

# Report To The Mississippi Legislature



## **An Evaluation of the Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information Systems**

**April 15, 1997**

An adequate accountability information system helps managers improve a program's efficiency and effectiveness and helps policymakers identify shortcomings that should be corrected through policy changes. PEER found that the Department of Human Services' (DHS's) system for collecting and reporting information on child support enforcement was adequate to marginal in eight of the nine areas examined during the period of the review (primarily FY 1996).

Based on criteria PEER developed, DHS earned passing or marginal ratings for the Child Support Enforcement Division's collecting and reporting of information in four areas of program output (e.g., establishing paternity). DHS also earned passing or marginal ratings for collecting and reporting two types of program outcome information, including amounts of child support collected and distributed by the division, as well as on two of three elements of program efficiency. DHS earned a failing grade on information it provided in the area of timeliness of case processing. The division did not routinely compile and report information that would have helped managers and policymakers identify timeliness problems in specific phases of the enforcement process. DHS should improve its collection, reporting, and monitoring of accountability information in the areas in which the Child Support Enforcement Division earned marginal or failing ratings.

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Child Support Enforcement Division's  
Accountability Information Systems**

**April 15, 1997**

**The PEER Committee  
Mississippi Legislature**

The Mississippi Legislature

**Joint Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review**

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April 15, 1997

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At its meeting of April 15, 1997, the PEER Committee authorized release of the report entitled **An Evaluation of the Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information Systems.**

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Billy Bowles", written over a horizontal line.

Representative Billy Bowles, Chairman

**This report does not recommend increased  
funding or additional staff.**

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# An Evaluation of the Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information Systems

April 15, 1997

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Accountability information describes a program's functions, effects, and efficiency. This report describes what data is, and is not, available to legislators and agency and program managers concerning the state's child support enforcement program.

The review sought to determine the adequacy of the accountability information maintained by the Department of Human Services relative to the child support enforcement program—whether the program produces the data necessary to make informed policy decisions. Primarily, the review concentrates on the department's accountability information for FY 1996, but does not speculate about information needs that could be brought about by implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (i.e., the 1996 federal welfare reform act). The review's purpose was not to assess the agency's effectiveness or efficiency.

### Overview

Accurate, appropriate information is critical for making decisions about a program's needs, resources, or accomplishments. In this report, PEER documents the adequacy of the information relative to policymakers' concerns so that program managers can correct data deficiencies. This report also presents examples of program data that can be solicited from the program.

In making its determination, PEER divided information needs into the following groups:

- *program outputs*, which address the agency's ability to provide reliable data about the program's goal-oriented accomplishments, historical trends, resource allocations, and program obstacles;

- *program outcomes*, which refer to data that demonstrate the program's impact on its stakeholders; and,
- *program efficiency measures*, which give information about the financial and processing aspects of the child support enforcement program.

Overall, DHS can provide the minimum accountability information needed to answer policymakers' (i.e., legislators and program managers) concerns. However, PEER found some accountability informational areas the agency should improve. (See Exhibit A-1, page viii, for a table summarizing PEER's evaluation of the Child Support Enforcement Division's accountability information system.)

Regarding program outputs, DHS captures most of the information needed; however, the department does not capture or monitor some data (e.g., case priorities). The department does not use a case classification scheme to prioritize its caseload (more than 278,000 cases in FY 1997). Policymakers need this type of information in readily accessible form to determine the number and types of child support cases pending and to make decisions about directing program resources where they are most needed.

Regarding program outcomes, DHS monitors some program outcome data, but the department does not maintain all of the information in a readily accessible format. The department also does not collect or monitor timeliness statistics. Policymakers need this type of information to determine the effect that the program has on its clients and the state's resources (capital, labor, and equipment).

Regarding program efficiency data, DHS captures some program efficiency data, but the department does not capture or monitor some processing statistics (e.g., average number of days to process a case to collection). Policymakers could use this information in determining how well the Child Support Enforcement Division manages its resources in accomplishing the program's intended purpose.

**Exhibit A-1**

**Overview of PEER'S Evaluation of DHS Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information System**

<b>Types of Accountability Information Needed</b>	<b>System's Adequacy in Collecting and Reporting</b>
<b><i>Program Outputs</i></b>	
Goal attainment	<i>Marginal</i>
Historical comparisons and trends	<i>Pass</i>
Resource allocation	<i>Marginal</i>
Program obstacles	<i>Pass</i>
<b><i>Program Outcome</i></b>	
Client service	<i>Marginal</i>
State's interests	<i>Pass</i>
<b><i>Program Efficiency</i></b>	
Financial efficiency	<i>Marginal</i>
Timeliness of case processing	<i>Fail</i>
Data integrity and security	<i>Pass</i>

Key:	
Pass	DHS provided an adequate level of information about the program's aspects to make an informed decision. <i>Example: The Child Support Enforcement Division could provide statistics regarding the division's ability to collect child support, one element required to pass the goal attainment criterion.</i>
Marginal	DHS provided some information about the program, but not enough to make a complete determination. <i>Example: The Child Support Enforcement Division could provide some data about processing statistics, but could not provide case universe data.</i>
Fail	DHS provided little or no data about the program's attributes. <i>Example: The Child Support Enforcement Division could provide no information about the lack of established case priorities.</i>

**SOURCE:** PEER analysis.

## Recommendations

Accountability information deficiencies of the Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division could be corrected with little change and cost to the department. Many of these deficiencies could be corrected with some programming changes to the division's electronic database system.

1. The Department of Human Services should monitor goal attainment statistics (i.e., number of cases pending action and number of cases processed by major phase) through its electronic database system in order to monitor program advancement as well as program problems.
2. Using existing resources, the Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division should study, document, and implement a classification system to prioritize the state's child support caseload for use in directing resources where they are most needed.
3. The Department of Human Services should modify its child support database to monitor case aging statistics (e.g., average time for a case to receive support, average time cases are in a particular work phase) for use in identifying case management problems.
4. The Department of Human Services should require any child support contractor to report processing data similar to that maintained by the department (e.g., caseload ratios) to ensure uniform quality of services.
5. The Department of Human Services should track and monitor the timeliness of child support case processing. Timeliness reports should also include information on the average time elapsing between phases as well as the number of cases in each of several categories (e.g., the number of cases for which paternity establishment took thirty, sixty, ninety, or more than ninety days).

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# **An Evaluation of the Department of Human Services, Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information Systems**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

Accountability information describes a program's functions, effects, and efficiency. This report describes what data is, and is not, available to legislators and agency and program managers concerning the state's child support enforcement program.

A recent topic of debate among legislators has been the privatization of the child support enforcement program. In order to make informed decisions regarding the continuation or expansion of this or any other privatization effort, legislators must have reliable information about the program's goals, activities, and accomplishments, as well as data regarding the performance of the contractor. Accountability information is also valuable in making other types of decisions regarding a program's resource needs or the adequacy of its accomplishments.

### **Authority**

In accordance with MISS. CODE ANN. §5-3-51 et seq. (1972), the PEER Committee reviewed the accountability information systems of the Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division.

### **Scope and Purpose**

The review sought to determine the adequacy of the accountability information maintained by the Department of Human Services relative to the child support enforcement program--whether the program produces the data necessary to make informed policy decisions. Primarily, the review concentrates on the department's accountability information for FY 1996, but does not speculate about information needs that could be brought about by implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (i.e., the 1996 federal welfare reform act).

