

BUILDING SERVICES TO HELP FATHERS

“... a kind of positive environment where we can support each other.”



The Issue

Developing and providing services to low-income fathers is a relatively new concept. Most employment and family-related services that are available to low-income individuals are directed toward women. When women are unmarried, the popular assumption is that male counterparts are uninvolved with providing basic support, so connecting women with employment-based services assists them to meet basic financial needs for their families. Recent welfare reforms have underscored the importance of helping women find jobs. Through welfare agencies, women have access to job clubs, training assistance, substance abuse and domestic violence treatment programs and other programs and services. They can access services simply by applying at local social services agencies anywhere in their state. Currently, no social service network exists to assist low-income fathers become financial providers, or to help them gain skills to become better parents to their children.

Low-income fathers can benefit from the same types of services, given they have many of the same characteristics as welfare mothers—low literacy, poor employment history and low-wage employment.

Many low-income fathers have become adults without the benefit of involvement with their own fathers. They often experience feelings of self-doubt about their ability to be a good father because they may lack real examples of what a father should do and what he should provide. The all too familiar trend is that fathers become disengaged from—but not uninterested in—raising their children. Helping to connect

fathers with services using existing points of contact (courts, child support agencies, schools, etc.) can help foster healthy parenting. It also can help to increase fathers' financial capacity to become the type of parent that they themselves may have lacked.

The shame of unemployment, lack of sufficient employment, feelings of incompetence, and uncertain expectations from their female partners are the leading reasons that fathers become disengaged from their children and families.¹ Providing financial support has been the gauge used to measure father competence. Low-income men, in particular, often apply this stereotype to themselves and are more likely to withdraw from their families as a result.² Reversing this trend means connecting men with realistic employment opportunities while helping to reshape the way they view themselves, their family and their role as a father. States can assist in this transition by using employment as the catalyst to bring fathers into programs, then supplementing their participation with other services like modification of child support orders, mediation, marriage and relationship building and parenting plans.

Unlike welfare services for women, most programs that serve fathers are not available statewide or through one primary access point. They typically are provided at the community level by local agencies or organizations, although fathers largely are unaware of these opportunities. Community-based programs tend to provide the more inten-

sive employment services, peer support and relationship building assistance, but cannot by themselves adequately address issues of child support enforcement and visitation. Child support issues pose some of the biggest barriers to fathers. Whether these barriers are self-created or not, they significantly affect whether fathers are successful with other types of services. Without formal connections to state child support, welfare and court systems, many local programs less effectively address some of the critical child support modification, arrearage and collection prob-

lems that fathers face. The challenge is to use these and other state systems as entry points to connect fathers with the local, community-based services that help fathers develop the

skills to become better parents and partners and more productive members of the work force.

Meeting the Challenge— Policy Options for States

Programs usually provide some variation of four basic service components. Some focus attention on a specific issue like assisting with finding jobs; others provide a wide range of services, while using a particular component as a recruiting method to involve fathers in their program.

The complex issues facing low-income fathers often require that programs use a wide variety of service providers to connect fathers with services that address different barriers. In considering a strategy to serve fathers, states must

Points of Entry to Connect Fathers With Services

- Child care Centers/Head Start
- School Systems
- Courts
- Child Support and Welfare Offices
- Recreation Centers
- Healthy Start Centers
- Paternity Establishment
- Pre- and Post-Release Programs within the Justice System

define the scope of their interest and the desired outcome based on that goal. For example, if the goal is to increase child support collections, states may want to focus their efforts on employment assistance in tandem with assistance to modify child support orders where appropriate. If the goal is to reconnect fathers with children, programs that foster healthy relationships and parenting education offered at the community level may be appropriate. Ultimately, some combination of services can provide the maximum benefit to enable fathers to better provide both financial and emotional support for their children. However, states will need to identify the types of entities that are best suited to provide these services, how these entities will work toward a common goal, the various strategies to be used to solicit the involvement of fathers, and then develop an oversight capacity to monitor progress.

