

17<sup>TH</sup> CIRCUIT COURT FAMILY DIVISION & BOARD OF  
COMMISSIONERS' OFFICE  
JOINT NEWS RELEASE



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**Kent County Circuit Court and Board of Commissioners Develop Action Plan,  
Task Force on Child Support Bench Warrant Enforcement**

**GRAND RAPIDS** – The Friend of the Court estimates that there are about 3,500 outstanding bench warrants impacting approximately 6,000 children who are not receiving court-ordered support. The Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners Jim Saalfeld and Circuit Court Family Division Presiding Judge Kathleen Feeney jointly announced that they have developed an Action Plan to study the Friend of the Court Bench Warrant Enforcement Program. The first step is to develop a “Friend of the Court Community Engagement Task Force.”

The purpose of the Task Force will be to:

- i) Provide a forum for community engagement and dialogue about child support enforcement practices;
- ii) Research best practices for community engagement in child support enforcement and addressing outstanding bench warrants; and
- iii) Provide recommendations to the Circuit Court on a community engagement and bench warrant enforcement program by March 31, 2017.

In July, two Sheriff's Deputies were assigned to enforce bench warrants. These warrants are issued as a last resort when a person does not pay child support and does not attend scheduled hearings with Family Court. "We don't want to put someone in jail for failure to pay; that just compounds the issue when the person can't work because he or she is incarcerated," said Judge Kathleen Feeney, 17th Circuit Court Family Division Presiding Judge. "Our Friend of the Court's goal is to resolve support disputes without arrests. Our Friend of the Court office is there to assist parents when conditions deserve another look, but we can't help if payers won't work with us."

"My primary concern is for the approximately 6,000 children who are not receiving court-ordered support," said Jim Saalfeld, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners. "The Administrator's Office, Circuit Court Family Division, Friend of the Court and this Board have been engaging in conversations with the community for the past six months. This Task Force brings together experts in child support issues and members of the community to provide input to ensure children are not left behind by parents who should be supporting their children."

"I applaud the Court staff, Friend of the Court, the Sheriff, the Administrator's Office and the Board for taking steps to work with the community over the past six months," said Judge Donald Johnston, Kent County 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court Chief Judge. "There have been many people dedicated to this process. I look forward to seeing the findings and recommendations of the Friend of the Court Community Engagement Task Force."

The Friend of the Court Bench Warrant Enforcement Program includes a **Responsible Parent Program**, tasked with helping parents find jobs, assist with parenting time and review support obligations. In addition to the

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Task Force, the Friend of the Court is extending its current moratorium on initiating enforcement action in the City of Grand Rapids until the Task Force work is completed. The FOC held a successful amnesty event in Grand Rapids in August, closing 150+ bench warrants without arrests. Another similar event is being planned for December 6, 2016 from 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. at **LINC UP**, 1167 Madison Avenue SE (north of Hall SE) in Grand Rapids. Additional events will take place in 2017. Members of the Task Force will be announced on or about December 1, 2016.

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