State Drowning In A Sea Of Unpaid Child Support

By MIKE HASTEN
Advertiser-State Editor

BATON ROUGE — Divorced parents who refuse to make child support payments often think they are hurting their former spouses but it is the children who are hurt the worst, says a Lafayette legislator.

Rep. Kathleen Blanco, a member of the Governor’s Commission on Child Support, says she believes the group can do something about the problem of parents not paying child support. The 33-member commission, which started meetings yesterday, is composed of legislators, judges, attorneys, child care professionals, and law enforcement officials who must deal with the problem.

“There are too many children suffering,” Blanco said. “Adults are victims but it is the children who are really suffering.”

The commission is charged with preparing new laws to be considered by the Legislature next spring and regulations for enforcement of some laws that already are on the books.

Rep. Allen Bradley of DelRidder, chairman of the group, said the commission’s work is new but “non-support is not a new problem in Louisiana. We are drowning in non-paid child support and the human misery caused by that is overwhelming.”

Bradley said the commission will examine numerous factors in child support, including who owes it, how judges decide who is to pay and how much should be paid, how it is collected, the problems in going to court to seek payment, and how to force payment when a spouse has gone out of state.

Help For All

Besides helping parents who are owed payments, the commission’s work could aid all state residents.

If nothing is done, the problem is sure to get worse, Bradley said, as it is predicted that 40 percent of all marriages in the 1980s will end in divorce and there will be a 27 percent increase in the number of single-parent households.

Women In Poverty

Marjorie Stewart of the Department of Health and Human Resources told the panel that one-third of the families headed by women are below the poverty level. That percentage increases to one-half when only the black families headed by women are considered.

In Louisiana, 20 percent of all children are in one-parent households, she said.

Gary Love, president of a group called Concerned Parents on Children’s Rights, urged the panel to push for a joint custody law that would allow divorced parents to share their children equally.

Love, who says he has paid child support for nine years, said some parents refuse to make support payments because they are not allowed to see their children.

“A lot of paying parents, if they aren’t allowed to see their children or are hassled when they go to pick them up, say ‘If I’m not going to get to see my kids, I’m not going to pay,’” Love said.

Most of the members of his organization are women, he said.

Love also urged the commission to consider some type of accountability for child support payments so the paying parent can see that the money is being spent on the children and that some type of penalty be imposed for not allowing visitation.

The commission was congratulated by Hollis Johnston of the Federal Child Support enforcement division, who said Louisiana is the first state to form such a group.