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DESPERATE FAMILIES WAIT FOR MONEY THAT DOESN'T COME; MANY TIMES, WRONG PEOPLE ARE
TARGETED. GARCETTI VOWS TO IMPROVE THE SYSTEM.

BYLINE: GREG KRIKORIAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

BODY:

Every day, hundreds of thousands of youngsters depend upon the Los Angeles County district attorney's office to collect the child support they urgently need. But the agency is as dysfunctional as many of the fragmented families it is entrusted to serve.

Failing on many fronts, Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti's family support bureau is driving some parents and children into deeper financial crisis, creating an even greater sense of frustration and helplessness in their lives.

California's legislative analyst ranks the district attorney's operation the least effective in the state. Some critics call it perhaps the worst in the nation in collecting money for needy families, the vast majority of whom are subsisting on welfare.

Despite a \$ 100-million budget and powers rivaling the Internal Revenue Service, the Bureau of Family Support Operations collects nothing in nine out of 10 cases. When it does, some parents--mostly fathers--are squeezed to the point of economic ruin.

So much hostility has engulfed the operation that Garcetti will skip Saturday's annual county child support forum because of death threats, organizers were told. Last year he was roundly booed.

In an interview, Garcetti defended his office's performance and said he is dedicated to improving a system that serves more children than are enrolled in the entire Los Angeles Unified School District.

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"We are doing a better job than at any time . . . in the collection of child support. Period," Garcetti said. "But I think the more important question is, 'Am I satisfied?' and the answer is no. I am not satisfied. I came in as D.A. 5 1/2 years ago, and I committed to my staff here and to the community that I would make . . . the L.A. County district attorney's office effort in child support second to none in the nation. And I don't think we are quite there yet, but we are getting very close."

An investigation by The Times, based on hundreds of interviews and thousands of pages of documents, found otherwise:

* Parents entitled to child support often wait years before the district attorney's office moves aggressively on their behalf. Collecting current support in only 7.6% of its more than 500,000 cases last fiscal year, children can reach adulthood without seeing a penny.

* To mask its poor collection rate, Garcetti's office last year took the unprecedented action of closing more than 240,000 cases, saying in virtually every instance that it could not locate the delinquent parents. But frontline workers say that only nominal efforts to find them were made, depriving thousands of children of support. Also, in a continuing effort to keep the caseload down, workers have been instructed to keep cases shut even when welfare recipients provide new information about the location of nonpaying parents. One former district attorney's official has alleged that documents were falsified to make the operation appear more successful.

* Although Garcetti has said child support is among his top priorities, he left hundreds of lower-level caseworker positions vacant, slowing efforts to locate parents who owe money. In two of the past three years, he used funds pledged for family support services to cover overspending in other areas of his department. Moreover, one of every four dollars is spent on administration, a rate well above units elsewhere with better collection records.

* In many cases in which it does collect money, Garcetti's office uses hardball legal tactics and has imposed insurmountable financial burdens on fathers, many of whom are poor and unable to hire attorneys to seek judicial redress. In some cases, the district attorney's collection unit has assessed men it knows are not the real fathers. Critics say the agency pursues such heavy-handed practices because it receives incentive funds for virtually every scarce dollar it collects.

* Officials have left as much as \$ 25 million in collected child support payments sitting in interest-bearing accounts because, among other reasons, they contend that the intended recipients could not be found. But The Times found several parents simply by looking in telephone directories and public records.

National child support advocate Paula Roberts makes it her business to track the success of programs throughout the country. She has one word for Los Angeles' performance: "Dreadful."

"All I can tell you," she said, "is that the older I get, the less certain I am there is a heaven but the more hopeful I am that there is a hell. Because between the parents who walk away from their kids and the bureaucrats who have nothing but excuses, I can only hope there is divine retribution."

Within the family support bureau's scattered offices--from the Antelope Valley to the South Bay--some caseworkers say they have long felt uneasy about the conduct of their agency. But many add that they have been fearful of risking their careers by speaking publicly.

"At least now," said one veteran caseworker, requesting anonymity, "management will change its ways and maybe things will be better for the public. Not only for the children's sake but the parents' . . . because we are destroying lives left and right."

The Long Wait for Relief

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Collecting child support, although undeniably troublesome, is a relatively straightforward process.

In California, the authority to collect support rests with county district attorneys. Cases are opened when single parents seek help or, automatically, when they apply for welfare.

To collect support, the district attorneys must first locate the "noncustodial" parent, establish his or her genetic relationship to the child and then secure a support order in court, unless one has been obtained through a divorce.

