



Monterey County Department of Child Support Services

Collecting court-ordered Child Support payments in a timely fashion is vital for two reasons: First, to benefit the children involved. And second, to reverse the drain on state and local resources that occurs when these payments are collected late, or not at all.

As a 167-person agency responsible for some 22,000 child support cases, these issues are well understood by the Department of Child Support Services of Monterey County, California (MCDCSS). And as part of an ongoing commitment to improve service to taxpayers, recipients, and obligors (non-custodial parents), Director Stephen Kennedy set a challenging goal: Create a Customer Service process that offers obligors more, faster, and easier ways to make their support payments (which average \$487) as they become due.

"Customers have commented with enthusiasm on our acceptance of payment cards."

—Brenda Alcantar
Front Desk Assistant

The Process

Historically, MCDCSS payments have been made by employers when wage attachments have been obtained; by bankruptcy trustees, other child support agencies, and assorted child support enforcement sources; and by the obligors, via cash, money order, and personal or certified check.

Kennedy recognized obligor payments as the most productive area for improvement. It was also the area of greatest difficulty, with the cost of processing checks amplified by the cost of returned checks, which taxpayers ultimately pay.

"Better collections help families and taxpayers. Payment cards make collections easier."

Additionally, since obligors risk court action for late or non-payment, making it easier to pay could benefit obligors as well as recipients.

—Stephen Kennedy
MCDCSS Director

The Implementation

To facilitate the transition, MDCCSS worked closely with MasterCard Worldwide, a merchant bank, and a payment processor, to design a system that enables recurring as well as one-time payments.

The recurring option is ideal, since it requires no further action by the obligor except keeping within their available credit or debit limit, and no further action by MDCCSS except recording payments as received.

The new service was launched in September 2001, publicized with signage in the MDCCSS lobby, billing inserts inviting obligors to use their payment cards, and the MDCCSS Web site www.co.monterey.ca.us/mdccss/, which prominently displays payment card logos.

Since then, MDCCSS has added the ability to process payment card remittances online at their Web site, for which a convenience fee (considerably below the cost of money orders) is assessed. This means that now MDCCSS obligor clients can make credit or debit card payments in person at the agency's offices, by telephone, by mail, by the Internet, or by signing up for recurring payments.

The Results

Although in operation for less than a year at this writing, MDCCSS Director Stephen Kennedy estimates that payment card receipts could approach \$100,000, and that this amount is almost certain to rise in future years, as more card-based payments, and especially more recurring payments, take place.

Most importantly, the new process allows the Department to process payments within two working days, as required by federal law. Meeting this requirement helps the county and the state avoid loss of federal funding.

And by reducing the number of support recipients forced onto welfare, the Department is helping families become self-sufficient, while providing a real savings to the taxpayers.

"We believe with not only payment card acceptance but also a fully integrated Web site that allows the obligor to receive information and make payments online, we and the customer can save ..."

—Karen J. Young
Data Analyst

"We implemented acceptance of payment cards as a direct result of customer requests at our cashier's window. It provides an alternate payment method for our customers and allows us to take advantage of today's technology."

—Karen J. Young
Data Analyst

"I am pleased to have a world-renowned company providing an added convenience to the residents of Monterey County, one that I believe will improve collections and efficiency for the Department of Child Support Services."

—Dave Potter Chairman
Monterey County
Board of Supervisors

The Future

Tomorrow, the Monterey County Department of Child Support Services envisions an even broader range of automated and e-payments. As Stephen Kennedy says, "We believe that the acceptance of credit and debit cards to support a child is another, easier way to pay for this important obligation. By integrating our current Web site to offer easier ways to make electronic payments, we can provide better customer service and help individuals receive timely child support payments."

"Monterey County is proud to be in the forefront of providing enhanced support for children by offering a credit card option to non-custodial parents."

—Sally Reed
County Administrative
Officer

"We're looking forward to implementing a handheld, wireless capability to accept payments right at the courthouse, immediately after judgments enforcing child support orders. This will help obligors avoid fines or incarceration with an on-the-spot payment by credit or debit card."

—Ted Russell
Business Manager