- Types of Services**
- Employment assistance
 - Peer support
 - Relationship and family centered services
 - System referral and accountability

Employment-Based Services

Employment assistance is one of the fundamental components of most programs. Because jobs and child support issues are the primary concern for most fathers, services that focus on helping fathers find jobs can help programs to recruit involvement in other aspects of their programs. In fact, many programs use employment services as a starting point to engage fathers. Employment services can include assistance with writing resumes, developing interview skills, providing referrals to job openings, helping to improve basic skills math or reading skills and providing access to enhanced training opportunities. In some instances, attitude, substance abuse issues, low literacy, and lack of high school diploma or a GED will need to be addressed before offering intensive employment assistance. Although the primary goal is to help

men in their program earn a paycheck, numerous programs work to improve the wage earning prospects of these men through specialized training. The goal is to help them earn enough to stay current on their child support and advance in the labor market.

In many cases, employment is used as the catalyst to connect men with other beneficial services such as peer support or mediation. Men become involved with programs because they need a job, but stay involved for the other support the program provides. One father explained, “When they knocked on my door with their brochure, I thought they were child support enforcement

coming to get me so I didn’t talk to them. But they told me they could help me get a job. I figured I could keep being a couch potato or I could

see if they could really help. Once I got in the program, they helped me sort out my child support situation and helped me reestablish contact with my daughter.” Program practitioners substantiate this experience.

“Guys come into the program thinking that all they need is a job. But by the time they have spent a few weeks with us they begin to open up and let us help them in other areas. They have been carrying around a lot of emotional baggage for so long that they are ready to share their experience with other guys who are going through the same thing,” says Geraldo Rodriguez, direc-

- Policy Considerations to Develop a Strategy for Service Delivery**
- Define the approach—statewide program or local initiatives?
 - Clarify the objective—increased child support payments through employment, reconnecting fathers with children, preventing the breakup of fragile families, healthy parenting or some combination?
 - Identify partners for service delivery, which may include entities you never considered partners—community agencies, court systems, child care centers, schools and education systems, welfare and child support agencies, faith-based organizations and women’s organizations.
 - Develop clear and obtainable goals that allow each entity to succeed in what they do best while maintaining a common vision for a specified objective.
 - Use various outreach and communication strategies to solicit participation.

tor of Parents’ Fair Share Programs in Los Angeles County.

Generally, these services have been successful in their goal of helping fathers obtain needed employment. For these men, the issue seems not to be their ability to get a job, but to keep it. This reality has led many programs to offer continuous access to services to ensure that they are available to provide guidance, encouragement or other support services to prevent fathers from losing their jobs.

Peer Support and Relationship-Building Services

Although fathers often become involved with programs because of employment prospects, peer support becomes the cornerstone of their continued involvement with programs. For men, an acceptable social network rarely exists where they can discuss issues surrounding relationships and child development or confront their inner feelings about themselves as men or as fathers. Peer support gives men an opportunity to discuss these issues in a productive and positive atmosphere with other men who have similar problems. Peer support also helps to facilitate resolution of particular problems, especially if the group follows a curriculum that is designed to address such things as anger management, communication, relationship building and parenting.

This structure helps to ensure that men have access to the types of skill building activities designed to help their transition to become better fathers and

The STRIVE Employment Model

STRIVE (Support and Training Results in Valuable Employees) is a nationally known program that works in many communities to provide local employment assistance both men and women—many of whom are low-income fathers and women receiving welfare. Currently, STRIVE operates sites in New York, Baltimore, Boston, Pittsburgh and Chicago.

STRIVE focuses on promoting “soft skills” that employers look for, while providing short-term training and support services. The average per-client cost for STRIVE services is \$1,500. STRIVE conducts intensive post-employment follow-up to help its clients stay employed once they obtain jobs. STRIVE also offers employed clients additional training opportunities so they can upgrade their skills to advance to higher paying jobs. The STRIVE program in East

Harlem, New York, has developed a Fragile Families Initiative to help fathers obtain jobs that offer good pay and benefits. As part of the program, STRIVE mandates completion of a fatherhood development and relationship building class. These workshops include fatherhood development, father influence on children, decision-making, dealing with stress, understanding the child support system and becoming self-sufficient. To assist clients with navigating the court and child support systems, STRIVE helps connect participants with free or low-cost legal services.

