

Computer glitch stalls child support payments

National Post, Melissa Leong, with files from April Lindgren, Wednesday, September 13, 2006

A provincial government computer glitch has left tens of thousands of parents in Ontario — many of them single women — without this month's child and spousal support payments.

The Family Responsibility Office (FRO), a branch of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, was unable to process payments after a computer meltdown on Sept. 1. A spokesman for the ministry said the office has manually sent 21,523 cheques worth more than \$12-million.

"We understand how critical the situation is for families who rely on their monthly support payments," Paul Doig said. "We're just trying to get the cheques out."

The office collects money from people who are under court orders to pay support to their children and former spouses; it then forwards them to recipients, often by depositing money directly into bank accounts. Every month, the office processes about 105,000 payments worth about \$55-million.

Mr. Doig said technicians found the problem over the weekend and that the system would be functional this morning.

Parents began noticing a problem last week when money did not appear in their bank accounts. The office's automated phone service was flooded with calls, leading to technical difficulties; it began disconnecting frustrated callers.

One Ottawa father of five, who receives child-support payments from his former wife, said he repeatedly tried to call the ministry for information but was put on hold for an hour and then was disconnected.

"Fortunately for me, I'm not desperate for the cash. I can only imagine the thousands of people out there who are suffering," said the man, who did not want to be named.

Women's groups say those who will be most impacted are low-income families — especially in September when extra costs include back-to-school supplies.

"One late payment for lower-income women or women who are relying on social services and support payments to take care of themselves and their families ... it can really hurt them," said Andrea Gunraj, spokeswoman for the Toronto-based Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children.

"It can really jeopardize housing for her and her children."

Marla Stiles, 47, is unemployed and relies on \$700 spousal-support payments from her former husband. The Niagara Falls resident said she has been unable to pay her rent or buy such basic necessities as food; her mother has had to lend her money to buy her toy poodle, Munchie, medication.

"Being the government, why don't they have a backup system?" she asked angrily. "Why is a computer down this long? There's something wrong here."

NDP critic Andrea Horwath issued a news release on Monday saying the Liberal government had failed parents.

"The FRO is a government agency created to strengthen enforcement tools and have a strong case-management system. This just demonstrates that their deadbeat computers aren't working," she said.

Mr. Doig said the 19-year-old computer system used by the FRO will be replaced next year, adding that the government has committed more than \$30-million to this new system.

Last month, the province's ombudsman called the FRO's efforts to get tough with deadbeat parents "lackadaisical."

"Deadbeats in this province have been having a free ride on the backs of the citizens of Ontario," Andre Marin told reporters after releasing a special report about the FRO.

Since the FRO was created a decade ago, Ontarians have complained about unanswered calls, bureaucratic intransigence and mix-ups that often seem impossible to resolve.

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