
Civil Rights & Judiciary Committee

HB 1916

Brief Description: Improving the delivery of child support services to families by increasing flexibility and efficiency.

Sponsors: Representatives Kilduff, Leavitt, Ortiz-Self and Ormsby; by request of Department of Social and Health Services.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Revises child support provisions regarding: the data and analyses the quadrennial child support work groups must consider; and, modification or adjustment of a court or administrative child support order that is above or below the standard calculation.
- Adds a provision regarding incarceration of the parent who is obligated to pay support.

Hearing Date: 2/19/19

Staff: Edie Adams (786-7180).

Background:

Child Support and the Interplay of Federal and State Laws.

Child support obligations are established in the context of dissolution of marriage or parentage proceedings through the court or an administrative process with the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). The DSHS Division of Child Support (DCS) is responsible for administering the state's child support enforcement program.

Federal law requires states to have an approved child support program as a condition of receiving federal funds for various programs, including child support enforcement and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs. To meet federal requirements, states must conduct quadrennial reviews of their child support laws. Every four years, the DCS convenes a work group to review Washington's child support laws. The first meeting of the 2019 Child Support Work Group was held on January 25, 2019.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The amount of child support is determined using the statutory child support schedule, which includes an economic table and the child support worksheets developed by the Administrative Office of the Courts. The economic table is used to establish the basic support obligation for each parent, which can then be modified based on statutorily established adjustments and deviations.

2018 State Legislation. In 2018, the child support economic table recommended by the 2011 and 2015 Child Support Workgroups was adopted. Under this new economic table, the basic support obligation is based on the combined monthly net income of the parents and the number of children before the court. (Prior to adoption of the new economic table, the ages of the children were also a factor in determining basic support obligation amounts.) Each parent's share of the basic support obligation is determined by the parent's proportionate share of the combined monthly net income. After determining the basic support obligation based on the economic table, any adjustments to the basic support obligation are considered, such as medical support, daycare, and other special expenses, which results in a presumptive amount of child support called the "standard calculation." The court has discretion to consider reasons to deviate from the standard calculation.

The child support schedule includes low-income limitations that apply when a parent's net income is below, or would fall below, 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline. This is referred to as the self-support reserve. The basic support obligation, excluding health care, daycare, and special child-rearing expenses, may not reduce the parent's net income below the self-support reserve of 125 percent of the federal poverty level, except for the presumptive minimum \$50 support obligation or when it would be unjust considering the best interests of the child and circumstances of each parent. The 2018 legislation that adopted the new economic table also clarified that the reference to 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline was for a one-person family.

New Federal Rules. Federal rules that went into effect on January 19, 2017, require that, as part of each state's first quadrennial review of child support guidelines following revision of its guidelines (such as the revisions made to Washington's guidelines via the 2018 legislation) a state must:

1. Consider economic data on the cost of raising children, labor market data (such as unemployment rates, employment rates, hours worked, and earnings) by occupation and skill-level for the State and local job markets, the impact of guideline policies and amounts on custodial and noncustodial parents who have family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and factors that influence employment rates among noncustodial parents and compliance with child support orders; and
2. Analyze case data, gathered through sampling or other methods, on the application of, and deviations from, the child support guidelines, as well as the rates of default and imputed child support orders and orders determined using the low-income adjustment. The analysis must also include a comparison of payments on child support orders by case characteristics, including whether the order was entered by default, based on imputed income, or determined using the low-income adjustment. The analysis of the data must be used in the state's review of the child support guidelines to ensure that deviations from the guidelines are limited and guideline amounts are appropriate based on certain criteria.

These same federal rules permit states to elect to initiate review of an order, after learning that a parent will be incarcerated for more than 180 calendar days, without the need for a specific request and, upon notice to both parents, review and, if appropriate, adjust the order. If a state does not so elect, notice must be provided within 15 business days of learning that a parent will be incarcerated for more than 180 calendar days to both parents informing them of the right to request the state to review and, if appropriate, adjust the order. The notice must specify, at a minimum, the place and manner in which the request should be made. Neither the notice nor a review is required if the state has a comparable law or rule that modifies a child support obligation upon incarceration by operation of state law.

Modification of Child Support Court Orders.

A party to a child support order may petition the court for modification of the order at anytime upon a showing of a substantial change in circumstances. An order may be modified one year or more after it has been entered without a showing of a substantial change in circumstances for limited reasons specified in statute, such as:

- if the order works a severe economic hardship on either party or the child;
- if the party requests an adjustment in an order for support which was based on guidelines which determined the amount according to the child's age, and the child is no longer in that age category; or
- if the child is in high school and support beyond the child's eighteenth birthday is needed.

Child support orders may be adjusted once every 24 months based upon changes in the parents' income without a showing of a substantial change in circumstances. An order may also be adjusted 24 months from the date of the entry or the last adjustment, whichever is later, based upon changes in the statutory child support economic table.

The DCS provides services to establish, modify, and enforce child support orders. The DCS must provide services if a family is receiving TANF. In cases in which assistance is being paid on behalf of the child, the DCS may file an action to modify or adjust a child support order if the order is at least 25 percent above or below the standard calculation and the reasons for deviation are not set forth in findings. In nonassistance cases, the DCS may file an action to modify or adjust an order if the case meets the DCS's review criteria, the order is at least 25 percent above or below the standard calculation, and a party to the order or another jurisdiction has requested review. In addition, the DCS may file an action, in nonassistance cases, to modify or adjust a child support order under any of the statutorily authorized circumstances, if a party to the order requests review.

Modification of Child Support Administrative Orders.

Modification of an administrative order may be sought by the DSHS, the physical custodian, or the responsible parent if the administrative order has not been superseded by a court order and there has been a substantial change of circumstances. One year or more after an order has been entered, it may be modified without showing a substantial change of circumstances:

- if the order works a severe economic hardship on either party or the child;
- if the party requests an adjustment in an order for support which was based on guidelines which determined the amount according to the child's age, and the child is no longer in that age category; or

- if a child is a full-time student and reasonably expected to complete secondary school or the equivalent level of vocational or technical training before the child turns age 19 upon a finding that there is a need to extend support beyond the eighteenth birthday.

Summary of Bill:

Provisions are added to the statute governing the quadrennial child support work groups to require that such work groups consider the data and perform the analyses expressly required by the federal rules.

In cases in which assistance is being paid on behalf of the child, the Department of Social and Health Services' Division of Child Support (DCS) may file an action to modify or adjust a child support order if the order is at least 15 percent (down from 25 percent) above or below the standard calculation. It is no longer a prerequisite to such filing that the reasons for deviation are not set forth in findings. In nonassistance cases, the DCS may file an action to modify or adjust an order if the case meets the DCS's review criteria, the order is at least 15 percent (down from 25 percent) above or below the standard calculation, and a party to the order or another jurisdiction has requested review. The determination of whether the child support order is at least 15 percent above or below the appropriate child support amount must be based on the current income of the parties.

Additionally, if incarceration of the parent obligated to pay support is the basis for the difference between the existing child support order amount and the proposed amount of support determined as a result of a review, the DCS may file an action to modify or adjust a child support order even if there is no other change of circumstances and the change in support does not meet the 15 percent threshold.

An administrative order of child support may be modified at any time without a showing of substantially changed circumstances if incarceration is the basis for the inconsistency between the existing child support order amount and the amount of support determined as a result of a review.

In accord with 2018 state legislation, language is stricken from statutes concerning modification of orders that refers to the ages of the children as a factor in determining basic support obligation amounts.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.