



SHARED PARENTING SERVICES ENCOURAGE COOPERATION IN THE CHILD SUPPORT PROCESS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

CHILDREN DESERVE THE SECURITY THAT COMES from knowing both parents love and care for them. Even when parents live apart – which is true for 1.4 million children on the child support caseload – it is important that they work together for the good of their children.

Studies have found that noncustodial parents who stay involved in their children's lives are more likely to make regular child support payments. Studies also indicate that children whose parents pay child support have fewer behavior problems, make better grades and stay in school longer than children who do not receive regular child support. To promote healthy families, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) offers a variety of shared parenting services that encourage noncustodial parents' involvement in their children's lives.

The OAG's Access and Visitation online directory lists programs across Texas that facilitate cooperative 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 Attorney General's statewide Access and Visitation Hotline is the only service of its kind in the nation

that provides noncustodial and custodial parents with free phone access to attorneys who provide legal information and assistance about child custody, along with information about visitation, paternity and child support matters. Hotline attorneys do not represent parents or offer legal advice. Rather, they provide basic legal information and education about establishing paternity, the child support process and a parent's legal authority to see his or her child.

The hotline's toll free number, (866) 292-4636, is answered in English and Spanish, Monday – Friday from 1 to 7 p.m. Parents also can visit the hotline's companion website www.txaccess.org to obtain downloadable legal forms and examples for completing them. In 2011, hotline attorneys answered more than 29,000 phone calls and the website was viewed 55,000 times.

Awarding grant funding to local organizations is another way the OAG can help children whose parents are engaged in custody or visitation disputes, since federal regulations do not allow the use of child support funding to handle these matters. In State Fiscal Year 2012, the OAG awarded more than \$500,000 in federal access and visitation funding to private nonprofit organizations and local governments across Texas. Services provided under the grants include early

intervention, co-parenting education, mediation and enforcement.

Access and Visitation funding also makes it possible to develop public education material that promotes cooperative parenting. The materials are distributed through local courts, county domestic relations offices, OAG child support offices and community-based organizations. One example is the My Sticker Calendar: A Kid's Guide to Shared Family Time that is available to parents establishing child support orders. This award-winning calendar is a tool for parents and children to track and plan time the child spends in each parent's home. The calendar features artwork by children across the state.

According to a national report, unmarried parents who receive Access and Visitation services pay an average of 33 percent more of the child support they owe than those who do not receive services. And increased child support collections benefit taxpayers too. The money that parents pay to support their children is money taxpayers aren't spending to provide for these children.

The Office of the Attorney General appreciates parents who work together to care for their children. Cooperative parenting is the key to strong and healthy Texas families.

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POINTS TO REMEMBER



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- The Access and Visitation Hotline's toll free number, (866) 292-4636, is answered in English and Spanish, Monday – Friday from 1 to 7 p.m.
- Visit www.txaccess.org to obtain downloadable legal forms and directions for completing them.
- Although federal regulations do not allow the OAG to use child support funds to handle legal disputes about custody or visitation, limited special funding is available to assist in these matters.

For more information on these programs, or to apply for child support services, call (800) 252-8014 or visit the Attorney General's website, www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.

Information on this and other topics is available on the Attorney General's website at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov



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