

Local News

Commission calls for audit of OC's child-support enforcement agency

By Robert E. Kroll
The Register

The Orange County Human Relations Commission is calling on the county Board of Supervisors to order a special audit of the District Attorney's Family Support Division.

The commission acted Thursday night on a proposal by its executive director, Rusty Kennedy.

The Family Support Division was the subject of recent articles in The Register in which the division's approach to child-support enforcement was criticized by some as being harsh. The division has been under scrutiny by the commission for the past year and a half, according to commission chairman Jean Forbath.

The commission voted 6-1 for the audit. Commissioner Pat Krone opposed it, after saying that the information presented was "one-sided," lacking the district attorney's position.

As approved, the audit would:

- Evaluate the cost effectiveness of the child-support enforcement program, including the probation, jail, court and prosecution costs.

- Determine if the program discriminates against low-income and minority parents.

- Compare Orange County's approach to enforcement with that of other California counties that show better results through less punitive methods.

- Determine the number of parents serving terms in the Orange County Jail for non-support.

- Determine if the overcrowding in the jail could be relieved if alternatives to jailing parents for non-support were used.

The action was taken after a presentation by Bob Harper, 42, a Tustin maintenance man on probation for non-support. He told the commission "I am a criminal. My crime was breaking my ankle."

Harper said he was paying child support until his ankle injury, but his family went on welfare while he recuperated. A \$4,000 welfare debt mounted and he was told by the District Attorney's Office he had the choice of "going on probation or going to jail that day." He chose probation, but claims he is now locked into a low-paying job because his probation officer's inquiries make him unattractive to prospective employers.

Members of the commission were given copies of news articles discussing criticisms of the county's child-support enforcement program, published Nov. 19 in The Register. No representative of the District Attorney's Office was present at the meeting.

The articles, based on a three-month investigation of the program and the Family Support Division, revealed the agency has taken a more punitive approach to child-support enforcement than any other support-enforcement agency in California, without significantly better results.

The Orange County program seeks criminal prosecution as its primary means of enforcing child-support orders and recouping welfare paid to one-parent families. Most counties use the criminal courts only sparingly, state reports show. More than one-fourth of all criminal prosecutions for non-support in the state were initiated in Orange County in 1983.

Most other California counties

collect child-support primarily through wage garnishments, property liens and income-tax refund interception.

Deputy District Attorney Bruce Patterson, chief of the division, contends the methods are effective. He was unavailable for comment Thursday night on the commission's action.

The federal government reimburses the county for 70 percent of its operating costs for support enforcement. Additional sums are paid to the county by state and federal government as incentives for money collected.

State Department of Social Services statistical reports show Orange County collected \$17.7 million in support for 36,234 families during fiscal 1982, the last year for which comparative statistics are available. That year, the county spent \$6.3 million on the program, not counting the extra cost of prosecuting 1,411 people in criminal court.

During the same period, the San Bernardino County support-enforcement program collected \$17.9 million for 33,696 families, and spent \$4.5 million in operating costs. Only 43 people were prosecuted for criminal non-support.

Alameda County prosecuted no one in fiscal 1982 for non-support, yet it collected \$14.7 million for 41,440 families at a cost of \$5.7 million.

The commission is an 11-member advisory body to the Board of Supervisors. It handles issues of racial, ethnic or sexual discrimination, police-community relations, and other matters relating to tensions between community groups, Forbath said.