The review's purpose was not to assess the agency's effectiveness or efficiency, although in cases where the information was valid and reliable, the report includes information on the division's performance. For example, the review did not determine whether the program meets its goals nor did it compare the merits of service provision by the public and private sectors. Instead, this review concentrated on determining whether the information to answer policymakers' needs is available and adequate.

## **Method**

To determine the components of a system that would provide the minimum level of accountability information that legislators and program managers need, PEER developed a series of questions that policymakers might ask to determine whether the child support enforcement program is efficient and effective. This series of questions also might be used by program managers to identify problem areas in which policy changes might be necessary. These policy questions are:

- What major tasks has the division performed and how do these levels of program output compare to output in prior periods (e.g., previous months, quarters, years)?
- What are the effects of the program's outcomes on stakeholders (i.e., clients and policymakers)? and,
- How efficient is the child support enforcement program?

Prior to conducting fieldwork, PEER asked child support enforcement managers to review these policy questions and the specified information elements and to tell PEER whether they agreed that this information would help answer these policy questions. After reaching agreement with the Department of Human Services (DHS) on the necessary data elements, PEER reviewed DHS records, electronic files, budget requests and appropriations bills, certification manuals, requests for proposals, and other work papers to determine the adequacy of the program's accountability information.

Additionally, in conducting this review, PEER:

- reviewed state and federal statutes and regulations governing the operation and management of child support enforcement programs;
- interviewed staff of Mississippi Department of Human Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and other states' child support enforcement programs;
- reviewed audits and evaluations of child support enforcement programs in other states; and,
- reviewed federal and state audit reports of Mississippi's child support enforcement program.

## Overview

Accurate, appropriate information is critical for making decisions about a program's needs, resources, or accomplishments. In this report, PEER documents the adequacy of the information relative to policymakers' concerns so that program managers can correct data deficiencies. This report also presents examples of program data that can be solicited from the program.

In making its determination, PEER divided information needs into the following groups:

- *program outputs*, which address the agency's ability to provide reliable data about the program's goal-oriented accomplishments, historical trends, resource allocations, and program obstacles;
- *program outcomes*, which refer to data that demonstrate the program's impact on its stakeholders; and,
- *program efficiency measures*, which give information about the financial and processing aspects of the child support enforcement program.

Overall, DHS can provide the minimum accountability information needed to answer policymakers' (i.e., legislators and program managers) concerns. However, PEER found some accountability informational areas the agency should improve.

Regarding program outputs, DHS captures most of the information needed; however, the department does not capture or monitor some data (e.g., case priorities). The department does not use a case classification scheme to prioritize its caseload (more than 278,000 cases in FY 1997). Policymakers need this type of information in readily accessible form to determine the number and types of child support cases pending and to make decisions about directing program resources where they are most needed.

Regarding program outcomes, DHS monitors some program outcome data, but the department does not maintain all of the information in a readily accessible format. The department also does not collect or monitor timeliness statistics. Policymakers need this type of information to determine the effect that the program has on its clients and the state's resources (capital, labor, and equipment).

Regarding program efficiency data, DHS captures some program efficiency data, but the department does not capture or monitor some processing statistics (e.g., average number of days to process a case to collection). Policymakers could use this information in determining how

well the Child Support Enforcement Division manages its resources in accomplishing the program's intended purpose.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Legal Authority for a Child Support Enforcement Program**

Congress established the federal child support enforcement program in 1975 with an amendment of the Social Security Act entitled, "Child Support Program: Child Support and Establishment of Paternity" (TITLE IV-D; 42 USC 651). The program's mission is to help reduce or avoid the cost of public assistance programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), through state enforcement and recovery of support obligations owed by parents. Federal regulations require states to retain portions of support collected for public assistance recipients to offset assistance payments made to these families, and reserve the first fifty dollars of each support payment for direct transfer to the custodial parent.

In 1984, federal legislation amended the TITLE IV-D program to require states to assist non-public assistance families in the recovery of support and alimony. In alimony cases, the recipient must have a support case active with the state to be eligible for state assistance. Non-public assistance cases differ in that the state does not seek to recover public assistance, since no expenses were incurred, and that a custodial parent must file an application and pay a one-time twenty-five-dollar administrative fee.

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 43-19-31 (1972) provides that the Department of Human Services establish a Child Support Unit with the authority to:

- develop and implement a support order enforcement and paternity establishment program;
- initiate support and paternity actions;
- seek medical coverage, in addition to financial support;
- enter into contracts for the purpose of performing any tests;
- institute court proceedings to secure and enforce support and alimony orders;
- cooperate with other states in establishing paternity, locating parents, and securing compliance with court orders;
- secure and collect support and alimony;
- recover funds expended for public assistance in support of a child;

- recover court, attorney, and administrative fees; and,
- collect tax refunds or rebates to offset arrears.

MISS. CODE ANN. §43-19-45 (1972) authorizes the division to collect information from any government agency that may have information regarding a non-supportive or alleged parent. This section also extends the division's access to any private employment files.

### **Functions of the DHS Child Support Enforcement Division**

The mission, goals, and objectives of a program are essential to determining the informational needs of both managers and policymakers. The mission of the Child Support Enforcement Division within the Mississippi Department of Human Services is:

*To collect and distribute support payments to families with children who should receive the financial assistance of an absent parent and who qualify for IV-D child support services.*

The division further defines the objectives of the child support enforcement program:

*To ensure that all children are supported by both parents, through enforcement of support orders, location of absent parents, establishment of paternity, and collection and distribution of support payments to families.*

