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## Chasing down deadbeat parents

*The IRS can do a better job of collecting child support payments than state and local agencies.*



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Guest Columnist

Joanne Greystone trusted her husband. She also trusted the government.

She and her children are still suffering from those two mistakes.

After her husband left and moved in with his secretary, Joanne expected that he would keep his word and continue to support their three children. Before long, the checks stopped coming. The kids went without new clothes and, some days, Joanne (not her real name) did not know where her next meal was coming from.

Meanwhile, her ex was vacationing in Aspen and the Caribbean with his new girlfriend. He managed to avoid making his court-ordered child support payments by periodically changing his address. When Joanne called pleading for money, he laughed and told her no one could force him to pay.

He was right. With more than 1,500 state and local agencies involved in the collection of child support in this country, it's a small wonder that only 20 percent of the orders are collected. This, despite the fact that \$2 million was granted by the federal government to automate these agencies' computer systems.

The phenomenon affects you even if you are not a single parent, because your tax dollars end up supporting the children of deadbeat parents.

It's not as if state legislators haven't been trying to deal with this crisis. Under the federal welfare reform law, enacted in 1996, all states had to step up efforts to pursue delinquent accounts by Jan. 1 of this year or face heavy financial penalties. Pennsylvania alone stands to lose \$105 million in federal funding and \$719 million for temporary

assistance for needy families, the welfare program for women and children.

The most recent in a series of laws passed by the Pennsylvania Legislature requires applicants to have Social Security numbers to obtain a marriage license. According to the law's co-sponsor, Rep. John Fichter of Norristown, it's "easier to track people when you have a Social Security number."

The centerpiece of the new law is the requirement that employers report all new hires to a data bank at the state Department of Labor and Industry so their names can be run through its computer. If the new employee owes support, an automatic wage garnishment will be issued.

The bill also makes it easier to obtain bank account and property holding information about deadbeats. Last year, Pennsylvania collected \$150,000 from lottery winners whose names were matched against the list of child support debtors.

This bill was preceded by one that withholds drivers' licenses, fishing and hunting licenses, boating permits, professional certifications and other privileges from Pennsylvania citizens unless their support is up to date.

Despite these efforts, the caseload continues to increase, rising from 13 million to 20 million cases between 1990 and 1995. Nationwide, more than \$40 billion remains uncollected. The collection of child support is a national disgrace.

Even with the Uniform Family Interstate Support Act, where state orders are enforced in sister states, errors and delays are notorious. Parents still cross state lines to avoid paying.

There is a better way. Instead of hundreds of agencies chasing deadbeat parents, we should only use one, the Inter-

nal Revenue Service. The IRS is the only system likely to work. Let the IRS collect and distribute child support.

Last year, U.S. Reps. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., and Lynn Woodsey, D-Calif. (she is a former welfare mother), introduced the Uniform Child Support Enforcement Act of 1997. This act orders delinquency claims to be collected by the IRS and establishes a flow of information from state courts to the already established federal case registry of child support orders.

With its computers, resources and attitude, the IRS has an 84 percent collection rate, more than four times that of local agencies.

Under the proposed scenario, state courts would continue to establish support orders. The IRS would collect the money and disburse it monthly, via the Social Security Administration. Employees would be required to include court-ordered support data when they declare their withholding status. Employers would then collect payments from paychecks, and delinquency claims would be sent to the IRS. This is welfare reform at its most basic.

The collection of child support payments is as much a federal function as the delivery of the mail and national defense. Yes, the fashion in government these days is to transfer programs, responsibilities and money from Washington to the states. This is fine for problems that should be addressed on a local level.

But when it comes to child support, America is one big state. Americans are free to travel wherever they want, which is why the IRS is particularly suited for this role, especially when child support can make a difference between solvency and poverty for single-parent family.

Of course, we would all prefer that men like Joanne's ex simply supported their children. But until the day arrives that deadbeat parents are controlled by their consciences, we need the IRS to keep their promises for them.

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