The East Harlem STRIVE also gives participants an opportunity to gain advanced skills once they have jobs. The ASAP (Access, Support and Advancement Partnership) Program conducts night courses that provide a combination of direct skill training and social and business skills

like long-term goal setting, time management, risk taking, conflict resolution and utilizing corporate resources. Hard skills training can last from 10 to 24 weeks and is geared toward the emerging skill needs of local employers. The program reports that in two years more than 300 graduates have been placed, most of whom earn more than \$20,000 per year within 12 to 18 months. Retention rates above 95 percent are reported. “Our success is due to the fact that, instead of just running a program, we have a system. We help guys move through each different phase of our program that helps them advance to the next level. We also bring in the business community to tell us what they want and need for employees. We give them good employees, which is good business for the community,” says Rob Carmona, president and CEO of East Harlem STRIVE.

partners, delivered in an environment conducive to sharing and learning. At the same time, it is feasible to introduce relationship and marriage building skills. For many low-income men, healthy relationship models are scarce, as are healthy marriage relationship models. Fathers may not have considered a long-term, committed or married relationship for themselves if no one they know or see on a daily basis has had, or is currently involved in such a relationship. Connecting new fathers with marriage and relationship building services may help to support these fragile beginnings and help fathers move toward more permanent relationships where appropriate.

Additionally, fostering the formation and maintenance of two-parent families is a key goal of welfare reform efforts started in 1996. To this end, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds can be used to support relationship building, mediation and marriage-based services for fathers. Teens and young men and women who are not yet parents can benefit from learning effective relationship building skills to help them make better decisions about future partners. “Relationship skills should be offered to all young

people, since divorce and family breakdown occur in all levels of society, and the skills are transferable to all relationships—even if someone chooses not to get married,” says Representative Mark Anderson of Arizona.

The Center on Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (CFWD, formerly known as Baltimore City Healthy Start, Employment and Men’s Services) is a nationally recognized community-run program in **Baltimore, Maryland**, that uses peer support networks and a manhood development curriculum to teach fathers about being financially responsible for and emotionally supportive to their children. The program will assist fathers to develop a team-parenting plan with the mothers of their children. CFWD is adding a marriage element to its existing curriculum that will introduce fathers and families to the principles of marriage. The goal of this approach is to ensure that regardless of the relationship status of parents, children deserve two involved parents who cooperate in their

role as parents. Mothers can benefit from relationship building skills, particularly if they attend with their male partners.

“Fathers and families don’t come into the program ready to hear about building relationships—especially marriage. But we can’t afford to push them out on the issue altogether. We have to recruit them first and help them to identify and work through their barriers. Over time, we can present the idea of committed relationships, including marriage, in a way that they are ready to digest,” says Joe Jones, president and CEO of CFWD.

Once in the program, all fathers receive an assessment and are assigned a case manager to help them establish achievable goals, part of which can include teaching basic job skills in preparation for entry-level employment. “Unless we can get these men in economic situations that support their families and communities, we are missing the boat,” according to Jones.

“All of the research indicates that children need and deserve two parents in order to maximize their development and childhood experience. This goal cannot be legislated. Those who fall short still deserve love and encouragement.”

—Representative Mark Anderson, Arizona

Recruitment and Outreach

Most often, fathers hear about programs through other fathers, although in some cases court or child support authorities may mandate their participation as an alternative to jail for failure to pay child support. Program models solicit participation for their program in four basic ways:

- Mandatory or voluntary referrals from the court system, when a father is involved with a proceeding about his child support and claims to be unemployed.
- Through the child support system when paternity is established, usually through cooperation with a mother who is receiving welfare.
- During a voluntary paternity establishment, usually before or right after a baby is born.
- Self recruitment/volunteer fathers.
- Through mothers and the services they are using

After fathers get jobs, they are eligible for post-employment training that focuses on wage progression to help them get better jobs. Similar to other programs, CFWD has developed extensive relationships with other service providers that can help fathers with substance abuse, domestic violence or visitation mediation.

One way CFWD solicits participants is by recruiting pregnant mothers to participate in Healthy Start, then engaging fathers. Home visits are conducted in an attempt to connect with these fathers. Jones asserts, “We conduct as many home visits as necessary to get fathers involved with the program. These dads don’t want to be found because they think we are going to report them [to the welfare or child support agency]. Sometimes it takes a few visits before they understand that we are not child support or probation officers checking up on them. We want to help them deal with their economic situation so they can provide for their kids.”

System-Based Services— Referral and Accountability

Because many low-income dads have never married, their first contact with any state system is usually with the child support agency or the court system after a default order has been set and they are called to appear before the judge to explain why they are not in compliance with their child support order. Despite the punitive approach many courts and child support enforce-

ment agencies use with fathers who are behind in paying their child support, both have the opportunity to become a gateway to connect fathers with other types of services that can help them meet their obligations. They also retain the authority to use more punitive mechanisms should fathers fall short of meeting court or agency expectations.

