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No More Excuses - Alberta Justice Ad Campaign makes bad, worse.

Equitable Child Maintenance & Access Society (ECMAS) members and local dads have reacted with shock and outrage to a recent ad campaign which will only make many already bad situations worse. The Alberta Maintenance Enforcement Program (MEP), Alberta Justice Department, has initiated a radio and poster ad campaign against divorced dads with arrears in child support. These ads state quite clearly that dads are simply 'making excuses' if they are late or behind in payments. Yet over the past 11 years, ECMAS has acted as a go-between with MEP for hundreds of files where dads have been put into this situation through circumstances beyond their control.

Hundreds of dads have lost work in Alberta since the recession hit last year. Unfortunately, child support payments do not change to accommodate a loss of income. Only the courts can change a support payment, but dads who need change the most are the ones least able to afford a lawyer. In a vast majority of cases, legal representation for a 'variation to child support' costs in excess of \$1000.

EI benefits pay around 60% of an out of work dad's wages. MEP automatically garnishees 50% of that, leaving dad with about 30% of his former income. But even if he's lucky enough to be eligible for EI, under this scenario, he will still fall into arrears. After only 35 days, MEP will begin to strip them of their dignity through 'progressive collection procedures'. Although some of these procedures can actually impede his ability to gain employment and pay his support, through its ads, MEP insists that this is only an excuse.

The Justice Department in Alberta has always prided itself on the fact that it has never used the word 'deadbeat' (a media term) because it is meant to dehumanize. This ad campaign, however, does exactly that. It dehumanizes dads with any arrears by implying that any financial difficulty is simply his fault.

Statistical evidence shows that dads with arrears suffer from depression at a startling rate. In fact, MEP's own 2006 Client Survey (posted on their website) clearly shows a rate of depression exceeding 40% amongst registered dads, (the national average according to Stats Can is only 4%). Out of about 50,000 files, MEP, itself, states that 60% 'have some problems' with making the payments. This basically tells us that about 30,000 dads (and potentially thousands more not registered with MEP) are being publicly demoralized and mocked every day in Alberta.

What MEP apparently has also failed to realize is that this type of ad not only harms innocent dads it also harms innocent children. It has great potential to contribute to parental alienation syndrome (something increasingly recognized as a form of child abuse). Children and families see and hear these ads which imply that their fathers just don't care. Even Judges, lawyers and schools, are sometimes swayed by this kind of blanket objectification.

And is that not the intent?

This ad campaign assigns blame where it seldom fits. It promotes prejudice against an identifiable group already at high risk of suicide. Stop these ads now or 2010 will be remembered as the year that government hate campaigns became acceptable.

A link to the Youtube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrnM6BzMF00>

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