



By Robert Doar

One of the joys of my job for the past 15 years has been working with the child support program, one of our country's strongest, but least recognized, anti-poverty programs. Child support provides important resources for families in need and enforces non-custodial parents' (usually fathers') societal responsibility to provide for their children financially.

- Starting this summer, a comprehensive new program that will connect NCPs to work, the formal child support program and wraparound services that include peer groups, mediation with the custodial parent, and parenting and anger management classes.
- Outreach in the Family Court, where

## How a Friendlier Child Support Program Can Help Dads and Kids

It's also highly successful. In 2008, New York City collected more than \$670 million and distributed \$639 million of that money directly to families, the majority of whom are former public assistance recipients. Child support makes a real difference for these families: a mother and two children who used to be on public assistance received an average of \$4,444 in 2008, a quarter of the federal poverty level. It also has other benefits: evidence shows that parents who pay child support are more likely to be involved in their children's lives, and that their children tend to have higher grades and fewer behavioral problems and go farther in school.

But even a successful program can be improved, and it's no secret that while strong child support enforcement efforts have benefited single parents and their children, they have created hardships for some low-income noncustodial parents. In the past two years, we in New York City have strengthened our child support program through employment initiatives, outreach and programmatic changes designed in response to the needs of NCPs. These include:

- Links to employment for jobless NCPs, through referrals made by the Family Court and the employment programs that serve our public assis-

workers explain — as soon as NCPs receive them — child support orders that are often difficult to understand; and at Rikers Island, the city jail, where staff helps custodial and non-custodial parents obtain information about their cases and better understand the child support system.

- A new initiative through which NCPs can modify orders owed to the Department of Social Services without returning to Family Court, by signing a stipulation agreement with us.
- A pilot initiative to establish "minimum orders" of \$25 and eliminate arrears for NCPs who owe child support to the DSS and receive public assistance or are under criminal justice supervision, and one that allows poor NCPs to reduce DSS arrears by up to \$30,000 over three years if they pay current support and fulfill other criteria.
- A new Division of Parent and Community Engagement that coordinates these programs and develops new ones to raise parents' awareness of and increase compliance with the child support program.

This is not to say that we are straying from our core mission of establishing orders and collecting on them. The

***New York City collected more than \$670 million and distributed \$639 million of that money directly to families, the majority of whom are former public assistance recipients.***

new efforts will ultimately improve our ability to collect child support payments. While some NCPs shirk their child support obligations, others need help to be able to fulfill them. Rather than imposing punitive orders that low-income fathers will never be able to pay and driving them underground, we are working harder to establish orders they can afford and keep them engaged with the formal child support program and their children. This is especially important in the current economic climate.

In the past two decades, sweeping policy changes such as welfare reform have helped many single mothers with children move toward work and self-sufficiency, but these changes have too often overlooked the needs of low-income fathers. This group has also borne the brunt of stricter child support enforcement. The social services must do a better job of serving these men, if not for them, then for their children. The child support program is an ideal place to start. ■

*Robert Doar is commissioner of the New York City Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services, which oversees the New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement.*