



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Commission on Children

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Legislators agree on the importance of dads

Bill to Help Fathers Keep Up on Child Support Clears House and Senate

Putting aside their differences on other issues, lawmakers have voted unanimously for legislation aimed at helping fathers stay involved in their children's lives, even if they live outside the child's home. Democrats and Republicans agreed that fathers are critical to children's sense of self, learning, and stability.

The legislation—House Bill 6486, An Act Concerning Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families—won unanimous approval in the state House of Representatives on Monday and in the Senate late Tuesday. It awaits the governor's signature.

The government spends \$100 billion a year to support households with absent fathers. The legislation approved this week seeks to provide unemployed and under-employed parents with the employment and life-skills training needed to connection and child support payments to the family.

Every third child in the United States lives in a home without a father. The consequences of this are profound, including greater likelihood of child poverty, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, crime, depression, suicide. Dr. Kyle Pruett of Yale University reports that children with involved fathers, as compared to children with absent fathers, have higher grade completion and income, greater problem-solving competence and stress tolerance, and less reliance on aggressive conflict resolution.

The legislation is based on the knowledge – underscored in the hearings held by the legislature's Fatherhood Taskforce – that most low-income fathers care about their children and want to be involved in supporting them. Many of them are dead broke, not dead beat. Current child support policy does not have effective mechanisms to distinguish fathers who evade paying support from those who would pay support if they had the resources, according to the National Conference of State Legislators.

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Among other things, the bill would give judges the option to refer fathers to services instead of jail if they fall behind in their payments due to unemployment. The services would focus on improving their employability or life skills. The bill would also:

- require the Department of Social Services (DSS) to report to the legislature by February 1, 2010 on the effectiveness of child-support collection efforts.
- encourage DSS to seek federal and private funds that promote stable father involvement. The Obama administration appears likely to release several million dollars to increase father engagement in their children's lives.
- require the Chief Court Administrator to create a "problem-solving" docket to help noncustodial parents with child-support payment arrearages. Judges handling cases on this docket would then be free to consider the services option.

Families aren't the only ones who'd benefit from this legislation – so would taxpayers. Other states that have taken these measures have seen increases in child-support payments, decreases in incarceration, and significant fiscal savings. Missouri, for instance, saved \$7 million.

Leading the adoption of the bill by the House was Representative Bruce Morris of Norwalk and Senator Gary LeBeau of East Hartford, who co-chair the legislature's Fatherhood Task Force.

"The unanimous vote shows how strongly everyone feels about the importance of fathers in children's lives – and how much they believe this bill can make a difference," Representative Morris said, pointing in particular to the supportive floor speech of Representative DebraLee Hovey of Monroe.

He also thanked Representative Joseph S. Mioli of Westport, who recalled in his remarks the hard work of the late Representative Faith McMahan on this issue. The legislation awaits action in the Senate.

If signed into law, it would take effect on October 1, 2009.

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