

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Over 1,700 VI Men Owe More Than \$29 Million In Child Support; AG Calls It 'Un-American, Downright Shameful'

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Justice has launched an initiative dubbed "Operation Support Our Children" that seeks to collect more than \$29 million in child support payments owed by delinquent parents, 99 percent of them fathers, Acting Attorney General Claude Walker announced on Monday at a press conference held here at the Nisky Center, Suite 500, 2nd floor.

"Unfortunately in the Virgin Islands each year, the total amount owed by parents with delinquent child support accounts continues to grow to the point where drastic action

must be taken by the department of justice to address this problem," Walker said, adding that DOJ has direct oversight responsibilities for the Paternity and Child Support Division (PCSD).

Currently, there are 1,728 parents in the Virgin Islands who owe approximately \$29,599,919.52 in overdue child support. "This is a tremendous amount of money that should not have been allowed to grow to this point," Walker said.

This is shameful conduct that has to stop. Quite frankly, we can say it's downright un-American for someone to have a child, and have the means to take care of that child but refuses to do so. - Acting Attorney General Claude E. Walker.

According to Walker, PCSD has made many attempts to have these parents pay what they owe, including setting up payment plans and where appropriate, giving the parents in delinquency a hearing to present proof that the amount owed is incorrect. They've also sent out letters, quarterly notices and financial statements to remind these parents of the amount owed and affording them the opportunity for a hearing.

"But still they've either failed or refused to pay what they lawfully owe. And the paternity of the parents in question have been firmly established," the acting AG said.

DOJ has conducted said asset assessments and is well aware that some of the parents on the list hold "good paying jobs" and have the means to take care of their children by making timely child support payments twice a month as required. But for whatever reason, they've chosen not to support their children, a decision, Walker contends, affects all taxpayers.

"They're placing the burden of taking care of their children on one parent, and on the taxpayers of the Virgin Islands. This is shameful conduct that has to stop. Quite frankly, we can say it's downright un-American for someone to have a child, and have the means to take care of that child but refuses to do so," Walker said.

"So you have retirees, custodian workers, teachers -- all of us. We end up having to take care of these children because someone with the means have decided he's not going to do it," Walker went on, clearly frustrated with the current state of affairs. "It ends today," he assured.

In the past, Walker has said he would be taking strong action against government corruption during his tenure, but the AG's latest action shows that it intends to make strides against injustices outside of government.

"The attorney general's office will not allow this type of behavior to continue. We will not be enablers to this type of irresponsible behavior." Walker said the mothers are almost always the ones left with the financial strain; and revealed that of the 1,728 parents who are in delinquency, 1,710 are men and are fathers -- "about 99 percent," he said.

DOJ will take "drastic steps" to reduce the rate of child support arrears to protect the children of the Virgin Islands and for the very survival of PCSD, the acting AG made known.

It was also revealed that the territory has been losing millions of dollars in federal funding because of DOJ's "minimal efforts" in reducing past child support arrears. Last week, federal monitors revealed to Walker and his team that PCSD was "way behind" in child support collection compared to other states.

Walker said DOJ, in accordance with the territory's laws, has the authority to suspend any license -- business, driver's, professional licenses-- for any parent who owes \$2,500 or more in child support payments and have been delinquent for more than 30 days. The DOJ has also established a relationship with the U.S. Department of State, according to Walker, and any parent owing more than \$2,500 for the more 30 days, will also have their passport withdrawn -- barring that person from traveling overseas.

"So if this applies to you," Walker challenged, "you need to own up to what you owe to avoid drastic actions being taken against you." The AG said the delinquent parent could either pay the amount owed in full, setup an approved payment plan, or request a hearing to challenge the amount listed as owed. A modification can also be requested, for example, if the owing parent loses his job, Walker revealed.

And this action must be taken before October 31, 2015, Walker revealed. "Because after that time the attorney general's office will be left with no other choice but to take the actions that I have stated."

"Taking no action is not an option," he concluded.