This clears the way for collections to begin, often through garnishing wages. In California and other states, failure to comply can trigger criminal prosecution.

Garcetti and Wayne Doss, who heads the family support bureau, boast that child support collections during the 1997-98 fiscal year reached a record \$ 257 million and that criminal charges were brought against some 6,500 allegedly delinquent parents.

Although those numbers are encouraging, they do not tell the whole story. Last fiscal year, the most recent for which complete figures are available, the district attorney collected current support on less than 8% of the child support cases. When factoring in past-due collections, the number rises to 12%, still far below the national average of 21%.

The picture is even bleaker in cases in which parents receive public assistance. The district attorney's office, according to the most recent state report, recovers only about five cents of every welfare dollar spent supporting single-parent families--a rate so bad that California's legislative analyst recently ranked Los Angeles last in the state.

When Catherine Sanford applied for welfare in 1996, she viewed it as a desperate, stopgap measure in the hopes that the district attorney's office would swiftly find the father of her 2-year-old daughter, a married man who owned a business. She said she was inspired by news accounts of Garcetti's resolve to crack down on deadbeat dads.

The stakes were high: She was losing her house.

On her welfare application, Sanford named the girl's father and provided his home and work addresses, as well as his Social Security number. As required, welfare officials notified the district attorney's office to begin the collection process.

"I believed that God would take care of them ," Sanford said of her daughter and a second child. "And he does. But his timing is different than mine."

So was the district attorney's.

The case languished, and Sanford's life crumbled.

The child support bureau initiated a complaint against the father but did not begin court proceedings. Sanford soon lost her Altadena home and was forced to move her family into homeless shelters while working part time as a security guard.

Last month, she got word that the district attorney's office had secured a payment order in her case, although she is still waiting for the checks.

"I gave them all the information that was needed," she said, "and they still stalled."

The district attorney's office acknowledged that it had been improperly slow.

Sanford's case was practically a model of efficiency compared to Shanae Young's. When her case was referred to the district attorney's office, her son was 9 months old. Today he is 12, and Young has yet to receive a cent in child

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support.

Young told the district attorney's office that the boy's father was in the Air Force, information easy to confirm with a single call to the military. Yet no action was taken. Young said she repeatedly complained. The response, she said, was usually the same: As long as you're collecting welfare, why worry?

Because Young did not aspire to a life on the public dole, she sought the help of child support advocates. This summer, after a decade of waiting--during which she got off welfare on her own--the district attorney's office finally initiated court action.

"Something could have been resolved . . . if they had really took the time and worked on it," Young said. "It could have been done in a month. I'll give it even two or three months. But 10 years? . . . It's not fair to the children. It's not fair to the parents who are taking care of them."

Family support director Doss said the bureau has lost Young's complete case file and does not know why it has dragged on. In the past several years, he said, it has been complicated by defense tactics.

Several former and current caseworkers said the unit's caseload is so staggering--bigger than that of 40 states--that they spend more time tracking paperwork than parents who owe money. Continuity and efficiency is impossible, they say, because cases are shuffled from one employee to the next, with no one having continuing responsibility.

Too often, the workers said, cases are prioritized not by which are the oldest but by who yells the loudest, be it a parent who is due support or someone who thinks they have been billed excessively. "We only work the ones who holler," one veteran worker said.

Former Dist. Atty. Robert Philibosian learned firsthand that the system responds to a hard, well-placed nudge.

When his cousin was erroneously billed for \$ 43,000 in back child support and was unable to resolve the mistake, Philibosian said he picked up the phone and demanded immediate action.

"They took care of it because I hounded them. But what happens to the poor schlump out there who can't call me for help?" Philibosian said.

"It has been such a mess for so long," he said of the agency, "that they just don't know what to do with it."

Little Room for Compassion

The amount of monthly support that parents are ordered to pay is determined by a state formula based on their earnings. Sometimes, however, that sum may be too much to handle, especially if the parent's economic status worsens. District attorney's employees complain that because the system is built on money and statistics, there is little room for compassion.

This has prompted some workers to quit in disgust.

"I just couldn't stand what they were doing to people," said ex-Deputy Dist. Atty. Elisa Baker, who resigned in 1995 and now, with another former prosecutor, runs a paralegal service for indebted parents.

"I got a call from a homeless shelter and was told that I had put a man and . . . his four children out on the street because I had put an enforcement order . . . for 50% of his income. I was devastated," Baker recalled. "That was the beginning of the end for me, because I think that was the first time I was in touch with the ramifications of what I was doing."

