***PA CORNER: May 1, 2012***

**Child Support Court**

More than 11 million dollars is owed for back child support in Lincoln County alone. This means that of the parents in Lincoln County that are court ordered to pay support, the amount that is left unpaid is more than 11 million dollars. Many of the parents that are the lawful recipients of these unpaid monies (custodial parents) are forced to collect government aid to help make ends meet for their children, thus requiring your tax dollars to make up for the short fall when the non-custodial parent has not fulfilled his or her obligation.

Many refer to these parents as “dead beat Dads” or “dead beat Moms” but often times the reason a parent is not paying their support is not that simple. Generally the non-paying party believes they are financially unable to meet the court ordered amount. They become frustrated with the feeling that they will never be able to meet their burden. Thus, rather than paying a portion of the ordered amount they pay nothing hoping that eventually they will be able to “get caught up” on their arrearage and their support will be paid in full. The snowball effect happens once the first payment is missed and the burden soon becomes unachievable and overwhelming.

While laws are meant to protect citizens and specifically custodial parents in child support cases, sometimes implementing the law through traditional methods gets in the way of justice being served. In those cases, the Lincoln County Court System was willing to examine the process and offer a new and creative approach with a goal to assist the custodial parent in collecting support and to assist the non-custodial parent in paying the obligation. In fact, that’s how the Lincoln County’s Child Support Court was born.

We knew there were people in court who wanted to pay their child support but didn’t have the means to do so. Instead of punishing those parents for not paying with fines and jail time, the judges, defense lawyers and prosecuting attorney’s office decided there was a better way to help parents pay child support. Our goal: to stop a vicious cycle that is hurting parents, children and our economy.

For Lincoln County’s Child Support Court, we identify candidates who may benefit from the program. These individuals must be willing to make a commitment to the program which includes attending monthly court appearances, parenting classes and other customized financial and budgeting classes that are tailored specifically to each participant’s needs. Once practical, the participant begins making regular payments toward his support obligation.

Once an individual is selected to participate, those defendants are screened to determine their education level, work history and personal data. My office employs two highly qualified women to assist the State in the collection of child support. A child support liaison and an attorney are specifically staffed to assist with these cases. They work closely with the custodial parents and strive to build a positive relationship with the non-custodial parent in an effort to expedite payments. Anyone with a history of violence or child abuse is not accepted into the program.

After the assessment, an individualized plan is developed. This plan generally includes obtaining a GED, resume building or job coaching workshops, financial management classes, parenting classes and enrolling in alcohol or substance abuse programs when applicable. Customizing each participants plan assists them in making regular child support payments while enhancing their ability to be a productive member of society.

During monthly court hearings, each defendant’s progress is tracked. Failing to comply with their individualized plan may result in sanctions or additional requirements added to their agreement. Major infractions or laws violations could result in the participants discharge from the program at which time they would return to the active court docket.

After all requirements are complete and defendants have made payments successfully for six months, defendants will begin to pay the full court ordered, child-support amount. Once they have made timely payments for another six months, participants will graduate from the program. From there, they have the opportunity to have the charges dismissed depending on the specifics in their case.

Started in June 2011, this alternative court is funded with grant money.

I am proud to be part of a solution to this problem and am thankful to those who have made Lincoln County Child Support Court a success.

Leah Askey

Lincoln County Prosecuting Attorney

For questions or comments, contact me: office@lcmopa.com