



Department of Social Services

Human Resources Administration

Department of Homeless Services

Steven Banks, *Commissioner*

Seeking Solutions to the Issue of Child Support Debt

On Tuesday, September 26, HRA's Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) hosted its bi-annual policy conference. Each OCSE conference explores new and different ideas and solutions for delivering the key anti-poverty service of child support to children by drawing on the insights of a wide range of service providers, advocates, Family Court staff, OCSE staff, and representatives of other government agencies, including the State and federal child support programs.

This year's conference brought together some 180 attendees to discuss child support debt owed by noncustodial parents, increase awareness of the issue and discuss strategies both programs and parents can use to prevent and eliminate it.

The event began with remarks from DSS Commissioner Steven Banks, HRA Administrator Grace Bonilla, and Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick, and an overview of child support at the national level by Vicki Turetsky, former Commissioner of the Office of Child Support Enforcement at the U.S. DHHS Administration for Children and Families. Commissioner Banks focused on the HRA Office of Child Support Enforcement's accomplishments in fighting child poverty, collecting nearly \$3 billion for New York City's children since 2014.



DSS Commissioner Steven Banks



Panelists Stevan "Coach" Lynn, Brian Bannister, Kimberly Seals Allers, and moderator Joseph Jones Jr. discuss child support debt

Administrator Bonilla shared a moving story from her career at HRA that highlighted the need for addressing child support debt. A forty-year-old man had called her for help. "He wasn't a noncustodial parent and he wasn't a custodial parent, he was a child on a child support order," said Administrator Bonilla. "He was calling because his dad was sick and his dad's final wish was to be able to go home. But he couldn't because he owed child support and we were holding his passport." The Office of Child Support

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Enforcement was able to address the father's arrears and get his passport returned to him.

"Many months later, I got a call from the same forty-year-old man in tears. We had changed his father's life. And *that* is the power of child support. That's what we can do with someone's life," Administrator Bonilla continued. "I believe in child support. But I also believe in good policy. I believe in policy that shows someone mercy. And here in New York City and at HRA and through the Child Support program, that's what we get to do every day. And we get to do that because we have partners like you who show up."

"This conference is about finding ways to reduce and avoid child support debt. We want all of you here to help us find new solutions that are balanced and safe," said Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick. "We're not doing that so we can see different numbers on our spreadsheets but because our experience is that reducing and eliminating debt leads to improved child support payments. And more regular child support payments are connected to better outcomes for children, as a great deal of research attests."

The event's keynote speaker was Joseph Jones Jr., the founder and CEO of the Center for Urban Families in Baltimore, which works to strengthen urban communities by helping fathers and families achieve stability and economic success. Mr. Jones shared a moving story of his life, moving from a troubled childhood in Baltimore and struggles with drugs and fatherhood to working in the city's health department on issues like infant mortality. During this time, his relationship to the child support program also changed dramatically, and he worked to pay off his arrears while starting Baltimore's first responsible fatherhood program.

Mr. Jones also chaired a panel with three parents who had varying experiences around child support debt: Kimberly Seals Allers is a journalist and author, and custodial parent, who forgave a large amount of child support arrears owed to her so her child's father could participate in his daughter's life. Brian Bannister is a Community Engagement and Outreach Coordinator at Seedco and a noncustodial parent, who shared his experience with the child support program and the help he received in paying off thousands of dollars in arrears. Stevan "Coach" Lynn is the producer and host of the TV show *Dare 2 Dream: A Father's Guide to Success* and is both a custodial and noncustodial parent.



HRA Administrator Grace Bonilla



Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick



Executive Deputy Commissioner of OCSE Frances Pardus-abbadessa

“I’m a noncustodial parent, not a victim,” Mr. Bannister said. “When I make that last payment, I’ll call all the special people I met that helped me stay consistent and keep paying it off. Romantic failure does not eliminate parental responsibility.”

Together, the panelists advocated both responsibility and assistance for noncustodial parents—and for inclusive language that lets them know they matter in their children’s lives. The panelists were also featured in a series of short documentary videos where they described their experiences with the child support program, along with other custodial and noncustodial parents.

Executive Deputy Commissioner of OCSE Frances Pardus-abbadessa gave an overview of the child support programs in New York City available to reduce debt owed to the government and initiatives targeted to avoid debt from accumulating in the first place.

“Child support debt is a complex issue that doesn’t lend itself to a simple solution,” said Executive Deputy Commissioner Pardus-abbadessa. “A lot of deep thinking is required to find a real solution. We’re taking a two-pronged approach—preventing arrears from accumulating, and finding ways to reduce arrears for those who already have debt.” Reducing debt, Pardus-abbadessa explained, often leads to increased child support payments and can ultimately reduce the stress on both, the parent who owes money and the parent to whom it is owed.

The event included several breakout sessions where participants discussed the reasons child support arrears accumulate, and brainstormed ideas for preventing arrears from building up in the first place, and helping noncustodial parents who already have arrears pay them down and participate in the program in a way that is fair and feasible. Ideas from the breakout sessions were presented to the group as a whole later in the session in a discussion with experts in child support from the academic and nonprofit sectors.

The event also included presentations on the Child Support Snapshot, a tool for bringing child support information and services into the community with the hope of preventing and reducing child support debt, and the ACCESS HRA website, mobile app, and Provider Portal, which help clients apply for, recertify and manage benefits like SNAP. The Provider Portal allows community-based organizations to help clients apply for and manage benefits, and keep on top of important recertification dates to stay connected to benefits.