

# Tough love: To show support for fathers who haven't

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The official who oversees the state's system of child support payments wants to alter the agency's image. Craig Burshem believes that the system can do more than just wield a club against men, and that officials can assist people who have recently left jail, need jobs or can't meet their financial obligations.

The makeover is a tough sell, though, and Burshem knows it.

"It's certainly a heavy lift to change perceptions," he told me Tuesday.

Yet Burshem talks with a passion suggesting he's willing to try new strategies - not only by helping mothers struggling to make ends meet, but also by buttressing fathers critical to the success of their children.

Men, after all, represent roughly 90 percent of the parents without custody in these cases in the commonwealth.

Burshem directs Virginia's Division of Child Support Enforcement, part of the Department of Social Services. I met him at a recent graduation for the Fathers in Training program, a Virginia Beach-based initiative that teaches men to reconnect with their children and become better dads.

The director doesn't try to sugarcoat the enormity of the child support problem. In Virginia, \$3.1 billion was in arrears from noncustodial parents in the fiscal year that ended June 30, Burshem said. The division collected \$657 million that year for custodial parents.

Some 327,000 children are in the caseload in Virginia - about 20 percent of the state's kids. The money they get in child support is crucial.

Federal statistics released last year said support payments provide a significant amount of family income, especially for poor children. The money helps pay for rent, food, clothing and other expenses.

"For families below the poverty level who received child support in 2009, the average amount received was \$3,909, and their average yearly income was \$8,642," according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Burshem, who has been in the job a year, says his division previously published the names and photos of the worst support scofflaws.

"It's a little draconian," he admitted.

Instead, the director wants to chart a course that's more honey than vinegar.

He wants to work with prisoners after they've left corrections facilities, assisting them in locating jobs. Sometimes, this means referring people to nonprofit or government agencies in their communities. That way, the men are more likely to afford their payments.

The division also lets parents know they can seek to amend court orders, Burshem said, especially if they've been unemployed or need "a chance to get back on (their) feet and start paying on the arrears." It's a long-standing practice he wanted to re-emphasize.

For more information, parents can go to their local child support office, or call 1-800-468-8894.

Burshem's role involves meeting people who have struggled with support orders. He hears their stories and lets them know his agency doesn't have to be the enemy.

That's why he journeyed from Richmond to attend the Fathers in Training ceremony in the Beach. Some of the graduates lived with their children; others had to pay support.

"You want to enforce the (child support) obligation," he said. "But there's a segment of society who needs a hand up to get back on the employment trail."

I don't know whether this approach will work. Some parents will simply refuse to do their part.

The goal of helping children, however, is worth the attempt.

Catch Roger Chesley and other local pundits on "Another View," a program covering issues involving African Americans in Hampton Roads, on 89.5 WHRV-FM at noon Friday.

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