

New child support guidelines consider both parents' income

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

It's hard for most people to say "child support" and smile.
For 18 months, a diverse group of state residents had to deal calmly with the emotional issue. Their goal was to even out Michigan child support awards.

The result: a child support guideline to help judges, friends of the court and attorneys make sure children's needs are met after divorce.
"Divorce is an emotionally charged situation," explained Ulysses Hammond, who directs the Friend of the Court Bureau.
"People need to step back and look at how it affects kids."

THE PROPOSAL sets child support percentages which would be applied statewide.
It also puts forth ideas about how kids in fragmented families should be supported.

One of the most important features is that both parents' income will now be considered when figuring child support. Previously, only the non-custodial parent's income was taken into account.
It also stresses the importance of children's sharing in their parents' level of income.

"In intact families, children share in their parents' level of living," said Brenda Wagenknecht-Ivey, assistant director of the Friend of the Court Bureau.

'Divorce is an emotionally charged situation . . . People need to step back and look at how it affects kids.'

— Ulysses Hammond
Friend of Court director

"As the parents' level of living increases or decreases, the children's level of living increases or decreases too."

REQUIRED BY the 1983 Friend of the Court Act, the guidelines, drawn up a Child Support Guidelines Advisory Committee, will take effect July 1.
Involved in the process were attorneys, Friend of the Court referees, and advocates of mothers' and fathers' rights.

The document will be revised to include suggestions made at seven state forums. The final hearings were last week in Pontiac and Detroit.

"We're putting what we were doing for 18 months under a microscope and asking citizens if the guidelines are comprehensive, fair, equitable," Hammond told 35 people attending the hearing in Oakland County's Commissioners Auditorium.

Oakland County Friend of the Court referee Patrick Cronin, who was on the advisory committee, does not expect the new guidelines to change county practices much.

"We've always based child support on the needs of children and parents ability to pay," he said. "A lot of these things we've already been doing."

IN LOOKING at child support statewide, the Friend of the Court found awards vary greatly. Two hypothetical cases drew child support recommendations from zero to \$70.50 and \$5 to \$44.25 weekly.

Aiming to make awards more uniform, the committee set standard percentages of net income that non-custodial parents should pay for child support.

The percentages apply when both parents make the same amount of money or the custodial parents makes less income than the non-custodial. They go up or down one percent with each \$75 of net weekly income.

Also considered is the value of "productive services" of the custodial parent. While some cases will vary, base support has been set at 21.3 percent of net income for one child; 33.2 percent for two children; 41.5 percent for three children; and 47.7 percent for four or more children.

WHILE SETTING award percentages, the committee also drew up some basic principles to be applied to Michigan child support. They are:

- The guidelines are exactly that — guidelines. Individual cases may be considered on their own merits.
- Children have the right to share in the natural parents' level of living.
- Both parents are financially responsible for the children.
- The guideline considers pre-existing support orders as well as split, alternating and joint custody.

WHILE REALIZING break-ups hurt families financially, the committee stressed that children should be protected as much as possible.
Instead of using minimal state Department of Social Service figures when establishing child-raising costs, they chose instead to go with higher Department of Agriculture statistics.

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