



COUNTY OF EL PASO Domestic Relations Office

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February 22, 2009

QUARTERLY REPORT

Second Quarter FY 2009- 2010

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

For nearly a decade the DRO has provided invaluable assistance to families and family courts in El Paso. The DRO is able to efficiently and effectively serve the courts, reduce their burden and assure that the needs of the children within this system are met as prescribed by law. While the DRO is a non-mandated service it is authorized to be a fee-for-service agency and vigorously conducts itself as a business first and foremost. The El Paso County DRO has set the mark of excellence across the state and is currently the most cost effective DRO in Texas. **By direct revenue and cost savings, the services of the DRO are without cost to the County.**

The growth of the DRO is the result of support in the Courthouse, particularly from Commissioner's Court, and the dedicated work of an exceptional staff of employees.

In addition to this summary, please consider the following specific matters.

II. REVENUE AND BUDGET:

- a) A significant reduction in cost (9%) has been realized by the recent resignation of administrative staff members and by resetting the step level of their replacements as well as by maintaining a vacant Office Manager position during the hiring freeze this fiscal year.
- b) DRO revenue from contracts, grants and user fees for the close of the fiscal year was **\$1,029,404**. Furthermore, our Child Support Service Fee revenue exceeded \$300,000 for the year. These are both record numbers for the DRO. In FY 2010-2011, DRO direct revenue is projected to exceed \$1.1 million. Revenue is monitored daily by the Director and all revenue is evaluated monthly as to every revenue source and projection.

- c) Significant **cost savings** result from DRO services, e.g., the role of DRO probation as a **jail diversion** program to avoid costs (\$58/per person/per day) for litigants on probation. Enforcement of health insurance and uninsured expenses avoids healthcare at the County expense. The cases served by the DRO are substantially resolved without court action, reducing the need for additional courts. No family law district courts have been added since the DRO was created in 2000.

III. COMMUNITY CONTACTS:

There were over **100,000** telephone contacts last fiscal year. County Communications has assisted our office in revamping our telephone strategy to better accommodate our high volume. In addition there are an average of over **500 walk-ins** per week and ITD reports the DRO website is receiving over **3,000** “hits” per month. ITD has assisted our office in redesigning our website to better serve the community through a more logical and informative flow. We are available on the World Wide Web at: www.epcounty.com/dro

IV. CHILD SUPPORT MONITORING AND CUSTOMER SERVICES:

When the DRO opened in 2000 an average of \$2.7 million in child support was processed locally each month. Today, due to federal mandates, local processing is approximately \$10,000 each month. As a consequence, staff previously assigned to local processing of child support have been retrained to provide increased monitoring of child support payments and local customer service. Therefore, these services have been vastly increased without adding staff. The “monitoring” provides early intervention to avoid the development of large delinquencies in child support payments. This growth in child support monitoring has produced an increase in the litigation handled by Friend of the Court resulting in a higher rate of child support compliance in our community.

The DRO is connected to the State Disbursement Unit (SDU) and the following services are done locally by the DRO Child Support Monitoring and Customer Service staff:

- a) Creation of new final child support orders at the SDU. The DRO scans the court records daily to identify new orders and creates the SDU file. There are over **25,000** child support cases that have been created by the El Paso DRO in the Texas Child Support Enforcement System under contract.
- b) Local customer service to families, courts, employers, and attorneys including current information regarding child support accounts. The DRO handles thousands of these events each month under contract.
- c) Monitoring of child support orders and records of payment to maintain compliance. When the monitoring of payments indicates a delinquency of more than 30 days, the case is referred to DRO enforcement. The majority of these problems are resolved within 30 days by the monitoring staff without further referral for enforcement.

V. FRIEND OF THE COURT ENFORCEMENT:

- a) The DRO Friend of the Court Division is responsible for enforcing over **25,000** parent-child orders referred to above. In FY09, judgments for delinquent child support through April 30, 2009, exceeded \$1.7 million, a year to year increase of more than 50%.
- b) As a result of the sharp increase in case volume, a third paralegal position has been approved for this division. This position has now been staffed increasing production and the backlog of cases has been eliminated. Enforcement motions are now filed within 30 days of referral.
- c) The Friend of the Court (FOC) division enforces periodic child support and health insurance by application from a litigant or by referral from the DRO Child Support Monitoring and Customer Service (CSMCS) division. The FOC division also enforces access and possession (visitation) violations upon application. Access and possession cases are first referred to Family Court Services (FCS) for resolution through mediation; a motion to enforce is filed only as a last resort in these cases. Over 95% of all cases handled by FOC enforcement are resolved by agreement before court hearing. Only 5% of FOC cases consist of contested hearing.
- d) **100%** of visitation cases this fiscal year have been resolved by the DRO staff without court hearings. The DRO is the only public agency enforcing visitation.

