My Life" program to all the local high schools in Polk County. Between the years 2008 and 2012 (most recent statistics), the teen birth rate in Polk County has reduced by 14%; in prior years, the teen birth rate was slowly rising. While the Agency cannot directly relate a connection between the "There Goes My Life" program and the drop in the birth rate... we would love to take the credit for it.

The Polk County Child Support Agency collected nearly \$4 million last year in support payments for families that were owed child support. The agency collects \$7.20 in support payments for every dollar spent in expenses. The Agency has 7.02 full-time employees (FTE's), which consists of 4 FTE Case Specialists, 1 FTE Financial Specialist, 1.17 FTE attorneys, and .85 FTE support staff.

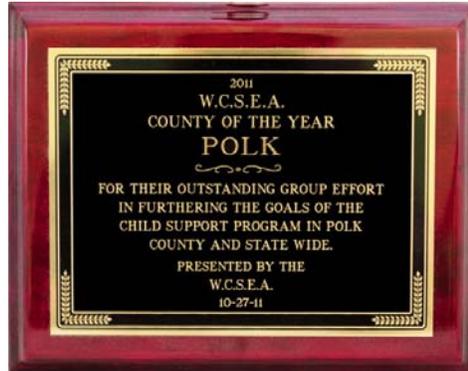
Funding for the Child Support Agency is primarily through Federal and State sources. The Agency is reimbursed from the Federal government at approximately 66% for each dollar spent. The remaining 34% of expenses are paid through state and county funding. Of that 34%, only 13.14% (a 3-year average) of the Agency's annual cost is paid through local county property tax dollars. For the state funding, the Agency must meet performance standards in order to receive such funds. The performance measures are the following:

Court-Ordered Establishment Rate – Polk County 91% (State average 87%)
Current Support Collections Rate – Polk County 78% (State average 73%)
Paternity Establishment Rate – Polk County 100% (State average 100%)
Arrears Collection Rate – Polk County 75% (State average 65%)

In addition to collection of child support for families, the Agency also collects money as repayment for Foster Care and Kinship Care. These monies, \$26,000 in 2013, are paid to Polk County as reimbursement of tax levy dollars for the costs incurred for the Foster Care and Kinship Care programs.

The Polk County Child Support Agency is a member of the Wisconsin Child Support Enforcement Association (WCSEA). The mission of the WCSEA is to provide training and networking to help local [county] child support agencies best serve and aid the children and families of Wisconsin by establishing and maximizing the collection of child support. The WCSEA recognizes annually individual workers, agencies, and members throughout the State who represent its mission, and accentuate commitment to furthering the goals of the child support program. Polk County has received 5 of these awards.

WCSEA Judicial Member of the Year – 2003 – Molly Galewyrick, Circuit Court Judge
WCSEA Board Member of the Year – 2007 – Jeff Fuge, (former Child Support Director)
WCSEA Hall of Fame – 2010 – Robert Hachey, (former Child Support Director)
WCSEA County of the Year – 2011 – Polk County Child Support Agency
WCSEA Worker of the Year – 2013 – Chad Hoag, Financial Specialist



Our Agency works with many different departments within the County. We work most closely with Economic Support and Human Services for those cases in which parties are receiving Public Assistance Benefits. We also work with the District Attorney office, which prosecutes our criminal referrals.

The Polk County Child Support Agency is located in the Polk County Justice Center. The Agency is currently housed with the office of the Corporation Counsel, who also serves as the Agency's attorneys.