As an alternative to jail, men who are without employment can be mandated or encouraged to participate in an employment program to help them find a job. Referral to an employment-based program provides judges with an alternative to sending fathers to jail. Courts can refer unemployed fathers to a child support caseworker who will work with them to negotiate a payment plan and, in some cases, a modification. After meeting with the child support agency, fathers can be referred to other agencies or programs that can help them find jobs, obtain training and develop skills. Child support enforcement workers can coordinate with their welfare departments to identify welfare families who have child support orders. Workers can solicit fathers who want to come forward and give them services in exchange for their cooperation. **Florida, Kansas and Indiana** have developed programs through the court that require fathers to work or go to jail if they are behind in paying their child support.

The Noncustodial Parent Employment Project in Florida was established through state statute as a pilot project

operated as a collaborative venture between a local nonprofit organization, the courts and the Department of Revenue (Florida’s IV-D department). The program bypasses traditional education and training programs in favor of utilizing a father’s existing skills to help him get a job. The program pairs participants with mentors who closely monitor participant progress. The employment caseworker and the Department of Revenue monitor the progress and employment status of participants. Workers and participants meet weekly during their first month of employment then every other week for five months. To successfully complete the program, participants must be continuously employed for six months. Aside from collecting child support, the underlying goals of the program are to foster a responsible work ethic as well as financial responsibility to their children.

Program evaluation suggests the program is a success. Fathers report seeing their children twice as often as they

Types of Relationship Building Services That Can Be Funded With TANF Money

- Relationship education
- Team parenting workshops
- Classes on parenting for new parents
- Marriage/relationship mentor couples
- Mediation
- Relationship counseling

did before entering the program. They also claim better relationships with their children and their child’s mother. Fathers feel better about themselves and their role as fathers. Additionally, 55 percent of program collections are credited to former participants who have continued to pay support. Lastly, program collections exceed program costs by \$1.2 million.

Child support agencies can be used to connect fathers with services and programs. Welfare caseworkers can inform their clients about the opportunities for fathers to receive assistance finding jobs

and ensuring their child support orders are established at manageable levels. **Los Angeles, California, Missouri and Georgia** have developed model programs through their child support programs—all of which successfully help fathers get jobs, keep jobs and pay continuous child support.

In Los Angeles County, social child support workers and local service providers conduct intake at the courthouse for fathers who are behind in child support payments. In exchange for a downward modification (if their child support order is set too high), participants receive intensive help finding a job, peer support, parent education, communication and relationship skills and help in developing a co-parenting plan if they are not married to the mother of their child. Unique to this approach is the fact that all partners—child support officials, local employment providers and county staff—meet weekly to discuss the progress of clients, or to agree on a course of action for clients who do not participate according to their responsibility agreement. “True

collaboration is more than referring between agencies. It is sitting down face-to-face with partner agency staff, talking about intervention strategies and agreeing on a single course of action. That is what makes our program unique and successful—both for clients and all the partner agencies,” says Geraldo Rodriguez. Additionally, the program is self-supporting—it brings in more revenue than it costs to operate the program. The program has successfully increased collections for this population by a substantial margin.

Georgia and Missouri operate similar programs that connect fathers who are behind in their child support payments with employment or skill-building opportunities. Unique to these programs is that their services are available statewide. Georgia has developed partnerships with technical institutions to train fathers in such fields as heating and air conditioning repair, carpentry, welding, computer repair and automotive repair. The program boasts that its services are available within 50 miles of any Georgia resident. Additionally, 80

percent of fathers who complete the program are still employed. Perhaps more importantly, 80 percent are paying child support.

Like Georgia, Missouri uses the courts and child support systems as the connection point to refer fathers to services. Unique to its approach is that, as a condition of working a child support case, child support workers are required to refer eligible fathers to the program. Courts use referrals as a condition of probation for failing to pay support. After completing the program, 80 percent are still employed and 85 percent continue to pay support. After expanding the program statewide, the program increased collections by \$1 million over the previous year.

The critical element for successful use of this strategy by the court systems and state agencies is for them to develop solid working relationships with local programs that can deliver proven results with their clients. Locally run programs can evoke a sense of trust in their clients that state agencies may not

Same Twist, Different Approach

Tennessee has taken a different approach by focusing on lifestyle change and behavior modeling. The goal of the project is to assist fathers whose children receive public assistance to establish a relationship with their children and to pay child support. The program uses behavior modification principles to build mentors within families, based on the philosophy that people can solve their own problems with some strong role models, targeted direction and support. Viewed as a more holistic approach, the program tries to address all the emotional problems of clients in hopes of helping the person as a whole, rather than working on short-term solutions to multiple problems. Mentors also try to work with the entire family structure—partners, mothers, fathers, grandparents and aunts or uncles.