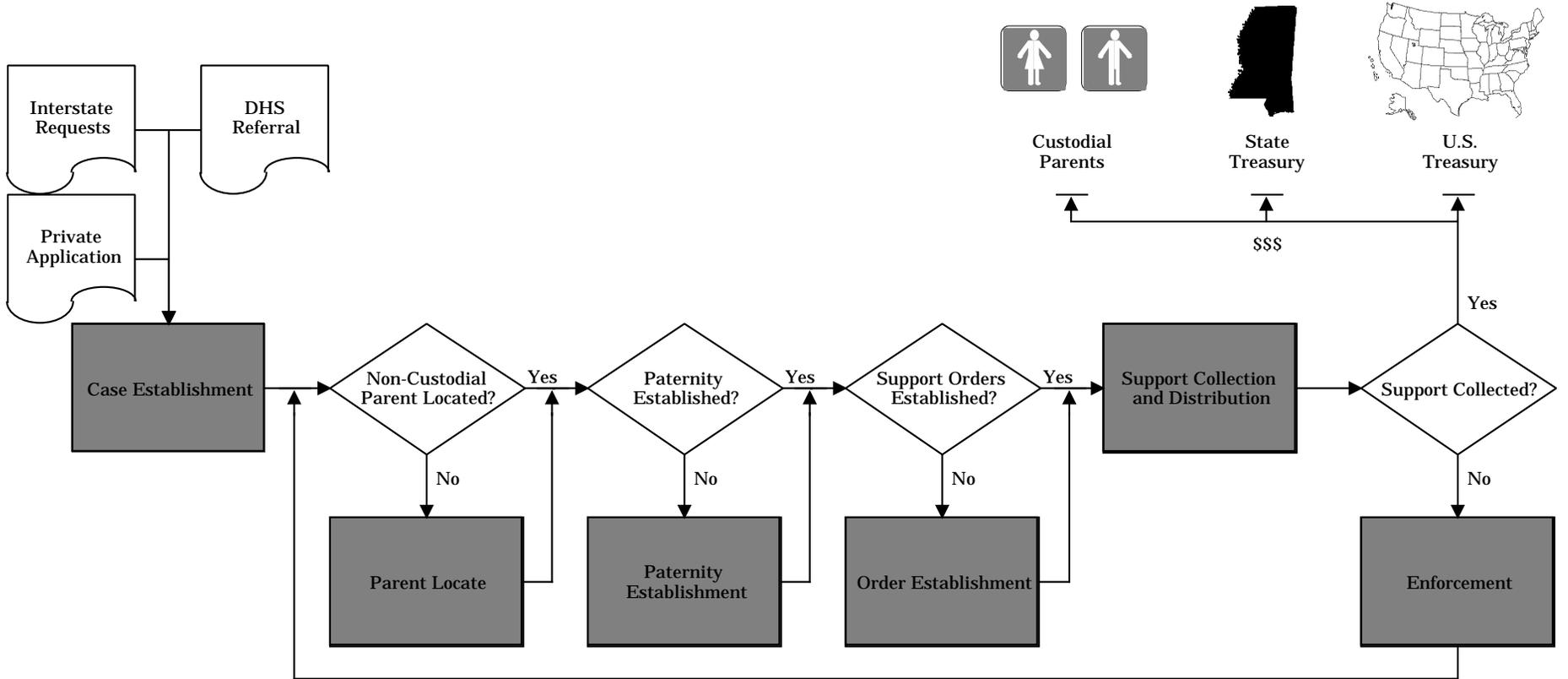
The Child Support Enforcement Division assists participating families through five major activities: locating absent parents, establishing paternity, establishing support court orders, collecting and distributing payments, and enforcing orders (see Exhibit 1, page 7). Currently, the division manages over 278,000 cases (including arrears) involving over 366,000 children, encompassing both public assistance and non-assistance cases.

In the event that the non-custodial parent is unidentified or unavailable, the division must locate the parent, or alleged parent, to serve notice to establish a child support order. This step is critical to the child support process, as the alleged parent must be given opportunity to refute any such order and the non-custodial parent must be found in order to collect support payments.

After the non-custodial or alleged parent has been located, if a male parent should deny paternity, the division must seek scientific, medical confirmation that the alleged is the parent of the child through paternity tests. The division uses private contractors to administer and determine all paternity tests. If the tests prove to be negative, the division excuses the

# Exhibit 1

## Child Support Enforcement Decision Flow



*The shaded boxes represent subsystems (processes) of the child support enforcement process. The Child Support Enforcement Division must complete each process before the next can begin. For example, the division must locate the non-custodial parent before establishing paternity.*

**SOURCE:** PEER analysis.

alleged parent. However, upon positive confirmation of paternity tests, the Child Support Enforcement Division proceeds to obtain a child support order. In cases where the non-custodial, non-supportive parent is the child's mother, the division uses hospital records and the child's birth certificate to establish maternity.

Under the provisions of TITLE IV-D, the Child Support Enforcement Division must seek to obtain financial and medical support from a non-custodial parent. Support order establishment is key to the eventual collection and distribution of child support, as it provides a legal order that compels the non-custodial parent to provide financial support and medical coverage for one's child or children.

The division is responsible for all collections and distributions of support. DHS's receipt of all payments acts as a check and balance for the system, as a county office tracks support payments to monitor the compliance of the non-custodial parent with the support order. Additionally, DHS also accounts for arrears (delinquent payments) of all support cases. Should a non-custodial parent stop payment, regardless of reason, the division seeks to enforce the order. Under federal regulations, the division may seek recovery for delinquent payments from the non-custodial parent through:

- notification to the non-custodial parent;
- referral to a collection agency (although DHS has not implemented policy to refer support arrears to a collection agency);
- revocation of state licenses (e.g., driver's, professional, hunting);
- interception of state and federal tax refunds;
- income withholding assignment of wages (i.e., employer withholding);
- notification to credit bureaus;
- initiation of contempt of court proceedings; and,
- acquisition of a contempt citation which may result in liens, judgments, and jail time.

### **Program Objectives**

Mississippi's Child Support Enforcement Division, federal agencies, and other state governments are working toward the same program goals in child support enforcement. As noted above, the mission of the program is "to ensure that all children are supported by both parents. . . ." (see page

6). In this endeavor, the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services has implemented a strategic plan for the five-year period from FY 1995 to FY 1999 which requires active pursuit of three major goals.

First, the program seeks to establish paternities in all of its cases. Specifically, the plan refers to increasing the establishment of paternities, especially those within one year of birth. Toward this goal, the federal government offers enhanced funding for all paternity testing (90% federal; 10% state).

Secondly, the program seeks to ensure that all children in child support cases have adequate financial and medical support orders. Federal regulations require that states seek both financial and medical support for all cases. Each state is responsible for increasing the percentage of cases with financial support and cases with medical support.

The plan also attempts to obtain financial and medical support from both parents for all children. As identified in the plan, states have four objectives to meet the last goal:

- increase the collection rate;
- increase the percentage of cases where health insurance coverage is obtained after being ordered;
- increase the percentage of cases with appropriate and current support orders; and,
- make the process more efficient and responsive.

Additionally, DHS has identified annual goals for the division's performance. For example, the division has sought to increase not only the amount of collections annually, but also the numbers of absent parents located, obligations established, and paternities established by at least five percent for FY 1996. These performance goals increase to a minimum eight percent increase for FY 1997.

## **EVALUATION**

Each goal and program activity is critical to measuring and determining the Child Support Enforcement Division's performance. The following discussion describes the criteria PEER compiled to measure the division's accountability information system.

### **Method for Determining Criteria**

To determine the adequacy of the Child Support Enforcement Division's accountability information systems, PEER developed policy questions that would be useful to a policymaker in concluding whether the program is advancing towards its goals. These questions centered around three main ideas: outputs, outcomes, and efficiency.

*Program outputs* are measurable results of the program's activities in advancing toward the program's objectives. For example, a child support program output is the number of paternities established for a fiscal year. A *program outcome* differs from an output in that it is a measure of the impact of the program's output on the client or stakeholder. For example, the average amount of support distributed to custodial parents as a direct result of the program's efforts is an outcome measure. *Program efficiency* refers to maximization of resources (capital, labor, or equipment) within a program. An example of program efficiency may include measures of how quickly a case may be processed.

PEER queried DHS to determine the rationality of each criterion and DHS agreed that these questions and data requests would be a reasonable set of information required to make informed management and policy decisions relative to the program. Exhibit 2, page 11, lists PEER's criteria and provides an overview of findings regarding the division's information system.

