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No child support, no auto tags; Seriously delinquent parents to receive notices

Bruce Selcraig Staff Writer

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Texas parents who are six months or more behind on their child support payments will get warnings, starting Thursday, that they won't be able to renew their auto registration if they don't pay up.

The Texas attorney general's office plans to send at least a thousand such warnings per month, giving those who are delinquent about three months to make payment arrangements before their registration renewals are due.

They won't have to pay their entire child support bill at once, but to keep their vehicles legal they'll need to pay a minimum of \$200 and agree to a payment plan with the attorney general's office, said Janece Rolfe, communications manager for the agency's child support division.

The new enforcement program will target an estimated 12,000 to 24,000 seriously delinquent parents per year, out of some 1.3 million Texans who have legal orders to pay child support. But its proponents say it could change the lives of many children.

"There's a huge gaping hole in our community, and that's the lack of financial support for tens of thousands of children," said Patricia Castillo, director of The PEACE Initiative, a domestic violence awareness group based in San Antonio for 26 years.

"We work with a lot of dads who have to pay child support," Castillo said. "And though I can see how this might impede some people's ability to work - because they need a car - the bottom line is if you're making babies you'd better support them."

But critics of Attorney General Ken Paxton's new campaign were loud and many across San Antonio.

The new enforcement tool will simply force a number of parents to drive illegally, predicted **Ramon Vasquez**, director of the San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign, which offers parenting classes, legal aid and job counseling to some 900 mostly unemployed parents.

"We insist that parents in our program be 100 percent child support compliant," said **Vasquez**, who as a young father more than 30 years ago owed \$10,000 in child support at one point. "But over half of them also have criminal records, and this AG program threatens to drive people like this, who have to have their cars to work, back into the justice system."

Sally Justice, an attorney who has worked on both sides of child custody and protection issues for more than 30 years, said Paxton's initiative will create a "downward spiral" for thousands of Texans who have lost jobs and can't afford their payments.

"Police will issue more tickets, the tickets will go unpaid, and driver's licenses will be suspended," she said as she left a mediation session at the Bexar County Courthouse. "Then you just have more illegal drivers owing tons of money. I don't have a solution, but this is not it."

Attorney John Bustamante said various Republican-led initiatives in the Legislature over the years in such areas as housing, drug crimes and family law have essentially worked to keep poor people in a permanent underclass.

"Paxton may be well-intentioned, but this multiplies problems rather than solves them," he said. "I just wish the people who pass these laws and effect these policies could be down in the trenches with us seeing the

consequences of their actions."

Paxton's decision isn't a new law - his office has had the authority under the Texas Family Code to revoke driver's, professional or recreational licenses of those not paying child support, Rolfe said.

Texas has led the nation for nine consecutive years in both the total amount of child support payments collected per year through state efforts - \$3.8 billion in 2015 out of \$4.5 billion owed - and the total collected for each dollar spent by the AG's office, a ratio of about 12-to-1, Rolfe said.

The division is merely a conduit for on-time monthly payments of hundreds of thousands of Texans, about 80 percent of all noncustodial parents in 2015. But for the nonpaying 20 percent, many of whom have been taken to court by a former spouse, the AG's office acts as an enforcement agency.

"This is just another tool that allows us to do our job," Rolfe said. "It is not our intention to take away people's means of transportation."

State District Judge Peter Sakai, who was instrumental in setting up Bexar County's much-acclaimed children's court, said he supports anything that increases parents' compliance with child support orders.

"But philosophically," Sakai added, "programs like this one by the AG really hit people of color and low-income people. I really hope it doesn't have a lot of unintended consequences."

bselcraig@express-news.net
