

## **Access & Visitation Hotline: Helping Parents and Their Children Connect**

“I’m doing my part,” said the parent without custody. “It isn’t fair that the other parent keeps me from seeing my child.” This is a situation shared by many Texas parents, and sometimes, it is the other way around. “The parent was scheduled to pick up the kids this weekend, but never showed up,” said another parent. To assist Texas parents who need help connecting with their children, the OAG awarded a grant to Legal Aid of Northwest Texas, which operates a statewide Access and Visitation (A&V) Hotline. The hotline is the only service of its kind in the nation that provides noncustodial and custodial parents with free phone access to attorneys who offer legal information and assistance related to child custody and visitation issues, as well as paternity and child support information. Hotline attorneys cannot offer legal representation to callers or access their OAG child support case, but they can provide legal information for anyone with visitation, child support and paternity questions. Attorneys can help parents understand the legal language in their court order, offer easy-to-understand explanations of the family law process, identify potential solutions to visitation problems, and refer parents to local visitation resources. The A&V Hotline is a good customer service tool for staff as it is a readily available referral resource for parents with custody and visitation questions. The hotline has a companion Web site, [www.txaccess.org](http://www.txaccess.org), where parents can download sample materials and tools for assistance with child access issues. The OAG’s A&V Hotline receives more than 1,500 calls a month, with an average hold time of 10 minutes. **The statewide toll free number, 1-866-292-4636**, is answered in English and Spanish, Monday – Friday, from 1 to 7 p.m. Most calls to the hotline are received earlier in the day, making the evening the best time to call. When referring callers to the hotline, please let them know there is no hold time between 5 and 7 p.m.

**Success story:** Recently, a dad without custody called the hotline to complain that he was being denied visitation with his two children by their mother. At first, the father spoke hesitantly because he was unsure of his English and legal terminology. A bilingual hotline attorney took the call and noticed the caller’s unease. He responded in Spanish and the relieved caller told his full story. The dad said the children’s mother said she would continue to deny him access and there was nothing he could do about it legally. The dad, who had a visitation order, was very upset about not seeing his children. After explaining all the options to enforce his rights, the hotline attorney told the dad about the local Domestic Relations Office, gave him the number to Legal Aid, and mailed him information on enforcing visitation orders. The grateful caller said that for the first time, he felt heard, and now believes that he has legal rights to his children and feels empowered to enforce those rights.