## Exhibit 2

### Overview of PEER'S Evaluation of DHS Child Support Enforcement Division's Accountability Information System

Types of Accountability Information Needed	System's Adequacy in Collecting and Reporting
<b><i>Program Outputs</i></b>	
Goal attainment	<i>Marginal</i>
Historical comparisons and trends	<i>Pass</i>
Resource allocation	<i>Marginal</i>
Program obstacles	<i>Pass</i>
<b><i>Program Outcome</i></b>	
Client service	<i>Marginal</i>
State's interests	<i>Pass</i>
<b><i>Program Efficiency</i></b>	
Financial efficiency	<i>Marginal</i>
Timeliness of case processing	<i>Fail</i>
Data integrity and security	<i>Pass</i>

Key:	
Pass	DHS provided an adequate level of information about the program's aspects to make an informed decision. <i>Example: The Child Support Enforcement Division could provide statistics regarding the division's ability to collect child support, one element required to pass the goal attainment criterion.</i>
Marginal	DHS provided some information about the program, but not enough to make a complete determination. <i>Example: The Child Support Enforcement Division could provide some data about processing statistics, but could not provide case universe data.</i>
Fail	DHS provided little or no data about the program's attributes. <i>Example: The Child Support Enforcement Division could provide no information about the lack of established case priorities.</i>

**SOURCE:** PEER analysis.

### Accountability Information Analysis

In conducting this review, PEER sought to determine whether the Department of Human Services' information systems provide minimum

accountability information to meet policymakers' needs. Overall, the department can provide the minimum accountability information needed to answer policymakers' (i.e., legislators' and program managers') concerns. However, PEER found some accountability information areas that should be improved. For example, the department does not monitor the timeliness statistics of case processing to determine if clients' needs are being served efficiently.

PEER summarized the information requirements and the adequacy of DHS's responses in the area of program outputs, program outcomes, and program efficiency. For each section of the discussion, the segment of Exhibit 2 that applies precedes the discussion.

### *Program Outputs*

When evaluating a program, policymakers should have data available to help determine the program's accomplishments. PEER asked, "Does DHS have an information system that can produce a minimum level of data relative to the program's essential child support enforcement tasks?" Policymakers are concerned about a program's success in performing its major functions and its ability to improve consistently; therefore, this question encompasses data analysis relative to historical performance of the division, resource allocation, goal attainment, and program obstacles.

- *The quality and availability of the Child Support Enforcement Division's goal attainment data is marginal.*

One major concern of a policymaker is whether the program accomplishes what it was intended to do by meeting its goal through its activities. PEER divided the goal attainment criterion into three categories: processing statistics, pending case data, and phase processing data.

#### **Goal Attainment Data**

*Rating: Marginal*

Categories:            Processing statistics  
                             Cases pending action  
                             Cases processed, by phase

DHS staff supplied processing statistics that showed the division's performance met or exceeded many of the objectives reported to the Legislature. For example, the division located more parents and established more paternities in FY 1996 than in FY 1995. Additionally, the division set the objective of increasing paternities established in FY 1996 by five percent. The division met the objective with an increase of forty-eight percent.

The division has data regarding pending cases. In June 1996, the division had not located 88,127 non-supportive parents. Additionally, in June 1996, the division was working 35,842 cases for paternity establishment. Such data is essential to determining the phase(s) in which cases are accumulating (i.e., the phases at which cases are not moving smoothly through the system). Without this data, the division cannot adequately plan alternative actions to account for program obstacles.

The division captures information regarding cases processed by phase. For example, the division reported the number of cases with paternities established and the number of cases requiring paternity to be established. However, the division's staff do not use this information to develop or assess the division's accomplishment of its goals and objectives.

- *DHS can provide some accountability information with which to track the child support enforcement program's performance since Fiscal Year 1993.*

Another concern of policymakers is whether a program has a pattern over time of continually advancing towards its goals. This criterion examines the accountability information of the child support enforcement program's major activities (e.g., locating parents, establishing paternity; see Exhibit 3, page 14) and its quarterly availability.

In terms of major activity data, DHS can report at least the minimum level of information needed for determining whether the program is accomplishing its purpose and to permit historical performance comparisons and trend analysis, with one exception--case universe data.

***Historical Comparisons and Trends Data***

***Rating: Pass***

Categories: Cases initiated and closed  
Parents located  
Paternities established  
Obligations established  
Cases receiving support  
Case universe data

DHS creates a case file for each child support referral and application. The division monitors case processing and closure statistics for timeliness under federal guidelines. Federal guidelines require DHS to initiate the support case within three working days of receiving the application or a referral. According to DHS, the division initiates ninety percent of its new cases within three working days. The division also reports the number of cases, by reason, that are closed annually (see related discussion, page 18).

Exhibit 3 gives information for four successive fiscal years with which to compare the Child Support Enforcement Division's collections, paternities and obligations established, and parent locations, important indicators of the division's performance. DHS reports many of these performance indicators directly to the Legislature in the division's budget request and through the department's oversight committee.

### Exhibit 3

#### Child Support Enforcement Division, Reported Performance Indicators, FY93-FY96

Performance Indicators	FY93	FY94	FY95	FY96
Collections Distributed	\$50,684,651	\$59,566,703	\$61,987,529	\$98,838,387
Paternities Established	7,503	9,843	10,844	16,116
Obligations Established	7,919	9,477	9,846	16,030
Absent Parents Located	27,244	34,974	50,513	124,160
Court Orders Enforced/Modified	<i>not reported</i>	12,085	9,425	12,766

SOURCE: PEER analysis of DHS information.

Policymakers are also interested in the annual processing efficiency of the child support program. For example, DHS monitored the number of paternities established in FY 1996 (16,116); however, DHS staff reported the number of cases requiring paternity establishment (123,917) because the data was not readily available on METSS, the division's electronic database. Therefore, a policymaker could conclude that DHS established 13.01 percent of the paternities needed during FY 1996.

The division tracks case universe data by major activity through its electronic database system. For example, in June 1996, the division had obtained support orders in 115,311 of 244,595 active cases. During 1995, DHS installed the division's electronic database system but did not build historical information for each file, **as the department's needs for the system do not require the reconstruction of case files. METSS is intended to as a management tool to track and monitor the department's current caseload.** Information regarding case universe data prior to FY 1996 must be estimated by the division's staff. The Child Support Enforcement Division's need for depending on estimates should diminish as the division enters new cases and resolves older cases.

- *DHS does not have adequate accountability information from which a policymaker can determine whether program resources are allocated in the most efficient manner.*

This criterion requires the division to provide information used to determine the need to shift or request more resources and to ensure that they are used wisely.

**Resource Allocation Data**

**Rating: Marginal**

Categories:           Workload, by level of priority  
                               Workload, by geographic area  
                               Staffing, by geographic area

The division manages more than 278,000 support cases; however, the division has not implemented a case classification schedule to prioritize the workload. The Child Support Enforcement Division handles its cases on a first-come, first-served basis without regard to need, but federal regulations permit the division to implement a priority classification system. One method that the division could implement is a triage method in which the division would rank cases based on various factors (e.g., urgency of children’s financial needs, adequate and accurate information). Division staff reported that the division has field tested such a classification system with mixed results; however, DHS maintained no documentation of the field test. A classification schedule for support cases could further assist the division in allocating resources more efficiently by directing the division’s efforts to cases of greater need.

DHS monitors caseload data by county to determine staffing allocations. DHS reported that for a child support enforcement officer the caseload averages 995 statewide; furthermore, in some counties, DHS reported that this ratio is as high as 1,200:1. In the latter situation, DHS program managers noted that they are attempting to relocate personnel and positions to the areas of greatest need by using time-limited positions, which provide a greater degree of freedom to agency management than do state service positions.

The Child Support Enforcement Division maintains staffing and caseload information by county or region. The division’s staff provided manual calculations of staffing ratios at the county level. This information is needed to determine resource allocation priorities as well as the need for alternative programs to address factors that may contribute to higher caseloads.

