

Child support enforcement workers meeting in G.I.

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Child support enforcement workers are gathering in Grand Island this week to discuss new techniques and technologies for collecting delinquent payments.

The Nebraska Child Support Enforcement Association's annual conference is being held at the Midtown Holiday Inn through Friday, and approximately 189 people have registered.

The association's president, Collen Lembke, who is also the Lincoln County attorney, said county attorneys, Department of Health and Human Services caseworkers, federal workers and members of three Native American tribes are among those gathering to listen to speakers and participate in workshops about child support enforcement.

Though caseworkers have been overloaded with cases for a number of years, the last year has seen an increase in problem cases. There have been more noncustodial parents in court asking a judge to lower their child support payments because they've lost their job, had a salary cut or have had to take lower-paying jobs due to the economic downturn, Lembke said.

Many custodial parents are protesting requests for decreases for many of the same reasons, she said.

Child support is ordered to help pay for the cost of raising a child. It can be put in place during a divorce or a paternity case, Lembke said. Those who don't pay can be held in contempt of court, she said.

The conference's workshops include training on the statewide computer system used to track a payee's employment, ethics, confidentiality, how to work with different people, changes to federal laws and how to handle cases. The information will be beneficial to longtime child support enforcement workers and those who are new to the job, she said.

According to the conference schedule, the workshops will include speakers, panels and roundtable discussions. Several of the sessions are about computer technology, databases and e-filing and how it can help caseworkers.

"Technology has changed so much -- for the better," Lembke said.

There are a lot of things about child support the general public doesn't understand. For example, child support enforcement workers can't help with visitation and/or custody arrangements, and they work for the state, not for the custodial parent, she said.

To get delinquent child support payments, caseworkers can order a person's wages to be garnished, unless that person is self-employed, which can complicate matters. That's where the networking at the conference can come into play. It is a place for workers to get different ideas for going after delinquent payments, such as suspending a person's driver's license, suspending a commercial driver's license or taking away a hunting and/or fishing license, she said.

"That's like cutting off their left arm, for some of these guys," she said. "We have to be creative."