Complicating matters, some parents do not learn that they owe money until their bill has grown to thousands of

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dollars. They say they were never notified that actions had been taken against them.

District attorney's records show that, in 53% of cases, prosecutors have not directly served court summonses to parents being sued.

Instead, agency officials consider the process initiated if a summons is left at a parent's last known address. Although this process is standard in civil law, the consequences in child support cases can be devastating. In several cases, they claimed to have served men who were in fact in jail.

Roughly 70% of parents billed for child support are not in court when paternity is established and their monthly obligations set. Certainly, many of these noncustodial parents simply choose not to appear. But many others say that the first time they learned they had missed a court date was when their wages were garnished.

No one knows how many men are wrongfully pursued for child support, though the district attorney's own records show that on average more than 350 a month are incorrectly named as fathers.

Some men who fail to appear in court--whether purposefully or not--find themselves caught in a painful trap: They are not the fathers of children they have been ordered to support. But because they were not present to contest paternity, they are held liable for the payments.

Although Garcetti says his office has made a few exceptions, he stands by the policy.

"This is within the law," Garcetti said. "This is not a law that applies simply to child support. This is a law that applies to all civil judgments."

Although true, some of Garcetti's own prosecutors say it is unfair to burden legal novices with lifetimes of debt just because it's legal.

"If we convict someone wrongly in the criminal justice system, we do everything we can to undo that mistake," said Deputy Dist. Atty. Stephen Cooley. "It is a matter of ethics, pure ethics."

Added veteran Deputy Dist. Atty. David R. Ross, a top official with the California District Attorneys Assn.: "From a criminal prosecutor's standpoint, if we know the guy is not the father . . . to hold him responsible is patently unfair."

A state appellate court, ruling in the case of a man ordered to support a child he did not father, stated that "someone in the district attorney's office has lost sight of the paramount duty to seek justice."

Garcetti's office led an unsuccessful effort to persuade the state Supreme Court to reverse the ruling, but did succeed in having it "depublished." It cannot be used as precedent in similar cases--like that of Bert Riddick, a \$ 50,000-a-year computer manager who is now effectively homeless.

In 1991, an old girlfriend identified Riddick as the father of her newborn child. When the summons arrived for Riddick to appear in court, his fiancée was so enraged she hid the paperwork, producing it only days before the hearing as Riddick was about to leave on a business trip.

"In hindsight, I blew that chance by not appearing in court that day," Riddick acknowledged.

When the district attorney's office began garnishing his wages, Riddick frantically called the agency and was told there was nothing he could do.

Soon his car was repossessed. He, his now-wife Angel and their son were evicted from their apartment. Angel applied for welfare when she became pregnant with the couple's second child in 1995.

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"I felt kind of like 'The Fugitive,' where you're running and you didn't even do anything," he said.

On Valentine's Day of that year, Riddick was arrested for failing to pay child support. He spent three days in jail. Criminal charges were dropped when a blood test proved he was not the child's father.

But the civil court judgment requiring him to pay child support remained in effect.

This year, the district attorney's office began taking nearly half his paycheck. Unable to afford an attorney, Riddick went to court on his own to beg that the debt be lifted. With a prosecutor arguing against him, he lost.

Riddick then sent a desperate appeal via e-mail to Garcetti, but he received a letter from the office saying the court judgment would stand.

For financial help, Riddick turned to his retired parents, living on Social Security, who maxed out their credit cards for him. It wasn't enough. In June, when the Riddicks' gas was shut off, they had to microwave water to bathe their children. They gave their two beloved dogs to the pound.

This summer, the family was again evicted.

On a steamy August night, Bert Riddick pondered the mountain of debt lying ahead of him and the future of his family as he hefted their belongings into a borrowed van. For now, they will stay with his wife's relatives.

"I don't know if you're a religious man," Riddick said to a visitor, "but say a prayer for us."

He then broke down in tears.

Methods Are Questioned

Stung by years of criticism by advocacy groups and others, district attorney's officials have taken decisive action to improve the agency's performance--on paper, at least. Its methods, however, have been questioned.

John Erlinger, a former high-ranking analyst in the agency, told The Times that while working in the office in 1993 he witnessed employees falsifying records before their review by state officials. He said that files were doctored to make it appear that more action had been taken on cases so government funding would not be risked.

"There were millions of dollars involved," Erlinger said. "I look at it as high crimes and misdemeanors. It wasn't a little thing. . . . They were doing it for lots of money."