- *DHS has adequate accountability information with which to determine whether program obstacles exist and if so, how the program's operations would be affected.*

This sub-criterion refers to extraneous activities or limitations that could have a negative effect upon the program's success. DHS should be able to identify and report on measures associated with potential problem areas. PEER asked DHS staff to identify any obstacles to the child support enforcement program, citing interstate enforcement or location requests as an example. Information regarding the volume of interstate requests provides detail about the obligations that other states place on the division. Other states may request DHS to enforce a support case when the non-custodial parent resides in Mississippi. Additionally, other states may need location information regarding a non-custodial or alleged parent. DHS may also make these requests of other states and is required to reciprocate under the Uniform Reciprocal Enforcement of Support Act (see MISS. CODE ANN. Section 43-19-31 [k] [1972]).

***Program Obstacles Data***

*Rating: Pass*

Category: Interstate requests

Between January and June 1996, the division processed 1,502 requests for interstate support cases. Additionally, DHS also received 2,572 location requests from other states. DHS staff noted that these requests currently are not a limiting factor in the processing of cases. During the same period, the Child Support Enforcement Division estimated that it made 3,465 interstate and location requests to other states. Interstate request data are useful in determining internal resource allocations needed. PEER did not determine whether this data is a drain of program resources, since the objective was to determine whether the data was available.

DHS did not identify any other obstacles that could impede the program's performance. This is not to say that the department does not have obstacles to implementation (e.g., locating nonsupportive parents); however, this criterion relates to any obstacles that may be beyond the control or influence of the department.

*Program Outcomes*

PEER asked "Does DHS have an information system capable of producing data regarding the effect of the program on stakeholders?" This question deals with two basic functions of the division--client service and the state's interest in the program.

- *DHS has marginal accountability information from which to determine the program's performance in serving its clients.*

Data regarding the amount of support collected and distributed and timeliness of processing cases are useful in determining the net impact of the child support enforcement program on its clients.

***Client Service Data***

*Rating: Marginal*

Categories:           Support collected  
                               Support distributed  
                               Support arrears  
                               Timeliness statistics

The Child Support Enforcement Division captures both support collection and distribution data. For example, in June 1996, the division distributed an average of \$14.60 to each public assistance family referred with an obligation established, whereas the division distributed an average of \$82.83 to each non-public-assistance family with an obligation established. For June 1996, the state recovered an average of \$108.97 per public assistance family for the reimbursement of assistance. Accurate data of this type provides insight to legislators and program managers regarding the division's priorities and client service.

The division monitors the amount of unpaid, overdue child support by case and statewide. The division's purpose in doing so is to maintain a valid record for eventual collection of the debt. DHS has monitored this data since the program's inception in 1974.

The division's processing efficiency is a direct measure of how well it serves its clients. Timeliness statistics would provide policymakers and program managers data regarding the effectiveness of the division's service delivery. Although several extraneous factors (e.g., inability to locate absent parents) may impede the division's ability to devote equal effort to all clients, the Child Support Enforcement Division should measure the processing efficiency so that managers may direct resources to correct problems.

- *DHS can provide adequate accountability information from which to determine if the child support enforcement program serves the state's best interests.*

The child support enforcement program must serve the interests of the state as a whole. Due to limited resources, the child support program competes with a myriad of state programs for resources; therefore, the division must justify the program's continued existence through goal accomplishment and efficient resource management. This criterion

addresses information regarding the division's advancement toward its mission and any data regarding cost recovery systems.

**State's Interests Data**

**Rating: Pass**

Categories: Mission data  
 Program financial data  
 Contractor processing data  
 Division processing data

The child support enforcement program seeks to reduce the number of individuals dependent on public assistance. The program's goals and activities are reflective of this objective. DHS reviews public assistance cases annually to determine if the support collections are adequate to support the custodial parent and child(-ren) without the continued support of the state or federal governments. In Federal Fiscal Year 1996, the Child Support Enforcement Division closed 4,857 AFDC cases in which a custodial parent had received a child support payment (see Exhibit 4, below). Neither the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services nor DHS monitors whether these cases are reinitiated at a later date.

**Exhibit 4**

**Aid to Families with Dependent Children Cases Closed  
 Where a Support Payment was Received, in Mississippi,  
 Federal Fiscal Years 1992-1996**

	FY92	FY93	FY94	FY95	FY96
AFDC Cases Closed	2,184	2,645	2,794	2,939	4,857

SOURCE: PEER analysis of DHS records and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Support Enforcement Nineteenth Annual Report to Congress*. Table 51, 1995.

The state's interests in the program relate to the financial impact the child support enforcement program may have on the state's budget. To lessen the financial impact of the program, the division seeks to recover administrative costs for collection and case management through fee assessment. For example, the division requires all non-public assistance cases to pay an annual administrative fee of twenty-five dollars. Additionally, the division collects administrative fees for payroll withholding and tax refund intercepts. In Federal Fiscal Year 1994, these fees resulted in more than \$1.1 million in special source revenues for the division (see Exhibit 5, page 19).

## Exhibit 5

### Total Fees Collected by Child Support Enforcement Division, Federal Fiscal Years 1990-1994

	FY90	FY91	FY92	FY93	FY94
Total Fees Collected	\$333,038	\$310,050	\$925,861	\$908,263	\$1,133,365

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1995). *Child Support Enforcement Nineteenth Annual Report To Congress: For The Period Ending September 30, 1994.*

DHS staff collect information regarding compliance of MAXIMUS (the company with which DHS contracts for child support enforcement services in Hinds and Warren counties) with federal performance standards. On three occasions, DHS staff reviewed a sample of MAXIMUS cases for compliance with federal standards. The Child Support Enforcement Division conducted two of the reviews (December 1994 and July 1996). The Department of Human Services' Division of Program Integrity conducted the other review (January 1995) and provided compliance ratios for federal and department standards for the contractor's performance during the second quarter of state Fiscal Year 1995 (October through December 1994). The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services requires all states to comply with each performance standard at the minimum of seventy-five percent compliance level. The department found that MAXIMUS complied with all but one federal performance standard during the second quarter of Fiscal Year 1994. According to the department's review, MAXIMUS failed to comply with timely service of process and enforcement. This standard requires the state, or its contractor, to serve process for delinquent payments within sixty calendar days of the original due date. If the first attempt is unsuccessful, the standard also requires that the state attempt to serve process every quarter with sufficient information existing. MAXIMUS's compliance ratio for this process service standard was 37.5 percent. The department found MAXIMUS to be 88.7 percent compliant overall. In each of the three reviews, the department noted the contractor's deficiencies and required MAXIMUS to submit a corrective action plan.

Privatization is a major topic in the Legislature, and all information regarding a contractor's performance is useful in determining the outcome of any privatization efforts. Also, should the department, or its contractor, exhibit a pattern of noncompliance with federal performance standards, the federal government could penalize the state by withholding public assistance funds.

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services completed a follow-up compliance audit of the Department of Human Services' child support enforcement program. In this report, federal

auditors noted that the state had corrected six of eight performance deficiencies noted during a 1989 audit. The state's compliance with federal performance standards is necessary to avoid fiscal penalties in matching grants or public assistance funds. The Mississippi Department of Human Services completed a compliance audit of its child support enforcement program based on first quarter data from state Fiscal Year 1995 (July through September 1994). In this review, the department found that the program did not comply with six of the applicable ten criteria. The division's overall compliance rate was 53.2 percent. The division's areas of deficiency were untimely provision of support applications, untimely case assessment and location efforts, untimely service of process (for delinquent payments), underutilized location services, and untimely enforcement of support court orders after delinquency.

