

# THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

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## Support refunds won't be in mail soon

### Taft's Christmas wish is 4 to 7 months away

By Brian Clark

Enquirer Columbus Bureau

COLUMBUS - Thousands of Greater Cincinnati parents owed millions in illegally withheld child support payments may wait

months for refunds that Gov. Bob Taft hoped would come in time for Christmas.

"It looks like the Grinch has stolen Christmas," said Geraldine Jensen, president of the Association for

Children for the Enforcement of Support Inc., a group with two lawsuits pending against the state over the withheld payments.

The money - \$38 million plus another \$6 million in interest - was owed after Ohio held support payments for welfare assistance from 1997 through 2000 despite a 1996 feder-

al law banning the practice. In February, state officials admitted knowing about the computer error that kept the payments from being made.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services is working on a computer program that will find the families who are owed money and send them refunds. Some child support

advocates, however, want to see the money returned sooner than later.

State officials defend plans that call for mailing the first checks within four to seven months.

"We want to make sure we get it right," said agency spokesman Jon Allen. "We are on track at this

*'The \$38 million was not (the state's) money, never was their money and for them to take their time with it is appalling.'*

**Geraldine Jensen, president of the Association for Children for the Enforcement of Support Inc.**

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## Support: Refunds remain months away

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point."

Ohio officials have identified 160,000 cases to be looked at closely, but 190,000 other families who could be owed money also will have their files examined, including some in Greater Cincinnati.

In Hamilton County, officials know of 9,000 families owed refunds. They have been told by the state that there could be another 16,000 families owed withheld support.

Another 11,000 Hamilton County families could be

owed money from state intercepted tax refunds.

Butler County is combing through 6,000 names, said Zane Kindley, assistant director of the Butler County Child Support Enforcement Agency. He expects the final number owed refunds to be less than that.

Clermont County estimates 3,000 to 4,000 refund cases, said Theresa Ellison, of the Clermont County CSEA.

Warren County plans to search through all its 9,000 active child support cases by hand. Officials there believe 1,000 to 1,500 of those fam-

ilies merit extra attention.

"Because of the number (of cases), we feel we can do it all manually and feel that it will be more accurately done," said Mitch Bonham, director of the Warren County Child Support Enforcement Agency.

Individual counties will prepare the information to be fed into the state's computer program once the state tells them what information to send.

Laurie Petrie, spokeswoman for the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services, said her county was waiting on a

worksheet from the state, which may not appear until February or March.

Ms. Petrie said it could take another 2½ months to make sure the data run correctly in the state's program.

Following the state's projected timeline, it could be as late as June when the first checks are mailed.

Mr. Taft issued an executive order in August requiring the refunds of owed money. That order outlined a schedule calling for a computer program to be in place by November and refunds beginning by this month.

When the General Assembly passed a bill that essentially repeated that order in October, Mr. Allen said a new voluntary 18-month timeline began for Job and Family Services.

This new timeline leaves some child support advocates crying foul.

"Some people would have gotten a little extra in their holiday stockings," Ms. Jensen said. "The \$38 million was not (the state's) money, never was their money and for them to take their time with it is appalling."