Two knowledgeable sources, requesting anonymity, said they also were aware of the practice.

Denying any wrongdoing, district attorney's office administrators say the allegation amounted to nothing more than a disagreement over the interpretation of state regulations. They dismiss Erlinger, who retired in 1995, as a disgruntled ex-employee and say an internal investigation found that no policies had been broken.

The district attorney's office also has been chastised for inflating the number of noncustodial parents it claims to have located. During 1995 testimony before the county Board of Supervisors, agency officials said that its new computer had led to an astonishing 1,051% increase.

They failed to reveal, however, that most of that rise resulted from the computer counting some debtors more than once, a revelation that drew a rebuke from California authorities who oversee the state's child support collection programs.

One of the office's most dramatic moves to polish its reputation and silence its critics came last year.

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In one sweeping action, child support officials programmed their computer system to shut every case that met federal criteria for closing cases. The vast majority were dropped because the delinquent parent could not be located for three consecutive years. By dropping more than 240,000 cases from its active files, the district attorney effectively told hundreds of thousands of children nothing could be done for them.

"This is a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' proposition," family support chief Doss said of the case closures. "If we keep the cases open, child support advocates say, 'Look how badly they're doing.' If you close the cases, they beat you over the head for closing the cases. . . . It's a shame because, I think, that ought not to be the focus of performance measurement. But it is . . . and we never made any pretense that the effort involved, at least in part, was a response to that evaluation process."

Although other counties and states close cases, the magnitude of Garcetti's move was unprecedented in California.

As required by law, the district attorney's office sent notices alerting custodial parents that their cases would be closed unless the office heard from them within 60 days. The agency says it did not track how many notices reached the intended families.

After the case closures, the office was deluged by outraged parents who, when seeking status reports on their cases, learned they had been shut.

One worker said she personally reopened hundreds of cases that were closed because of computer errors or because minimal efforts had been undertaken to find parents. In some instances, parents had not only been found but were paying support.

"Because our system is so bad," the caseworker said, "you have a lot of kids out there doing without. It's a very big number. It would have to be in the thousands at least, or maybe the tens of thousands."

Current and former employees allege that one reason the office did not know the whereabouts of many noncustodial parents was that the information may have ended up in the trash. Bundles of unopened mail, including letters and government correspondence that would have opened cases, have been periodically tossed, they say.

During last year's massive case closures, the family support unit left "boxes and boxes and boxes of correspondence from custodial parents" unopened, according to a former employee, who added: "I can't begin to tell you how horrible it was."

It also has been difficult for needy parents to telephone the unit with information. District attorney's records show that at the time of the wide-scale closures, only 1.6% of callers were getting through.

The push to close cases--and improve the district attorney's numerical standing--has continued beyond last year's purge. This year, more cases have been closed than opened, records show.

"The mind-set is on numbers," said the former employee, "not people."

In welfare cases closed because the delinquent parent could not be located, a training bulletin tells workers not to reopen the cases even if new information is provided on the whereabouts of the missing parents. When shown the directive, Doss said he had been unaware of it and acknowledged that it was inappropriate.

One casualty of the push to keep caseloads down is La Shan Ettress, 32. She was told her case would remain closed because she was collecting welfare--even though she provided the district attorney's office with information on how to find her child's father.

"I told them . . . 'That doesn't make sense. You asked me all these questions about him and I gave you all this information and now you are telling me you are going to close my case?' " Ettress said.

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Today, she said, she raises her 6-year-old daughter on a \$ 456 monthly welfare check, plus \$ 202 in food stamps, while the child's father, who owns a business, pays no support.

"It is totally unbelievable," Ettress said.

Karen Cowen knows the feeling.

Last year, Garcetti's office closed her case, saying the 51-year-old who now lives in Emmett, Idaho, had received all the money she was owed for child support.

But the agency's own records show that it had collected nothing on her behalf--an amount she said should have totaled about \$ 41,000.

"I never got a dime," said Cowen, whose daughter will soon turn 27.

Doss said the case would be reopened.

Federal regulations require that the government search three years before it can close a case on the basis that an absent parent cannot be found. The district attorney's office didn't come close in the case of Ava Marie McGee.

Only months after turning to the agency for help in increasing the support she was receiving for her children, McGee received a letter stating that the father could not be found and that the case was being closed. This despite the fact that McGee told the office her former spouse had not changed jobs and lived down the street from her.