### *Program Efficiency*

PEER asked "Does DHS have an information system capable of producing efficiency data regarding the child support enforcement program?" This question addresses the financial and processing efficiency of the division, as well as the system's data integrity and security. In answering the question, "What is the program's cost efficiency ratio?" PEER defines this ratio as the total direct and allocated expenses of DHS to collect support obligations and recover delinquent support payments. Additionally, questions such as, "What is the average time required to process a support case from initiation to collection?" and "What is the average time that a case may spend in an activity phase (i.e., determining the location of a parent)?" are measures of the division's processing and program efficiency. This information could help managers and other policymakers determine the division's and program's success in improving efficiency.

- *DHS can provide adequate accountability information with which to determine the financial efficiency of the child support enforcement program.*

With limited resources, the financial efficiency of a program is a major concern of policymakers and program managers. This criterion includes analysis of data regarding the cost efficiency of the program, including cost information related to its primary subcontractor and cost accounting for each major activity.

#### ***Financial Efficiency Data***

*Rating: Marginal*

Categories: Program cost efficiency  
Performance data, by contractor  
Cost accounting, by major function

For the purposes of this evaluation, financial efficiency is an analysis of the total direct and allocated expenditures for the purpose of collecting child support. One method of determining financial efficiency is using a cost efficiency ratio (see discussion above). For example, in FY 1996 DHS expended \$28.90 million (including support services) to collect \$95.28 million in child support; therefore, the cost efficiency ratio for the child support program in FY 1996 in the eighty counties for which DHS provided child support services was \$0.30 per dollar of support collected (See Exhibit 6, below). Additionally, information on financial efficiency also should include data regarding private contractor costs and caseloads and the expenses related to each major division activity (i.e., locating absent parents, establishing paternity, etc.). DHS collects some information on the efficiency of its contractor for child support collections in two counties, MAXIMUS.

### Exhibit 6

#### Cost Efficiency Ratios for Child Support Enforcement Division and MAXIMUS, FY 1996\*

Fiscal Year	DHS-CSED	MAXIMUS	State Total	Difference (DHS-MAXIMUS)
1994	\$0.45	<i>n/a</i>	†\$0.50/\$1	<i>n/a</i>
1995	\$0.38	\$1.08	\$0.44/\$1	(\$0.70)
1996	\$0.30	\$0.63	\$0.33/\$1	(\$0.33)
Contract Lifetime	\$0.34	\$1.01	\$0.41/\$1	(\$0.67)

\*Rounding may affect totals.

†The difference between DHS and State Total for FY94 represents payments made to MAXIMUS, Inc., as start-up costs.

SOURCE: PEER analysis.

DHS contracted a portion of the division's responsibilities to a private corporation, MAXIMUS. Although privatization is common in many areas of government, what makes this situation unique is that the contractor is responsible for each facet of the program in two counties, with the exception of support distribution. In applying the same cost efficiency measure to the MAXIMUS contract, a policymaker could see the differences in performance between the state and the contractor. For example, during FY 1996, DHS paid MAXIMUS \$5.84 million, including bonuses, for \$9.23 million in support collections (\$0.63 spent per dollar collected). During FY 1994, MAXIMUS received \$2.98 million without handling one child support case or collecting \$1.00 in child support; therefore, PEER did not calculate a cost efficiency ratio. DHS paid start-up costs for MAXIMUS during FY94 and FY95. These costs total \$3.11 million and were excluded from the annual cost efficiency

ratio calculations. However, the contract lifetime cost efficiency ratio includes all start-up costs paid by the state to MAXIMUS, as these payment represent the total costs the state has paid for field testing the privatization of child support activities in Mississippi.

The change between MAXIMUS's cost efficiency ratios for fiscal year 1995 and 1996 is a result of a 22.69 percent increase in collections and a 32.10 decrease in payments. The Legislature took action during the 1995 Regular Session to set the maximum payments made to MAXIMUS during Fiscal Year 1996. Had the Legislature not intervened, MAXIMUS's cost efficiency ratio would have been \$0.84 per \$1.00 of support collected. While cost efficiency ratios represent only one method of testing a program's financial efficiency, this data represents an indicator which would necessitate additional review by the policymaker to determine if the division's information accountability system provides data to support the cost efficiency ratio. Therefore, PEER tested DHS's information systems by examining additional financial and case information. PEER sought to determine whether information available from DHS was adequate to answer the question suggested by Exhibit 6: "Is DHS more efficient than MAXIMUS in providing child support enforcement services, or is there a reasonable alternative explanation for the difference in DHS's and MAXIMUS's efficiency ratios?"

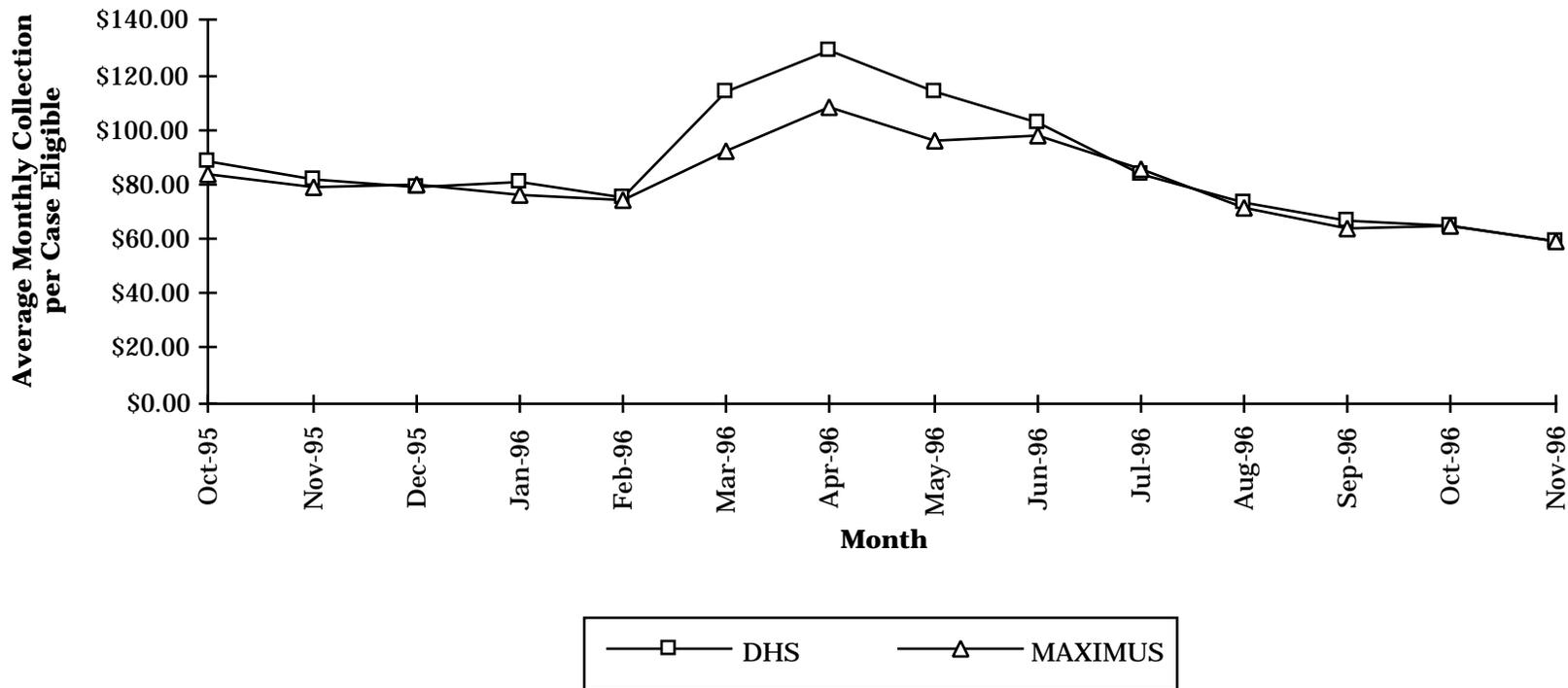
By examining the two service providers' resources per case and outcomes per case, PEER answered the question, "Is MAXIMUS's lower efficiency attributable to high expenditures per case or to low collections per case?" PEER found that in FY96, DHS had a cost per case ratio of \$118.41, whereas, MAXIMUS's cost per case was \$172.08. This ratio indicates that the state paid MAXIMUS 45.33 percent more than the DHS to manage a child support case in FY96.

