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**HEADLINE:** FAILURE TO PROVIDE: LOS ANGELES COUNTY'S CHILD SUPPORT CRISIS;  
ADDING ERRORS;  
COMPUTER SYSTEM THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO DRAMATICALLY BOOST COLLECTIONS HAS INSTEAD  
PULLED SOME PARENTS INTO A NIGHTMARE

**BYLINE:** NICHOLAS RICCARDI and GREG KRIKORIAN, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

**BODY:**

At the heart of Los Angeles County's problem-plagued child support program is a \$ 55-million computer system that has not lived up to its billing and all too often fingers the wrong man.

Stocked with questionable data from old files, the new system has failed to measurably improve collections but has turned slight errors into ruined lives.

Antonio Alvarez is one who felt the heavy but mistaken hand of the district attorney's office.

Last December, Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti's office sent the North Hollywood man a computer-generated bill for \$ 25,000 in unpaid child support for three children whom he could not have fathered. He had never met their mother.

Despite repeated trips and calls to Garcetti's offices, Alvarez could not get the problem fixed. Meanwhile, the agency put a lien on Alvarez's house and emptied his bank account. His car was repossessed. Alvarez's wife and two children abandoned him, believing he had led a double life.

"I thought it was the American dream," Alvarez said. "I had my own property. I had my own car. I had a savings account, checking account, everything--then boom!"

When after eight months Garcetti's office admitted that its computer had assessed the wrong Antonio Alvarez, it sent him a form letter with no apology.

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"They just destroyed our marriage, and with a letter they're going to fix it?" said Alvarez, 34, who ultimately convinced his family to return.

Despite stories like Alvarez's, Garcetti recently called his computer "the very best automated system in the nation."

But some workers who must use it disagree.

"Believe it or not, the computer system . . . really makes a lot of work for us," said one longtime caseworker. "We are constantly putting out one fire after another."

The county's most recent report shows that the computer is barely keeping pace with collections expected without the multimillion-dollar technology. It was supposed to do much better.

A decade ago, Los Angeles' size and clout led to its selection as the only county in the nation to receive federal funding for a new child support computer system.

The original cost estimate was \$ 24 million, but the price tag soared to \$ 55 million by the time the Lockheed-designed system was turned on in February 1995. It costs about \$ 16 million to run the system each year.

From the start, there were problems. An early glitch led to 18,000 checks being routed to welfare offices instead of to parents. A state evaluation of 42 randomly selected cases found that 30% contained errors.

Caseworkers were flooded with complaints but were ordered not to publicly talk about the errors.

"Please be sure employees are not saying to the public derogatory remarks about how the system is functioning," said one memo to managers. "Even if it's true, do not further aggravate the public by making any comments."

Garcetti's office says the problems have been fixed--although two weeks ago it acknowledged processing an average of more than 350 mistaken identity cases monthly.

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"I am not going to say the entire system is a bust," said one longtime caseworker, "but it sure as hell is a lot less than what we hoped. . . . The system has so many problems that we would be better off just hand-writing information."

Despite the horror stories, Garcetti's office has resisted pressure to improve the computer system.

The county auditor-controller's office in 1996 proposed an inexpensive audit to test the accuracy of the data. The audit would have cost \$ 25,000, which Garcetti's child support office refused to pay despite a \$ 2-million surplus.

Last year, the Los Angeles County Grand Jury examined Garcetti's child support operation and again recommended an audit of the computer system.

Said former grand juror Hank Cox, who chaired the committee that examined the child support operation: "A lot of people aren't getting what they are supposed to get, and that includes the most defenseless part of the population--the children."

Some employees of the child support bureau agree.

"When I saw Garcetti and Wayne Doss . . . talking about how good the computer was working, I just laughed," one caseworker said. "Then I thought about all the mistakes and just felt bad."

**GRAPHIC: PHOTO:** Antonio Alvarez was billed \$25,000 for three children he did not father. It took months to correct

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