After McGee protested, Garcetti's office acknowledged that it had located her ex-husband, who had been paying child support for seven years through payroll deductions.

The district attorney's entry into the case, however, only worsened McGee's hardship. Checks that had once arrived on time came sporadically because they were sent to the district attorney to be forwarded to her. In addition, they were for the same amount as before, not the higher amount for which she had sought the district attorney's help.

More strapped than ever, she asked the agency to back out--a request triggering more tumult. The district attorney's office informed her ex-husband's employer that the child support case had been closed and that the order to garnish her former husband's wages had been withdrawn.

Suddenly McGee was left with no child support at all. Only after the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles intervened did Garcetti's office have the support payments reinstated.

"For the last seven years, I got my checks on time. The minute the district attorney took over the case, my checks were . . . missing," McGee said.

The district attorney's office says McGee today has received all the money due to her. But by her account, she still is owed about \$ 600, a lot for someone struggling with heart problems and raising three growing children.

Doss acknowledges that the office erred in initially attempting to close McGee's case, but defended the eventual outcome of her case.

"They are completely incompetent," said Legal Aid attorney Jane Preece, who handled McGee's case. "They do not solve problems at the basic level. Ever."

Holding Back the Money

Although Garcetti has said he wants the success of the child support unit to be a hallmark of his administration, he

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has allowed job vacancies in the family support unit to run as high as 25%. In two of the last three years, he used nearly \$ 6 million allocated for child support operations to cover overspending in his criminal division.

That money could have hired more than 200 caseworkers.

When asked about using child support funds to offset spending elsewhere, Garcetti denied doing so. After child support director Doss corrected his boss, Garcetti blamed county "bureaucrats" for stymieing his hiring efforts.

Last fall, after an independent audit found that more caseworkers were urgently needed, county supervisors were in no mood for excuses.

"I don't understand why you are the only department that has these problems," Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke told Garcetti. "Every other department can find people."

Since then, under intense scrutiny, Garcetti's office has aggressively hired caseworkers. Today, the office's staff is almost double the 789 workers he inherited when elected in 1992. Garcetti points to the beefed-up staffing as proof that he has made child support a priority.

But some family support workers question the way in which the district attorney uses his considerable resources. He spends more per case than any of the four other California counties with the largest child support caseloads--Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego.

Some of those high costs can be attributed to Garcetti's emphasis on hiring expensive deputy district attorneys instead of lower-paid caseworkers or clerks.

"They're just doing things which are very expensive and not necessarily effective," said Leora Gershenson of the National Center for Youth Law. "They are focusing on aspects . . . that do not give a very big bang for the buck."

For years, questions also have arisen over the millions of dollars in child support collections allowed to accumulate in interest-bearing accounts. At times, the balances waiting to be paid out have soared to more than \$ 25 million.

District attorney's officials say a large amount of that money is owed to parents who cannot be found. Under state law, if a family cannot be located, the money must be refunded to the paying parents after six months. But Doss says the county prefers to continue looking for the parents.

Despite years of questions about the accounts from child support advocates, it was not until The Times raised the issue that Garcetti called a news conference in August to announce that \$ 6 million was available for about 4,800 parents whom his office had been unable to locate.

The district attorney was flanked by two women who were given money they had been owed for years--including one who said her case had already been closed. Garcetti also announced that the names of other women due money would be posted on the Internet.

A Times researcher, armed only with some of those names, easily found three parents by searching phone and other public records and then calling to verify identities.

"I don't think the district attorney tried very hard to find me," said Charline Bowersox, 66.

The children for whom she had sought support are now grown, with youngsters of their own. Bowersox has been listed in the phone book for 30 years, ever since she left La Puente for rural New Hampshire.

Without the child support she was owed, Bowersox said, she relied on welfare to raise her three children in a rundown house that, on occasion, had no running water.

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"I'm glad they've got a bank account," she said of the district attorney's office. "I'd like to see the money in my bank account."

A separate account for overpayments holds money for people like Javier Alvarez.

The 53-year-old Harbor City machinist diligently paid child support for 18 years. Even after his first daughter became an adult, the district attorney's office continued to take money from his paycheck, he said. The office even took from the disability payments he received when an industrial accident put him out of work, sending his family into poverty. When he called the district attorney's office to straighten things out, Alvarez said, caseworkers hung up on him.

Two years ago, a court commissioner ruled that Garcetti's office owed Alvarez more than \$ 6,000. He said he has yet to be reimbursed.

"If I take something from someone and don't pay for it, I have to give it back. But not Child Support. . . . This is my own money. This is not right."