After finding that MAXIMUS's cost per case was high, PEER asked, "Are these high levels of state expenditures for MAXIMUS's services associated with high collections per case?" This ratio is calculated by dividing total collections by cases eligible for collection (see Exhibit 7, page 23). Although MAXIMUS has more resources to apply to the collection of child support per case than DHS, Exhibit 7 demonstrates that collections per case eligible is not necessarily a function of the resources available. During FY 1996, DHS outperformed MAXIMUS four months and had similar collections during the other eight months.

After concluding that DHS spent less in state funds per case to achieve results that were comparable to MAXIMUS's per case collection levels, PEER examined the composition of MAXIMUS's and DHS's caseloads to determine whether DHS's higher efficiency was attributable to a more favorable caseload. For example, if DHS has a significantly higher proportion of higher yielding cases, its cost efficiency ratio could overstate its efficiency and result in an unreliable measure of DHS's cost efficiency. So, PEER examined DHS'S and MAXIMUS's caseload composition to

### Exhibit 7

#### Average Monthly Collection per Case Eligible, by Agency, Selected Months



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*The increased collections in the months of March, April, and May are a direct result of process automation. The division's electronic database automatically submits arrearage cases, of both DHS and MAXIMUS, to the State Tax Commission and the Internal Revenue Service to intercept tax refunds.*

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SOURCE: PEER analysis.

determine if a different mix of cases could result in higher collections per case ratios. Collections data show that non-AFDC cases have significantly higher collections than public assistance cases; therefore, if DHS had a higher proportion of non-AFDC cases than MAXIMUS, this could account for a higher collections ratio. As of November 1996, AFDC cases made up approximately 33.15 percent of DHS caseload and 31.92 percent of MAXIMUS caseload. Since the percentages of AFDC cases for DHS and MAXIMUS are within 5.00 percent, it is reasonable to conclude that case composition has no significant effect upon collection ratios for DHS and MAXIMUS.

Additionally, case selection and caseloads could impact the performance of DHS or MAXIMUS. According to DHS staff, case selection is based on the availability of reliable information regarding the non-custodial parent. In fact, according to DHS staff, the most important piece of data needed to start the process is the name of the non-custodial parent. Last known address, employment, and Social Security number are other examples of data needed to process a case. METSS, the division's electronic database, automatically alerts each caseworker (both DHS and MAXIMUS) of upcoming deadlines and processing requirements for all cases. These alerts ensure that a case is not overlooked, or avoided, by the caseworker. Although these alerts serve as controls on the child support process, a classification system to prioritize support cases is needed to ensure that cases with the greatest need are given priority within the federal criteria (see related discussion, page 15). In terms of caseloads, the DHS average caseload is 995 cases per child support enforcement officer; however, MAXIMUS's caseload ratio is 1,332 cases per caseworker, which would indicate that MAXIMUS would have a greater propensity than DHS to select cases subjectively to process.

Another reasonable explanation for the difference between DHS and MAXIMUS cost efficiency ratios could be explained by a lack of scale economies. Economies of scale provide that an agent will become more efficient as the production expands through diminishing overhead costs per production unit. PEER examined the possible savings for the state if MAXIMUS were to operate statewide and determined that this savings amounted to only \$8 per case, with over \$55 per case remaining unaccounted.

PEER also examined demographic data for Hinds and Warren counties and the state to determine if differences exist that might inhibit support collections. PEER found no differences in demographic data that could explain the cost efficiency ratio variances; further, census and employment data suggest that support collections should be accomplished more easily in these counties than in many other areas of the state because unemployment and poverty rates in these counties are lower than in most areas of the state.

Because reasonable alternative explanations could not be demonstrated by the data, a policymaker can rely on the cost efficiency data

(see Exhibit 6, page 21) as reported by DHS to conclude that DHS is more cost efficient than its contractor, MAXIMUS.

In an effort to determine the validity of alternative explanations for the difference between DHS and MAXIMUS cost efficiency ratios, PEER found one area where DHS does not perform as well as MAXIMUS. According to an FY95 audit completed by the department's Division of Program Integrity, the Child Support Enforcement Division had an overall federal compliance rate of 48 percent, far below the minimum 75 percent rating needed to avoid federal sanctions (see related discussion, page 19). The Division of Program Integrity last completed an audit of MAXIMUS in FY95, finding a compliance rate of 88.7 percent. Looking closely at that data, PEER determined that the federal performance indicators actually are process measures, such as establishing a case record within three days of application. On its face, it could be reasonable to question DHS cost efficiency if its performance is inferior, but the primary indicator of performance is dollars of support collected per case. MAXIMUS's superior performance on these process indicators does not result in higher child support collections per case. Although process performance is important, a program's impact on clients is more important, as this is a measure of the program's goal attainment (e.g., collections per case eligible for collection). While DHS should improve its performance on these process indicators because of the threat of federal sanctions, PEER concluded that this deficiency in processing does not call into question the reliability of the cost efficiency ratio.

The Child Support Enforcement Division currently reports another category of financial efficiency data, expenditures by major activity, to the federal government. Such data ensures that the state receives the maximum fund matches by showing expenditures in federal priority areas.

- *DHS does not provide timeliness data with which to monitor the case processing of the child support enforcement program.*

Timeliness information regarding the division's case processing is essential to determining efficiency and effectiveness of the child support enforcement program. For example, by capturing such data, the Child Support Enforcement Division could determine where backlogs are occurring and what measures are necessary to correct the backlogs. Additionally, timeliness data would serve as a measure of the division's performance in terms of timely client service.

***Timeliness of Case Processing***

***Rating: Fail***

Category: Processing statistics

DHS requires its support case workers (i.e., program managers, enforcement officers, and legal staff) to document when changes or reviews

of a case file occur. Although DHS currently captures information that could be used to determine the number of days elapsing between one phase (i.e., paternity establishment) and another phase (i.e., support order enforcement), it does not compile and report this information. This data is important in determining the efficiency of the division, as well as comparing the division's performance to that of similar programs in other states.

DHS captures one type of case aging data--court processing. The department monitors the number of cases that have hearings within thirty, sixty, and ninety days of referral to the program's legal division. Additionally, the department tracks the percentage of cases with disposition within three, six, and twelve months of referral to the program's legal division.

