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KAST: Every May, the Baltimore City sheriff's office holds what's called "Operation Mother's Day," in which it make a big push to arrest those who have failed to pay child support. This year, they're targeting the top 20 offenders, who owe over half a million dollars collectively. Maryland Morning producer Stephanie Hughes was there yesterday for the first day of the raids--she brings us this report.

SOUND OF KNOCKING.

PHILLIPS: Can you answer the door, ma'am?

It's around 7 in the morning, and Deputy Sheriff Barry Phillips is knocking on the door of a home northeast Baltimore.

PHILLIPS: Can we talk to you? Thank you. Appreciate it.

HUGHES: He's leading a group of deputies on a raid called Operation Mother's Day.

ANDERSON: Traditionally, we did these sweeps around mother's day each year to honor the mothers, but also to keep it out there in the community that people should take care of their children.

HUGHES: Baltimore City Sheriff John Anderson.

ANDERSON: And if you don't, there is a mechanism in place to bring you before the courts to get you to comply with your child support responsibilities.

HUGHES: Those child support payments can affect the choices single parents make. About 1/3 of Marylanders receive some form of public assistance. Kenisha Robinson is a single mom living in Baltimore. She has a job—but she hasn't received any child support payments since her daughter was born four years ago.

ROBINSON: It would be help; it'd be some help. It'd be help with my child; more money in my pocket for my bills and stuff.

HUGHES: This raid is directed at just 20 people, even though Baltimore has thousands of outstanding warrants related to child support. The people targeted owe amounts ranging from just under \$2700 to almost a quarter of a million. Urban Institute senior fellow Elaine Sorensen says it's only a small portion of the population that owes that much in arrears – which is a legal term for debt.

SORENSEN: Some people owe a lot of arrears. They haven't paid for years and years. That's where the arrears tend to accumulate. We do have research that describes the characteristics of these folks. They tend to not have any sort of regular income or a stable

job. They don't have bank accounts. They're not filing tax returns. So you don't find them in the regular economy.

HUGHES: And because these people don't tend to hold regular jobs, there's no guarantee they'll be able to pay what they owe, even if they're arrested.

SORENSEN: Typically, what will happen is they're brought before a family court judge, and asked to pay a purge amount. They've gotten typically arrested because they haven't shown up in court for a lack of child support payments. In order to eliminate the contempt charge against them, they need to pay some amount, and typically, that's a fairly small amount -- \$500 or \$1,000. Something like that.

HUGHES: That purge amount might just be a one-time payment. Neither the sheriff's office nor the Maryland Child Support Enforcement Administration regularly tracks whether those captured in the raids continue to make payments after they're released.

Once brought into custody, the state of Maryland does offer some services to help those parents find employment. Joe Jones, the president of the Center for Urban Families, says that's essential.

JONES: It's in the best interests when that contact is made that you distinguish between who's dead broke and who's a dead beat. For those who don't have any income, it makes no sense to incarcerate them. You expend tax dollars to chase them down, and even when you catch them, they turn their pockets inside out, and still don't have a dime.

HUGHES: Others say it's important to intervene before those people are totally out of dimes. Joe DiPrimio, the head of Maryland's Child Support Enforcement Administration, says when making a parent into a regular child support contributor, early intervention is key.

DIPRIMIO: It starts with treating the parties fairly, setting reasonable support orders they have the capacity to pay, and then following that case into immediately, so if they don't make their payment, they're contacted, you intervene and start to do a collection process right away. The key to this is you don't allow people to fall into arrears. You get those 25 thousand, 200 million dollars worth of arrears. They're incredible numbers. That doesn't mean that they're collectible.

HUGHES: He also says early intervention should transfer to the execution of warrants.

DIPRIMIO: To me if an individual fails to appear, and the judge issues a warrant, it's important that warrant be executed. Whether it's a Mother's Day raid, or in the normal course of business, early intervention says you do it right away. You don't wait until Mother's Day.

HUGHES: Sheriff Anderson says the raids to arrest those with warrants take place year round. But he says having a big push in May, complete with a wanted poster, gets the idea of child support into the public consciousness.

ANDERSON: In the past, we've talked to people in child support enforcement, they say a lot of times after we do these sweeps, folks will run into their offices and try to bring their accounts up to date, even folks we're not even looking for.

HUGHES: These raids aren't unique to Maryland – or to Mother's Day. They've been happening for years all over the country. And while they generally do get a lot of publicity, they're not the major method of child support collection. Again, Elaine Sorensen of the Urban Institute.

SORENSEN: My impression is that these kinds of raids were even more important 10 or 20 years ago. They're still very common. But child support has moved more into administrative remedies. It used to collect 10 billion dollars a year, and what these raids represented as a percentage was still small--but greater than it is today. Now almost all of the money is collected through administrative means.

HUGHES: Yesterday was the first of Baltimore's two day operation. Out of the 20 people targeted, the sheriff's office made just four arrests. A lot of the people had moved from the addresses the sheriff had on file. Deputy Sheriff Barry Phillips said that's not uncommon.

PHILLIPS: A lot of times if defendants, if they know we're looking for them, they'll move or leave, or change residences. We deal with a lot of transient folks, especially in these situations where they have a lot of arrears.

HUGHES: And the people that you didn't find—what will you do?

PHILLIPS: Keep looking.

HUGHES: Keep looking.

PHILLIPS: We'll keep looking.

KAST: Maryland Morning producer Stephanie Hughes. We have links to Baltimore City's child support division and the Center for Urban Families at our website, wypr.org. I'm Sheilah Kast. Next on Maryland Morning -- How what we make in Maryland is changing. Stay with us on 88-1.