After being contacted Thursday by The Times, the district attorney's office sent Alvarez a check for \$ 4,500, saying it appeared that the rest of the money had reached him. But Alvarez said that was the first check he had gotten from the agency.

At least Alvarez got some of his money.

Last year, Juan Melara, ill with cancer, asked a social worker in Wilmington to help him resolve a child support case.

"It was bothering him because he was trying to leave everything in order," nurse Mary Mungia recalled. "He knew he was dying and wanted to make sure his new wife would not be left with any financial problems."

The nurse called longtime child support advocate Sue Speir, who contacted Garcetti's office to find out what Melara owed.

A month later, Speir said, she got an answer: Melara had actually overpaid, and the district attorney's office said it was trying to get money back from his ex-wife.

The news came too late.

"He died before anybody in the D.A.'s office got back to him," Speir said. "He died thinking he still owed them money."

Times researchers Janet Lundblad and Paul Singleton contributed to this series.

Many Children, Little Support

L.A. County's child support system by the numbers:

1 In 5: Estimated number of county residents affected by child support system.

58: Rank out of 58 counties in state in overall performance, according to legislative analyst's office.

8%: Percentage of cases on which current child support is collected.

40: Number of states with fewer cases than L.A. County.

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760,000: Estimated children affected.

81%: Percentage of cases that involve families on welfare.

Note: Numbers represent Los Angeles County during the 1998 fiscal year.

Sources: Los Angeles County district attorney's office, legislative analyst's office.

How L.A. County Stacks Up

Comparison of Los Angeles County with six other California counties, including Sierra County, which leads the state in many support categories:

RECOVERY RATIO

Percent of welfare dollars recovered through child support collections by district attorneys:

July 1996-June 1997

Los Angeles: 5.4%

San Diego: 13.8%

Orange: 19.4%

San Francisco: 19.4%

Fresno: 20.9%

Ventura: 27.5%

Sierra: 44.8%

LOW RETURNS

Dollars collected in child support for every dollar spent by county district attorneys on collect it:

July 1996-June 1997

Los Angeles: \$ 2.11

San Francisco: \$ 2.33

Ventura: \$ 3.29

Sierra: \$ 3.81

Fresno: \$ 4.06

Orange: \$ 4.21

San Diego: \$ 4.26

Source: State Department of Social Services, Los Angeles district attorney's office.

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Who to Call for Help

The following organizations provide free or low-cost advice on child support matters:

* ACES (Assn. for Children for the Enforcement of Child Support) (800) 738-2237

* Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law (323) 939-2174

* Lawyers for Family Support (323) 852-1475

* Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (323) 801-7991

* My Child Says Daddy (323) 296-8816

* Neighborhood Legal Services (800) 433-6251

* SPUNK (Single Parents United 'N Kids) (562) 984-2580

To Comment

For readers wanting to comment on these stories, e-mail: child.support@latimes.com

Times Web site bulletin board: <http://www.latimes.com/child.support>

About This Series

Today--The county's child support program may be the worst in the nation, driving families into financial ruin while hiding its problems through questionable bookkeeping.

Monday--The task of trying to resolve child support problems proves daunting in a court system pushed by the district attorney's office to focus on volume and speed.

Tuesday--Weak state oversight of counties like Los Angeles has left California with one of the poorest child support systems in the country. Yet its leaders fight key reforms.

GRAPHIC: GRAPHIC: How L.A. County Stacks Up, MATT MOODY / Los Angeles Times **GRAPHIC:** Many Children, Little Support **PHOTO:** The district attorney's office said it could not find Trenisha McGee's father, even though he lived down the street and regularly paid support. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times **PHOTO:** (2 photos) Forced to pay for a child he did not father, Bert Riddick has seen his family's middle-class existence shattered. At left, Angel Riddick bathes her son Azriel with a hose because some of the family's utilities had been cut off. Bert Riddick, above, on an August night just before he and his family were forced to vacate their home. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times **PHOTO:** L.A. County Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti shares a light moment during an August news conference at which he announced that \$6 million was available for about 4,800 parents whom his office had been unable to locate. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times **PHOTO:** Caitlyn, 2, lives with her mother, Catherine Sanford, and infant brother at a Hollywood homeless shelter. Sanford applied for welfare in 1996 in hopes that the district attorney's office would seek child support from Caitlyn's father, whose address and Social Security number she supplied. But the case languished, and the family lost their Altadena home. The district attorney's office admits that its handling of the case had been improperly slow. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

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