

# MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT



## *Office of Public Information*

contact: Marcia McBrien | (517) 373-0129

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **GENESEE COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT PROJECT RECEIVES FEDERAL GRANT Focus on at-risk families in economic crisis; early intervention, support services stressed**

LANSING, MI, October 20, 2009 – A Genesee County court project aimed at helping financially-strapped parents address their children’s financial and emotional needs will get a boost from a \$350,000 federal grant.

Ultimately, proponents say, the project has the potential to bring additional federal funds to the county for child support services.

Described as a “problem-solving court,” the project, which received the grant from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, will focus on early intervention in cases where job loss, low income, or family issues signal that a parent will have difficulty making child support payments. Such families are at risk both financially and emotionally, according to Genesee County Circuit Court Judge Michael Theile, who is assigned to the court’s family division.

“We know from experience that when a parent has difficulty making child support payments, the children are affected emotionally as well as financially,” Theile said. “An involved parent is more likely to provide both financial and emotional support.”

Typically, Theile explained, a family court enters a support order, which parents are expected to follow. The Friend of the Court becomes involved with the case only when a parent violates the court’s order and falls significantly behind with payments. Often, the parents do not ask the court to consider how a parent can be more involved with his or her child, so the issue is never addressed in the initial order, Theile said.

“Usually courts are reacting to the parent’s failure to comply with the support order,” Theile explained. “Our goal with this project is not to react, but to be proactive, to treat support and parenting issues for the entire family early on, before the point where the Friend of the Court would usually become involved. Early intervention will not only help many of these parents find work, but also will promote positive relationships between parents and children.”

The project will feature prompt referral to an array of family support services, including job placement, job training, and services for those suffering from substance abuse or mental health issues. Child support officials can intervene at the very outset of a domestic relations case if it is already clear that parents’ lack of income or family dynamics will make it hard for parents to support their children or have a healthy relationship with them. In addition, the Friend of the Court may designate an already pending case for the demonstration project if a support-paying parent loses his or her job.

Six hundred new Genesee County domestic relations cases will be assigned to the project. Of those cases, half will involve families where the parents are not married to each other. A control group of 600 comparable cases will be handled under the circuit court's existing procedures. When the project ends after 17 months, data on both case groups will be studied to see if families who receive early intervention fare better economically and psychologically than those in the control group.

The \$350,000 federal grant is awarded jointly to the circuit court, Michigan's Office of Child Support, and the State Court Administrative Office, which is the administrative agency of the Michigan Supreme Court.

Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan, who serves on the National Judicial Child Support Enforcement Task Force, said she strongly supports both the Genesee County program and the broader concept of "problem-solving courts."

"Even in the best economic times, a parent's job loss can be devastating for a family," Corrigan said. "That is particularly true when the unemployed parent does not live with the children, but has been supporting them by making court-ordered child support payments to the other parent. The job loss, coupled with the loss of child support, strains an already-fragile relationship between the parents."

Parents who have difficulty paying child support can become frustrated and withdraw from their children out of shame over their inability to pay, Corrigan noted. "That's bad for everyone, especially the children," she said. "The children suffer emotionally. The parents' ability to cooperate in raising the children also suffers."

Corrigan said that the project's problem-solving approach "aims to address the underlying issues early on – in this case, lack of income and the related emotional fallout – rather than intervening only after the situation has already begun to deteriorate."

In addition to its positive impact on families, the grant money has the potential to bring about \$600,000 in additional federal funds, into the county, Theile explained.

"These are matching federal dollars that we would receive under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act," the judge said. "This is especially good news for our community when we have been hit so hard financially."

For more information on the grant application, go to [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/grants/preapp\\_conf\\_call\\_faqs\\_med\\_planning\\_and\\_downturn.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/grants/preapp_conf_call_faqs_med_planning_and_downturn.pdf).

-- MSC --