

# **The Maintenance Enforcement Program Review Committee Report**

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One Year Implementation Report  
October 2016

In September 2015 I delivered my response to the Maintenance Enforcement Program (MEP) Review Committee Report: Improving Client Services for Families. The Review Report focused on five themes and made 27 recommendations. The Department of Justice accepted all recommendations.

One year later I am pleased to report that there has been progress made in each and every area identified in the report. We have made changes to policies and practices, including improvements to customer service. A review of the Act has been completed and in the spring the Department of Justice completed a discussion paper and held consultations with interested stakeholders and partners.

This fall, we will be introducing legislation to ensure that the Program has access to the information that is needed to enforce an order.

I would like to note some key improvements in each of the themes of the report:

## **Enforcement**

- A bi-monthly training plan is in place to ensure staff understand the scope of their authority, court order analysis, and their powers to enforce.
- Files are being regularly monitored through case reviews, productivity reports, and intensive daily support and coaching meetings with staff.
- Initial discussions have been held with the Registrar of Motor Vehicles on a new protocol for refusing to renew licenses and permits when a payor is in persistent arrears.
- Initial work is underway for credit bureau reporting.

## **Court Orders**

- We have initiated discussion with lawyers and other stakeholders to improve the wording of court orders to make them easier to enforce. Training materials are being developed and will be delivered before the end of the 2016-2017 fiscal year.
- We will be introducing amendments to the legislation to allow the Program to have better sharing of information among government departments to better serve clients and improve enforcement.

## **Communication and Program Information**

- Recipients now have the phone number of the enforcement officer/assistant responsible for their case so their questions can be answered by the person who understands their case.
- We have developed fact sheets to help the public better understand the program.
- An updated website was launched this fall to provide better information for clients on the mandate of the program, roles and responsibilities, and what the program can and cannot do.
- Total payment history is now available on MEP Online for payors and recipients.
- We are maintaining the Client Consultation Group. The group was formed in October 2014 to provide input on how to improve the client experience and to help foster a culture of client service and innovation. The group has submitted its first report and recommendations to the Director. A call for new members has been completed.

## Staffing Structure and Skill Sets

- A permanent Senior Manager has been hired in New Waterford.
- Dedicated staff now respond to telephone inquiries and direct callers to appropriate resources.
- Staff have been trained in client service and de-escalation skills.
- Key job requirements and expectations have been developed for all positions, including expected results in demonstrating a positive client experience. Expectations are included in interviews for new hires.
- A file transition policy has been developed and implemented to ensure clients are notified of their new case workers and there is minimal delays associated with transitions.
- The Program completed an extensive file review to determine the status of files and caseload assignments to improve efficiency. This information is now included in a monthly audit report.

## Technology

- System reports have been developed to assist in better case management, measure productivity, and reduce errors.
- The benefits of electronic payment by payors and direct deposit for recipients as preferred methods for payment processing are actively promoted.
- Clients can view a list online of all enforcement actions taken on their file.
- The phone line has been upgraded for better monitoring and to ensure staff are available to answer calls.

As a result of these efforts, enforcement actions are up. Arrears are down in cases where arrears are enforceable. Fewer cases are in arrears.

I want to thank the staff for their work. They have shown great commitment in increasing enforcement numbers and reaching out to clients who are looking for answers to their questions.

In such a complex program, there is no single solution to ensure all recipients receive their court-ordered payments in full and on time.

However, many payors pay regularly and have never missed a payment to support their children. I want to acknowledge this as this is what we want to encourage.

Other payors have never paid, or have paid sporadically, despite enforcement efforts. Twenty percent of all cases in arrears account for nearly three quarters of the total arrears amount.

Results over the past year show significant improvement in the number of enforcement actions generated:

- Collection calls increased by 49% (September 2016 over September 2015)
- Examinations of payors increased by 165%(September 2016 over September 2015)
- Federal license denials increased by 59%(September 2016 over September 2015)
- Motor vehicle suspensions increased by 48% (September 2016 over September 2015)
- 20 cases referred for investigation to date; 186% increase from 42 cases at March 2016
- 28 court applications are currently in process, up from zero court actions in 2014-15

Though overall arrears increased by 4% during this period, we know the upward trend is driven by over \$13 million in arrears on cases that are currently not enforceable by the program. In these cases, payors may be on Income Assistance or incarcerated, or a court order may have suspended enforcement.

In cases where the program can enforce, we are actively doing so and arrears have decreased by 0.6%. The number of active cases in arrears has decreased by 4%.

Children and their families received payments of \$53.7 million in 2015, about \$1 million more than the \$52.6 million sent out through the program in 2014-15.

We have made progress in client service and collections, including increased collaboration with other provinces and territories to improve inter-jurisdictional collections.

While these trends are encouraging, we still have much work to do as many families are still not receiving the support they are entitled to receive. The program is gaining more information to better target its efforts. To date 15 of 27 recommendations from the Review Committee Report have been completed. The Department continues to implement the remaining recommendations and support the program's important work on behalf of families in Nova Scotia.

The priority over the next year is to:

- Implement credit bureau reporting;
- Communicate with clients through email;
- Develop a video resource for lawyers and an orientation video for newly enrolled families;
- Modify job descriptions to reflect skill sets required to assist clients.

**Honourable Diana Whalen**

Minister of Justice