VI. COMMUNITY SUPERVISION:

- a) There are **1,801 open probation cases** now being managed by 4 officers, including the newly approved position "Senior Probation Officer". The current year revenue already exceeds the total cost of the current positions including newly approved positions and revenue will continue to grow. Recent months indicate the probation caseload and revenue are growing more rapidly than anticipated.
- b) The probation officers, clerks and supervising attorney have a total monthly cost to the County **less than** the revenue they generate.
- c) In order to service growth at the lowest cost, ITD has assisted the DRO with a locally produced case management system.

VII. FAMILY COURT SERVICES:

DRO social workers perform many services, including:

- a) When ordered by the court, preparation of home studies in contested custody and visitation cases and adoptions.
- b) Intervention, when ordered by the court, to encourage the parent-litigants to resolve their issues without contested court action.
- c) Providing court ordered parenting education classes.

- d) Access and visitation grant services indicated at “VII” below.
- e) FCS is managing the Visitation/Exchange Center. See “X” below.
- f) Cooperative parenting group sessions, in the Title IV-D court, in Spanish as well as English, with parents in high conflict cases. DRO social workers are developing additional groups which will increase the number of groups provided. Specifically:
 - i) Modification of the curriculum for the non-IVD population.
 - ii) Modification of the curriculum for the specialized population referred from the Mental Health Collaborative.

DRO social workers are always accessible to the court. A new initiative known as “Forming Families” is a program developed by the El Paso DRO and the Texas Attorney General to work with very young parents in high schools. This El Paso pilot is being expanded and additional grant funding will be sought.

Court Assignments to the DRO-FCS

Month/Year	65th	171st	383rd	388th
January-09	1	2	9	
February-09		3	5	
March-09	1	5	15	2
April-09		10	10	
May-09	1	10	8	
June-09	1	3	7	1
July-09	1	3	12	
August-09		7	7	
September-09		5	8	1
October-09		1	16	
November-09		2	4	
December-09		4	8	
January-10		5	15	
Totals	5	60	119	4

VIII. ACCESS AND VISITATION GRANT:

The Office of the Attorney General has provided grant funding this year in the amount of **\$63,871** to provide services to the AG's child support enforcement court to improve parenting skills and cooperation between parents. The grant program, now in the third year, has been so successful that the El Paso program is being exported both in **Texas and nationally** in the Title IV-D enforcement system as a **model**. The DRO has applied for renewal effective September 9th – with increased funds.

New parental establishment (paternity) and other cases are referred to the DRO to manage the following services:

- a) Education of the parents on the rights and requirements under the parenting orders provided by DRO social workers and attorneys.
- b) 9-hour didactic group training for parents provided by DRO social workers. The training is provided 12 times during the grant year led by DRO social workers in English and Spanish.
- c) Individual counseling with DRO social workers and enforcement staff in problem cases.
- d) Supervised visits and exchanges.
- e) Court enforcement by the DRO in cases of non-compliance; and
- f) Probation when ordered by the court.

IX. FAMILY PROTECTION FUND:

The DRO is the contract administrator of the County contract to provide court ordered supervised visitation and visitation exchanges in family violence cases at maximum funding of **\$20,000** per FY. These “visitation services” are funded through the Family Protection Fund. This fund is based upon a “family protection” fee collected by the District Clerk as part of the court filing fees in new suits in dissolution of marriage and the contract is at no cost to the General Fund.

X. VISITATION/EXCHANGE CENTER:

In December 2009 the DRO acquired responsibility for the management and operations of the Visitation Center from the Child Crisis Center (CCC). The CCC generously agreed to allow usage of their facility through May 2010 – rent free. The DRO's Family Court Services division has taken on this responsibility. The DRO is looking for a new partner to replace the CCC's role in this service. We have prepared revenue projection models and feel that this is a sustainable endeavor. Furthermore, those in the family law system recognize how important this service is in assuring that children are able to spend time with both parents.

XI. BORDER CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH COLLABORATIVE:

DRO increased participation results from recognition that DRO services address many of the issues facing these families. The Executive Director of the DRO is a voting member of the governance team for the collaborative as well as the planning for the Youth Services Facility.

XII. ASSISTANCE FROM ITD:

With the assistance of ITD, the DRO has been able to manage the growth in services without added cost. Among others, ITD has provided:

- a) Enhanced system to enforce service fees owed to the County.
- b) The case management system for probation.

