



ACCESS AND VISITATION SERVICES HELP TEXAS PARENTS ADDRESS VISITATION CONCERNS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

CHILDREN THRIVE ON THE SECURITY THAT comes from knowing both parents love and care for them. That is why the Office of the Attorney General is committed to helping parents stay involved in their children's lives.

The Attorney General's Office often receives inquiries from frustrated parents wanting to know how to handle custody or visitation disputes. This is particularly problematic for parents who do not have legal custody of their children. Most of the time, parents without custody say the other parent won't let them see their child. Sometimes the parent with custody says their child does not want to go for visits.

To help Texas families who find themselves in these painful situations, the Office of the Attorney General awarded grants to 10 organizations that will help parents without custody stay involved in their children's lives. The groups will use the federally-funded grants to promote joint parenting skills and encourage both parents to positively impact their children.

The Access and Visitation grants help young Texans by providing valuable financial support for programs that encourage parents to actively participate in their children's lives. Having involved parents not only benefits Texas children, it also benefits Texas taxpayers by ensuring parents

financially support their kids.

The Texas Attorney General's Office is responsible for operating the state's child support program, which awarded the grants through its Shared Parenting Program. This year, more than \$500,000 in Shared Parenting grants was awarded to private nonprofit organizations and local governments across Texas.

Shared Parenting grant recipients are: Family Services Center, Inc. in Brownwood; Bexar County Domestic Relations Office in San Antonio; El Paso County Domestic Relations Office in El Paso; Harris County Domestic Relations Office in Houston; Travis County Domestic Relations Office in Austin; Project Unity's Safe Harbour program in Bryan; Family Court Services of Tarrant County; NewDay Services for Children and Families in Fort Worth; Legal Aid of North West Texas in Dallas; and the Houston Galveston Institute providing services in Dallas.

Access and Visitation grants provide funding for services that help never-married, divorced or separated parents comply with the court's visitation orders. These grants are intended to provide early intervention, co-parenting education, alternative dispute resolution, visitation compliance and other skills that may help parents resolve personal differences for the good of their children.

Studies have found that noncustodial parents who stay involved with their children are more likely to make regular child support payments. Studies also indicate that children whose parents pay their child support have fewer behavior problems, make better grades and stay in school longer than children who do not receive regular child support.

The Attorney General's Office renewed a grant to Legal Aid of North West Texas to operate the Access and Visitation Hotline. The hotline is staffed by attorneys who provide legal information and assistance about child custody, along with information about visitation, paternity and child support matters. The hotline's toll free number, (866) 292-4636, is available Monday through Friday from 1 to 7 p.m.

Hotline attorneys provide basic legal information and education about establishing paternity, the child support process and a parent's legal authority to see their child. Attorneys cannot represent callers or offer legal advice — only legal information.

Parents also can visit www.txaccess.org to obtain downloadable legal forms and examples for completing them. Also available are samples of parent letters to request compliance with orders, visitation logs, and other tools for resolving custody and visitation concerns.

The Attorney General's Office maintains an online directory of programs across Texas that facilitates joint parenting after separation or divorce. Parents, counselors and other professionals can search the online directory by zip code, county or service provided. The directory is located in the Child Support section of the Attorney General's website at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.

The Office of the Attorney General does not handle custody or visitation disputes. The child support program receives significant federal funding for child support activities. Under federal law, the Attorney General's federal funding cannot be used for custody and visitation related matters.

However, the Attorney General's Office can award grants to groups that seek to increase contact between noncustodial parents and their children. By sharing grants with local organizations, the Attorney General's Office can help Texas children whose parents are engaged in custody or visitation disputes.

The Office of the Attorney General appreciates parents who work together to care for their children. It is critical to a child's well-being that they know and have a relationship with both parents.

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