

Child support cooperation reduces dependency without breaking the bank

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Child support is one of the best tools to end the cycle of dependency for single-parent families.¹ These payments boost incomes for single-parent families by an average of 54 percent, help more than one million children escape poverty, and make it more likely that families will be able to leave welfare behind.²

But despite its power to move children out of poverty, fewer than one in four single-parent families on food stamps receive any amount of child support.⁴ Even among those families who receive support, most only receive a portion of what is owed.⁵ This means that families are missing out on thousands of dollars of income, trapping them in a cycle of dependency that robs their children of their real potential.⁶

The problem is urgent. Nearly half of single-parent families who receive no child support are on one or more welfare programs, including Medicaid, food stamps, cash welfare, public housing, and other programs.⁶ Worse yet, most of these single parents will remain trapped in dependency for years to come: fewer than one in ten will leave the program within a year, while more than 60 percent will languish in dependency for more than eight years.⁷

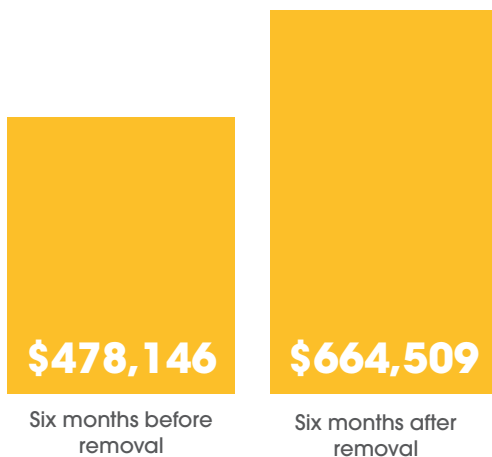
But the solution is simple: single parents on food stamps and other welfare programs should be required to cooperate with child support enforcement efforts as a condition of eligibility. Under this reform, custodial parents would be prohibited from obstructing efforts to determine paternity and collecting child support payments. Likewise, noncustodial parents would be required to make payments or otherwise cooperate.

The reform provides good cause exemptions when such cooperation isn't in the best interest of the child—such as when there is a risk of domestic violence—and children enrolled in the program will never be sanctioned for their parents' decisions.⁸ But parents who refuse to meet their obligations or otherwise interfere with states' attempts to collect child support would be removed from the program until they cooperate.⁹



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CHILD SUPPORT COLLECTIONS ROSE BY NEARLY 40 PERCENT AFTER REFORM



Source: Kansas Department for Children and Families

This reform has a proven track record of success. States have long required child support cooperation for cash assistance programs and several states have expanded these requirements to single parents on food stamps.¹⁰ When Kansas expanded its successful enforcement policies to the food stamp program in 2015, it set in place a system to track collections for families affected by the reform.¹¹ Within just six months, child support collections increased by nearly 40 percent among those impacted.¹² Since the change, poor families in Kansas have gained an estimated \$1.8 million more in child support each year.¹³ More support has translated into less need for government assistance, allowing many to move out of poverty and end their dependence on welfare programs entirely.¹⁴

The Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 would build on these state successes and require child support cooperation for all single parents on food stamps.¹⁵ Based on the experiences in states that have adopted the reform, child support collections could increase by nearly \$300 million per year as a result.¹⁶

Some critics have argued that this reform is too administratively burdensome on states and would lead to massive new administrative costs. But state experiences implementing the reform show that these concerns are unfounded.

States that have adopted this option do not have higher administrative costs than states that have not.¹⁷ Better still, state experiences show that the reform can be adopted within existing resources, with no need for additional administrative funds at all.

When Kansas adopted the reform, for example, the Department for Children and Families indicated that the agency would be able to absorb any administrative costs of the policy change within its existing budget.¹⁸

"DCF states that of the proposed policy changes, the requirement to cooperate with child support requirements in the SNAP Program would be the most substantial. This policy would affect approximately 19,900 SNAP cases. DCF would absorb the administrative costs of the policy. Making cooperation with child support mandatory for SNAP recipients is projected to increase child support payments to custodial families."

Likewise, South Dakota officials determined that the reform could be implemented within existing resources and would not result in any significant changes to ongoing administrative costs.¹⁹

"The DSS currently requires a similar degree of cooperation with the Division of Child Support as a condition of eligibility for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. From experiences with the cooperation requirement for TANF, the department estimates extending the cooperation requirement to SNAP would not result in significant changes to ongoing administrative costs. ... Requiring SNAP applicants to cooperate with the Division of Child Support as a condition of eligibility would require one-time changes to information systems in the Division of Child Support and in the Division of Economic Assistance. ... Since the BIT programmers who would likely do this work are already assigned to and perform programming for the DSS, there would be no need to appropriate any additional monies."

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Critics’ concerns about massive new administrative costs do not reflect the experiences of states that have actually implemented these policies. And these reforms have led to taxpayer savings, as families need less assistance overall and many are able to leave welfare entirely.²⁰

By adopting commonsense child support cooperation requirements, the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 paves the way to boost incomes, reduce child poverty, and help move more families out of dependency and into self-sufficiency. Best of all, more kids will receive the help they need—and deserve.

Appendix. Child support collections could increase by nearly \$300 million per year

STATE	ADDITIONAL COLLECTIONS	STATE	ADDITIONAL COLLECTIONS
Alabama	\$7,830,000	New Mexico	\$2,883,000
Alaska	\$464,000	New York	\$20,263,000
Arizona	\$7,436,000	North Carolina	\$11,491,000
Arkansas	\$3,711,000	North Dakota	\$374,000
California	\$33,134,000	Ohio	\$12,471,000
Colorado	\$3,559,000	Oklahoma	\$4,278,000
Connecticut	\$2,503,000	Oregon	\$4,361,000
Delaware	\$1,202,000	Pennsylvania	\$10,153,000
District of Columbia	\$1,219,000	Rhode Island	\$1,080,000
Florida	N/A	South Carolina	\$6,508,000
Georgia	\$13,312,000	South Dakota	\$739,000
Hawaii	\$973,000	Tennessee	\$8,958,000
Idaho	N/A	Texas	\$32,382,000
Illinois	\$15,556,000	Utah	\$1,494,000
Indiana	\$6,553,000	Vermont	\$579,000
Iowa	\$2,702,000	Virginia	\$7,386,000
Kansas	N/A	Washington	\$6,655,000
Kentucky	\$5,645,000	West Virginia	\$1,812,000
Louisiana	\$8,245,000	Wisconsin	\$4,913,000
Maine	\$1,338,000	Wyoming	\$257,000
Maryland	\$5,654,000	TOTAL	\$289,220,000
Massachusetts	\$6,454,000		
Michigan	N/A		
Minnesota	\$3,134,000		
Mississippi	N/A		
Missouri	\$7,172,000		
Montana	\$761,000		
Nebraska	\$1,156,000		
Nevada	\$2,120,000		
New Hampshire	\$783,000		
New Jersey	\$7,567,000		

*** As of October 2016, child support cooperation requirements had already been adopted in Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, and Mississippi.*

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