ITD and the DRO are presently working on the development of a Domestic Relations Office Unified Office System (DROUOS). This data system is in the early planning and development stages. As the County of El Paso migrates from JIMS to Odyssey – the development of DROUOS is imperative as Odyssey has no DRO or Child Support module. ITD, the Tax Assessor and the DRO are also enhancing the Scofflaw automation process to ensure county fee compliance. ITD has also helped the DRO revamp its website which contains an event calendaring system and will include the ability for e-pay.

XIII. TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF DOMESTIC RELATIONS OFFICES (TADRO):

- a) The Annual Conference of TADRO was held in Houston, Texas, November 11 – 13, 2009.
- b) The El Paso County DRO was awarded two (2) \$350 scholarships by TADRO to attend this year's conference.
- c) Jim Fashing has been elected to the position of TADRO Vice President and Ouisa Davis and Edna Telles have been selected as Board Members for the upcoming year.

XIV. LEGISLATION:

The DRO leadership is involved in legislative efforts both locally and at the state level. El Paso DRO leadership also contributes a leadership role in our state organization, TADRO, which independently provides or supports Legislation concerning DRO authority and issues involving Family Law. Locally, the County's Legislative Team is addressing HB3517 to further the effectiveness of Scofflaw and fee compliance.

XV. FAMILY LAW INFORMATION CENTER:

The information Center is the DRO community outreach program. Through this activity, we seek through community presentations, publications and media to reach the underserved in the El Paso community.

- a) The DRO has a program of training El Paso Police Department and Sheriff's officers with regard to visitation problems.
- b) A variety of activities are being coordinated with the Ft. Bliss Legal Assistance Office in response to the needs of military families and BRAC.
- c) DRO has established an attorney referral list. These attorneys have agreed to provide a 30-minute interview at reduced cost or no cost to persons referred by the DRO. A link to this list is provided on our website.

XVI. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:

In addition to the information provided hereinabove, the El Paso DRO has partnerships with several agencies, offices and entities in order to inform the public and enhance services.

The DRO has served as the Statewide Model for counties to improve and increase access to justice in family law and has been recognized by the Texas Supreme Court, the Texas Access to Justice Commission and Texas Association of Counties.

XVII. STAFFING ISSUES:

- a) On July 6th the El Paso County Commissioner's Court accepted Terry Pasqualone's resignation. Jim Fashing was named as the Interim Executive Director effective August 1st.
- b) We have been fortunate to be able to utilize a volunteer from MHMR and he has become a welcome member of our team.

XVIII. LONG TERM PLANNING:

The primary planning concerns of the DRO are:

- a) Development of a new child support system to include a uniform data management system throughout the DRO. This must be completed before Odyssey is implemented.
- b) Efficiently reorganizing DRO structure and services to respond to the anticipated substantial increase in family law litigation under BRAC.
- c) Provision of visitation services as ordered by the court, to wit, monitored and supervised visits and visitation exchanges.
- d) Development of satellite locations at the County Youth Services Center, Ysleta Annex and Northwest Annex to improve accessibility.
- e) Conduct a thorough analysis and feasibility study in consideration of implementing the ICSS contract from the Office of the Attorney General for the State of Texas.
- f) Development of new programs, as needed.

XIX. Please advise if further information is desired.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jim Fashing
Interim Executive Director

Notable quotes regarding the El Paso County Domestic Relations Office

“This agency is making a difference”

The El Paso Times

“The court depends on the work of the DRO in cases affecting children. Many cases are resolved out of court by DRO social workers and mediators advancing the docket and reducing court time. In those cases that go to trial, the DRO work is essential to the court in reaching a decision in the best interest of children. DRO services are high quality, low cost and expeditious.”

Mike Herrera, Judge; 383rd District Court

“The DRO saves the court countless hours by providing immediate and direct services to families. Affordable mediate through the DRO attorneys have saved enormous amounts of court time and benefitted families. The quality of service provided by the DRO is high and because they office in the courthouse their access to the judges is instantaneous.”

Kathleen Anderson, Associate Judge; 383rd District Court

“I can attest to the need of the Domestic Relations Office. Their services have been invaluable in assisting the Court in making determinations in what the Court hopes is in the best interest of the children and the parents. It is without hesitation that I request that all consideration be given to maintaining the Domestic Relations Office as a viable resource for the Family Courts of El Paso County, Texas.” **Jose Juarez, Associate Judge; 65th District Court**

“All visitation disputes in this court are referred to the DRO for resolution. Also, DRO probations is an important tool for collection child support and keeping cases from returning to court. These DRO services are essential to the effective administration of this court.”

Don Minton, Associate Judge; Title IV-d Court

“The El Paso County Family Law Bar Association urges Commissioner’s Court to continue to support and provide the very valuable services of the El Paso County Domestic Relations Office.” **El Paso County Family Law Bar Association**