During FY 1996, the Child Support Enforcement Division implemented a statewide electronic database system to track and monitor all child support enforcement cases, the Mississippi Enforcement and Tracking Support Systems (METSS). DHS procedures require the Child Support Enforcement Division staff to maintain activity date information in each case record, and METSS also tracks any activity or modifications made to any electronic cases. Although the division could audit a sample of case records to determine its processing efficiency from initiation to collection, METSS could do this automatically and include the universe of support cases (the total number of all active support cases) with few changes to the current system. This data would be useful in determining the level of service delivery the division is providing to its stakeholders. Without tracking the case aging and processing activities, the division cannot adequately monitor or forecast case management problems.

- *DHS can provide adequate accountability information with which to determine whether the program's electronic data integrity and security procedures are adequate.*

Information regarding the reliability and security of case information is essential to protecting the interest of the state and its clients. The reliability of data is a direct factor of the program's efficiency--the more reliable the information, the faster a case can be processed. The interests of the clients in protecting their personal and biographical information is also a factor that must be accounted for in the program's activities.

***Data Integrity and Security***

***Rating: Pass***

Categories:           Data reliability  
                              Security training and procedures  
                              Security violation reports

Data integrity refers to the reliability of the information collected and maintained by the division for each case. During the intake process, the custodial parent provides information (e.g., biographical, residence) regarding the non-custodial parent. The division considers all information unverified until confirmed by a third party. MISS. CODE ANN. §43-19-45 (1972) authorizes the division to collect information regarding an alleged or non-supportive parent from any source, public or private. The Child Support Enforcement Division verifies the information through an independent source; the division limits access to some electronic records to display only. This prevents unauthorized changes to support case files. Should changes be required in these cases, the central office staff can modify the record and return it to a display-only mode for the field agents.

Once a case is ready to proceed to court, the division again verifies all information regarding each case. The division verifies all data through a three-part review process. First, the child support enforcement officer double-checks the information as current and correct on both electronic and paper case files. Secondly, the area manager reviews, at his or her discretion, the case file before the legal division seeks to obtain a support order. Finally, the legal division is responsible for assuring that all information is included in the case record prior to the court's processing of the case.

The division has taken appropriate steps to secure its case records. The department has implemented policies to deter the leakage of any client's personal information. Program managers remind employees of security policies and procedures during training sessions, meetings, and correspondence. The division is also moving to place its policies and procedures manual on-line for immediate access by all employees.

The division also monitors database activity on METSS for security breaches through monthly security reports. Program managers assign each employee a unique security access code. The system tracks all use actions made in the system. The database automatically monitors and notifies management of any user access which has been denied. If the division consistently adheres to its policies, it could maintain a reasonable level of control over data security.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division has much of the information required to answer many policymakers' concerns. However, PEER found some areas requiring attention--efficiency measures, processing measures, and classification schedules. These measures would provide useful information to management and legislators regarding the division's performance.

Although the division maintains time processing and case aging data in each case record file, the division has not developed an adequate system to monitor these data. Without this information, the division cannot effectively plan for its efforts. With the implementation of the Mississippi Enforcement Tracking Support System, the division could easily monitor all cases for processing efficiency and case aging data.

The division fails to monitor the number of cases in each major activity phase; therefore, management can only speculate where the majority of cases are at any given time. With this data, the division could consider alternatives or strategies to overcome such factors (e.g., administrative adjudication).

DHS handles more than 278,000 support cases affecting more than 366,000 children without implementing a classification schedule to prioritize the state's caseload. A "triage" classification system, a method which identifies and processes high-priority cases before lower-need cases, could assist DHS in adequately monitoring and managing its workload more effectively while directing more resources to cases with the greatest need.

These information deficiencies could be corrected with little change and cost to the department. Many of these deficiencies could be corrected with some programming changes to the division's electronic database system.

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

1. The Department of Human Services should monitor goal attainment statistics (i.e., number of cases pending action and number of cases processed by major phase) through its electronic database system in order to monitor program advancement as well as program problems.
2. Using existing resources, the Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division should study, document, and implement a classification system to prioritize the state's child support caseload for use in directing resources where they are most needed.
3. The Department of Human Services should modify its child support database to monitor case aging statistics (e.g., average time for a case to receive support, average time cases are in a particular work phase) for use in identifying case management problems.
4. The Department of Human Services should require any child support contractor to report processing data similar to that maintained by the department (e.g., caseload ratios) to ensure uniform quality of services.
5. The Department of Human Services should track and monitor the timeliness of child support case processing. Timeliness reports should also include information on the average time elapsing between phases as well as the number of cases in each of several categories (e.g., the number of cases for which paternity establishment took thirty, sixty, ninety, or more than ninety days).

*Agency Response*



STATE OF MISSISSIPPI  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

DONALD R. TAYLOR  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



November 8, 1996

Mr. Max Arinder, Director  
Joint Committee on Performance Evaluation  
and Expenditure Review  
P.O. Box 1204  
Jackson, Mississippi 39215-1204

Dear Mr. Arinder:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your Evaluation of the Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement's Accountability Information Systems. Our comments are in reference to Recommendation Numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5.

We agree that accurate information is critical for making decisions about a program's needs, resources, and accomplishments. This is one of the reasons that we value our statewide automation referred to as METSS (Mississippi Enforcement and Tracking of Support System). From 1976 until 1995, the Division of Child Support Enforcement operated in a primarily manual mode.

In 1988, the Division of Child Support Enforcement was federally mandated to have an operational automated system by October, 1995. There were specific system requirements for federal funding match (Federal 90%/State 10%) and for certification. The automated system was intended to track and process child support cases. Purposely, the management tool aspect was not a part of the initial design of the system.

After years of planning, designing, and developing this comprehensive system, statewide implementation was achieved in September, 1995. We were one of few states to comply with the federally mandated implementation date. We have received First Level Certification status.

Mr. Max Arinder  
November 8, 1996  
Page 2

After the October, 1995 deadline, the 90/10 funding match was no longer available. Needed changes and enhancements, however, were made to the system under a personal service contract. Most of our existing management tools were added to the system during the year following statewide conversion..

### **PEER Recommendation Numbers 1, 3, and 5**

The Department of Human Services should modify its child support database to achieve the following:

To monitor the goal attainment statistics to monitor program advancement as well as program problems.

To monitor case aging statistics for use in identifying case management problems.

To report the results of tracking and monitoring the timeliness of child support case processing.

### **MDHS Response to Recommendation Numbers 1, 3, and 5**

The Division of Child Support Enforcement agrees with the recommendations that additional information is needed for management purposes. Despite some budget constraints, we are committed to realizing the maximum benefits from METSS.

### **PEER Recommendation Number 2**

Using existing resources, the Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division should study, document, and implement a classification system to prioritize the state's child support caseload for use in directing resources where they are most needed.

Mr. Max Arinder  
November 8, 1996  
Page 3

**MDHS Response to Recommendation Number 2**

The Division of Child Support Enforcement certainly understands the benefits of the recommendation, but federal regulations specifically prohibit prioritizing cases so that some cases receive services and other cases do not. See Attachment 1, Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR Chapter 3, Section 303.10.

Please contact me at 359-4861 if you have additional questions.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard Harris".

Richard Harris, Director  
Division of Child Support Enforcement

RH:pb

Attachment

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## **PEER Staff**

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Dale Hetrick  
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John Ringer  
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Larry Whiting

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