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Courtesy of Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement



Cell Phone Records Help Virginia Child Support Efforts

By Mikel Chavers

At any one time Nick Young, deputy commissioner and director of Child Support Enforcement in Virginia, is looking for some 125,000 to 140,000 people who have not paid their child support in the state. More than \$2.4 billion in unpaid child support is now owed—the cumulative total since 1975.

And the situation isn't getting any better.

The caseload increases steadily each year as traditional methods of punishing delinquent payers fail and as some continue to elude authorities. Young and his department are trying to reverse that downward trend. They're now tracking delinquent payers using cell phone records.

Seventy-five percent of Americans have cell phones, Young said, and that's what makes the state's program beneficial.

"It just became so obvious walking down the street," said Cindy Coiner, policy specialist for the department. Seemingly everyone—including those the department is looking for—has a cell phone, Coiner said.

The **Division of Child Support Enforcement Cell Phone Records Initiative**, operational in June 2005, works with the six largest cell phone carriers in Virginia to obtain billing addresses and cell phone numbers for parents who are delinquent in paying child support. The program is one of eight CSG Innovations Award winners.

Since 2005, more than 375 delinquent parents have been located and are now paying child support as a result of cell phone records subpoenaed by Young's department. Last year, Virginia collected \$608 million in child support (some delinquent), a nearly 4 percent increase over the \$585 million in child support collected the previous year.

"We're getting better at collecting it, but the problem is not necessarily going away," Young said.

But there's no question obtaining cell phone records on delinquent payers is another powerful tool Virginia's child support enforcement services has in its arsenal.

Take the case of one man living in a small, rural Virginia community who had not paid child support for his now 10-year-old son for five years. The man was enjoying the Fourth of July with his second family (not the mother and child owed support) when a sheriff served him with a warrant and took him into custody, Young said.

After the man sat in jail for two weeks, his second family paid a portion of the child support money owed—some \$4,000—to get him out of jail.

"That was all because we had his cell phone number," Young said. And that cell phone number was associated with a billing address.

Before that success story, however, the program got off to a somewhat rocky start when the idea was hatched in 2004. At the time, Young was working with the Federal Communications Commission and a few cell phone companies. The idea didn't come to fruition right away as the Division of Child Support Enforcement got a lot of pushback, Young said.

"A lot of people are skeptical of big government," Young said.

He said officials knew they had subpoena authority, but child support enforcement hadn't used it before with cell phone records.

As a combined effort between the Attorney General's office and the Division of Child Support Enforcement, the project first simply tried to obtain voluntary participation from cell phone companies to get records on some of their customers. But when attempts were unproductive, the program turned to mandatory subpoenas, Young said.

"You had to have the right documents; you had to talk to (the cell phone companies) in the right way," Young said. "They need to be able to turn to their customers and say they had no choice."

Now, 12 to 15 states have implemented the program and some are doing data matching, according to Young. He's also co-chair of the National Cell Phone Work Group formed by the federal child support enforcement office to make the program more widespread. The work group has 10 member states.

"Some states are going to have to have laws passed, and some states will have legislators that are more reluctant," Young said of the transferability of the program. As for Virginia, Young finds that the numbers on how many noncustodial parents don't pay their child support speak for themselves.

"We're here to enforce the law and make parents accountable to their kids," he said.

Fast Facts

- To date, 4,730 manual subpoenas that were physically signed individually have been generated for 840 noncustodial parents owing child support.
- A recent data match with Verizon turned up information associated with 17,233 noncustodial parents, including 30,714 reported cell phone numbers.
- Instead of using manual subpoenas, Virginia is beginning to electronically transmit inquiry files with some 250,000 names to cell phone companies for data matching.