ENLIGHTENED APPROACH TO CHILD SUPPORT
Sharon Tirrell

Marilyn Parker, divorced mother of three, could barely make ends meet with the help of $650 monthly court-ordered child support from her ex-husband Raymond. The day care facility that enabled her to work cost the majority of her earnings. Then during the recession Raymond lost his factory job and stopped paying child support. Marilyn was patient at first while Raymond looked for another job. But after two months and a missed rent payment, she was frightened and wondered if he was trying hard enough. She went to Henderson County Child Support Services, part of the Department of Social Services (DSS), in the old Health Department building on Spartansburg Highway which now houses various court services.

An enforcement worker contacted Raymond and learned that he was handicapped in his job search because he had a felony conviction. She helped him negotiate with the court to temporarily pay partial child support from his unemployment benefit. She referred him to Goodwill for job finding assistance. Goodwill has relationships with employers who are willing to hire felons. Raymond found a part-time job and eventually a full-time job. He agreed to a repayment plan for the delinquent child support. The worker followed up with the family until the problem was resolved.

In the past Raymond might have been labeled a deadbeat dad because he failed to pay child support and he might have been at risk for sentencing. Elaine Sorenson a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, in a study of child support, termed parents who couldn’t pay because they were imprisoned or unemployed “turnips,” as in “you can’t get blood from.” Today, at least in the North Carolina, the Department of Social Services does not tolerate the use of derogatory terms or any kind of disrespect. The preferred term is “parents who cannot pay.”

What Sorenson’s work did show was that most parents who end up in jail are low income. This and other studies helped enlighten public policy. In recent years there has been a major policy shift regarding the role of fathers. It led to revisions of child support laws in 1996 which called for programs to be developed to work with fathers. Grant funds were made available to create pilot programs that provide mediation and counseling and encourage child visitation. If these programs are successful, they will influence service delivery across the country.

Until recently in North Carolina Child Support Services units were known as Child Support Enforcement said Darlene Tipton, Child Support Supervisor. “Our new mission is about family centered services. We are to consistently collect as much child support as possible to benefit the child, but instead of seeking the maximum support as we used to, we look for the right amount that fits the family. We identify the needs of both the custodial parent and the non-custodial parent. We promote self-sufficiency so that children have can have support, safety and permanency.”

In practical terms, it means for example not revoking the driver’s license of a parent delinquent in child support, a penalty the law allows. “If we do that,” Tipton said, “how does the parent get a job or go to work? We place more emphasis on helping parents meet their obligations. We’re no longer a just an enforcement agency.”

When custodial parents don’t have court orders Child Support Services can help them file a complaint and secure orders of support. Marie Brighton’s husband John left her and their two teen-aged children without notice. He simply disappeared. Tipton’s staff located him in Florida utilizing the New Hires Database, which requires all employers to report information about newly hired employees. It allows child support staff to track down parents, even across state lines, and retrieve payments through payroll deduction. Marie obtained a court order and is now receiving child support checks from John’s employer.
Another option Child Support Services has is to intercept a parent’s tax return.

“Technology has made us more successful,” Tipton stated. “We have an amazing amount of resources at our fingertips and we ask the custodial parent to help us by using social networking sites to locate the other parent.”

Not all non-custodial parents are dads and not all custodial parents are mothers. 2010 US Census data showed that 82% of custodial parents were mothers and 28% were fathers or other relatives. “We see more and more grandparents, aunts and uncles and even neighbors caring for children,” said Tipton.

George and Bessie Scott recently sought help from DSS. They are raising five of their daughter’s children, who have two different fathers. Their daughter has disappeared. Not only will child support staff try to locate the parents, but in the case of one father they have to establish paternity in order to secure a court order. “We’re not always successful,” Tipton says. “Cases like these are difficult.”

When children are in foster care the case is automatically referred to Child Support Services in an effort to recoup at least some of the cost of foster care.

In addition to locating non-custodial parents, establishing paternity, securing child support orders and enforcing orders, workers monitor interstate cases where the non-custodial parent has moved to another state and they have to ask the DSS in that parent’s jurisdiction to enforce the court order.

Henderson County’s child support team is probably one of the most experienced and professional in the state. In addition to Tipton, the team includes Suzie Nanney, Bonnie Brooke, Bridget Anders, Twila Beeching, Janeen Whiteside and Beth McNally. Collectively they represent over 60 years of child support experience. They are assisted by Rebekah Price, one of two deputy county attorneys who work with DSS. Brooke has for six years served on the North Carolina Child Support Council, the group that assesses training needs and conducts an annual statewide training conference for child support workers, attorneys and court personnel.

The team had 2680 open cases as of January 31. The caseload has gone up about 15 % over the last 5 years, which Tipton thinks is due to the recession. In December and January the team met 100% of their state established goals.

Tipton has a lot of respect for her staff. “The work is much more complicated than I thought when I began supervising the unit 3 ½ years ago. It requires patience and persistence. They have to keep up with changes in the law. They work as a team. The most important thing, though, is that they all believe in what they do.”

(Note: Client names and circumstances described have been altered to protect privacy.)