The program is a collaborative effort in Nashville between the Department of Human Services, the courts and the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood. Other institute sites include Cleveland, Ohio; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; San Diego, California; Washington, D.C.; and Yonkers, New York.

The institute and the department work collaboratively to deliver services to fathers. The program solicits participants on a voluntary basis, although department caseworkers can refer clients for services. Once a participant becomes involved with the program, caseworkers from the department and the institute share information about the client to document his participation in the program. Institute staff carries out actual case management, although department caseworkers participate in establishing goals and resolving problems with participants.

Outreach specialists work with participants—or protégés, as the program calls them—to establish goals and develop an action plan based on their needs. Outreach specialists live in the community and are available 24 hours a day to assist fathers or their families with whatever services or assistance they may need, including attending court appearances or going to appointments with the child support enforcement agency. The core element of the program is peer counseling and support focused on modeling targeted values and behaviors—establishing paternity, developing fathering skills, improving work ethic and employ-

ment status, and providing financial support. According to program founder Charles Ballard, the success of his approach lies in showing—rather than telling—individuals what it means to be a responsible father and an adult.

Surveys conducted with protégés and outreach specialists indicate the positive effects from the program—fathers are spending more time with their children and constructive changes have occurred in the lives of children and fathers who are involved with the program. Institute and department staff observes that fathers are more likely to pay child support and retain employment after they complete the program. Similar observations from other institute sites report that the vast majority of participants establish paternity and continue to work. Additionally, three-fourths of program participants report having no additional children out of wedlock.

Jobs or Jail for Some Fathers

The prosecutor's office in Indianapolis helps fathers find employment by offering them a choice of getting help to find a job, performing community service or going to jail. If fathers come before the court and do not have a job, they receive an assessment to determine what services will help them get jobs. Like welfare recipients, some need very little help with employment, while others have multiple barriers like poor literacy skills or substance abuse problems. The prosecutor's office works with Goodwill Industries and America Works to provide the actual job training. Both assist with re-

sume writing, job searches, GED preparation, job training, skill development and work experience if clients do not have a job history. The prosecutor's office has developed partnerships with 24 local employers who agree to hire some of the fathers who participate in the program.

Some fathers earn as much as \$12 per hour after they complete the program. For some families, support payments are taking the place of welfare payments for their children. More than 50 percent of fathers who participate in the program continue to pay child support, and approximately

64 percent of fathers are still employed after six months. Providing child support has given some fathers an opportunity to connect with their children for the first time.

Marion County Prosecutor Scott Newman explains, "We are finding that there are a lot of fathers in our community who want to work. They want to do right by their children and support them financially. If they need a job, we have one for them. If they need job training, we have that too."

be able to achieve because of the long-standing apprehension many fathers have of state systems. However, developing these formalized relationships can ensure that agencies are meeting their goals of enforcing the child sup-

port that mothers and children need and deserve. Men are at different points with their own development as fathers. For some, the incentives offered through the child support or court system will serve as motivation; for others, voluntary participation in a local program will be enough. For new fathers, there seems to be a magic moment at the birth of their child—before child support orders are established, before welfare debt has accumulated and before the relationship with the child's mother has deteriorated. Policies can maximize this opportunity by informing new fathers of support networks and services designed to help them make the transition into their new role. This moment of opportunity to nurture stable families is one that policymakers have long overlooked.

help support fathers to become re-engaged in the lives of their children.

—By Dana Reichert, NCSL

Daddy Boot Camp

Through local hospitals, new fathers in Denver, Colorado, can participate in a specialized program designed to teach men how to care for their newborns and how to support their partners once they bring their babies home. The program also provides information on child development.

Many fathers care about their children and want to be involved but they may be unsure how to build these relationships. Policymakers are uniquely positioned to build connections between state agencies and service providers to

Need more information about fatherhood programs and services? Contact NCSL's Nurturing Responsible Families Project at dana.reichert@ncsl.org or phone (303) 894-3191.

Notes

1. Jim Levine and Ed Pitt, *New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1995), 119.

2. Ibid.



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