

Job cuts hit child support

Collections fell 3% last year

By **ROBERT K. GORDON**
News staff writer

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Then the economy hit bottom and Wilkerson lost his job at Asplundh Tree Expert Co., a job he had held for five years. Unemployed for more than a year, he soon found himself unable to make

child support payments and got about \$6,000 behind.

"I couldn't find a job," said Wilkerson, of Fairfield. "It was real frustrating. . . . I lost a lot of weight because of depression."

Wilkerson's experience isn't novel and illustrates how the recession is affecting child support collections in Alabama and across the country.

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NEWS STAFF/BEVERLY TAYLOR

Kenneth Wilkerson of Fairfield was out of work for more than a year, but he has a job now and is trying to catch up on his child support.

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The state collected \$267 million in child support payments in fiscal 2009, down 3 percent from 2008, according to the most recent statistics from the Department of Human Resources. Collections were down 4 percent in Jefferson County over the same period, statistics show.

What's increasing is the amount of child support being collected from unemployment checks as unemployment in Alabama stands at 11 percent.

In December, for example, DHR collected \$376,000 from unemployment checks statewide. That is a 77 percent increase from December 2008 and a 93 percent increase from December 2007.

"We do closely monitor the amount of child support from unemployment checks and those numbers are increasing tremendously," said Faye Nelson, division director for DHR's child support enforcement office.

The state collected \$69.9 million in child support through DHR's first quarter, nominally behind where collections were at the same point last year. Fluctuations in child support collections are not unusual, Nelson

said, but the recent reduction is attributed to the economy.

Child 'impacted most'

Collections had been holding steady or increasing because of increased enforcement efforts. There is the concern that if the economy doesn't start to recover, they'll continue dropping, Nelson said.

To help stem lagging collections, Nelson said DHR has geared up for income tax season, when the agency intercepts tax refund checks to collect child support.

"It's tough on everybody, and the child is impacted the most," Nelson said. "Their needs don't change."

That is an assessment Delane Johnson agrees with.

Her child's father lost his job at the Birmingham Housing Authority.

"It's been hard," Johnson said while waiting to see a Family Court judge in Bessemer. "The child lives with the mother and everything falls on us. You can't tell a child no, and things are expensive."

Johnson said her son is 16, adding that his needs increase as he gets older. Johnson, who works as a customer service representative, said she has amassed \$10,000 in credit card debt to make up for the missing child support money.

"Who has a Walmart credit card with a \$6,000 balance?" she said.

The slow economy also has led to an increase in requests to modify child support orders, said John Halcomb, a trial referee in Jefferson County Family Court in Bessemer. A modification is requested when the parent paying child support feels he or she can no longer pay the amount ordered by a judge.

Halcomb said the amount of modification requests he's heard has doubled in about a year's time as those ordered to pay child support lost their jobs.

When fathers get behind on child support, Halcomb said that, instead of throwing them in jail, he refers them to a 13-week program in which participants can obtain new job skills. But the economy has hampered efforts to transition the men into other jobs.

"We're having a hard time placing these folks," Halcomb said. "There aren't that many jobs available."

Ron Burt, project director of the UAB TASC program's Birmingham/Bessemer Father Initiative, said that when the program began in 2006, 12 to 15 people would enroll monthly. That number is now 20 to 25.

Initially he could find an out-of-work father a job in about 30 days. It may now take 90 to 120 days. Burt said he partners with an agency that pairs the men with jobs that may start out as temporary but eventually may lead to permanent employment.

"The economy has affected what we do," Burt said. "A lot of men are out of work."

Problems nationwide

A good-faith effort to pay support will keep you out of jail, said Circuit Judge Brian Huff, who presides over Family Court.

"If the person is making some sort of attempt to pay - he may not be able to pay the full amount - I think that goes a long way," Huff said.

Nationally, the 2008 fiscal year ended with more than \$31 billion in uncollected child support, according to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement. That's an increase from \$30 billion the previous year.

"I believe this is something all the states are dealing with to differing magnitudes," said Kim Bridges, president-elect of the National Child Support Enforcement Association. "We just had a national conference and all the states that were there said something about the fact that collections are dropping."

Bridges also is executive director of the Ohio Child Support Directors Association. She said the amount of child support collected in that state from unemployment checks increased 300 percent over the past two years.

The bad economy is not only hurting collections, it's also hurting the earning power of those ordered to pay child support when they do find another job. They don't make as much money as they once did.

"In Ohio, the manufacturing plant jobs have gone away and they haven't been replaced," Bridges said. "Even if unemployment drops, the good-paying jobs aren't there."

It's much the same in Alabama, Halcomb said. "I've had a computer tech now working in a steel mill. Real estate agents are really having a hard time. They're trying to get into truck driving," he said.

Wilkerson said the fatherhood initiative worked for him. He is working fulltime again as a press operator at New Process Steel. He had to learn a new skill set and start from scratch, but it's worked.

"The program saved my life," he said. "I was basically on the edge. It feels pretty good to have a fulltime job again."

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