



Including Fathers in Programs and Policies for Children and Families by Jessica Pearson

The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN) examined state approaches to supporting fatherhood programs and including fathers in state agencies, departments, programs, and policies that affect children and families.¹ The goal of the investigation is to stimulate replication of effective approaches in state settings. Our review covered four large-scale federal grant or demonstration programs dealing with fatherhood that operate in multiple and, in one case, every state; four statewide fatherhood commissions (in Connecticut, Ohio, Illinois, and Hawaii); and seven fatherhood engagement initiatives at the state level (in Alabama, South Carolina, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, Maryland, and Georgia). While most of the initiatives focus on providing direct services to fathers in the child support system to increase their employment, child support payments, and parental involvement, a few also aim to create system-level change across multiple public agencies. FRPN's investigation also examined four studies of the benefits of fatherhood programs (in Minnesota, South Carolina, Colorado, and Texas). The following describes some cross-state patterns that emerged from FRPN's analysis.

State-level programs are rare. Only four states have broad, legislatively authorized initiatives known as fatherhood commissions; of those four, only Ohio has state funding and paid staff. State fatherhood initiatives that operate in conjunction with the child support agency are more numerous than fatherhood commissions and councils, but even these are rare, occurring in fewer than a dozen states. Indeed, the current level of state activity in coordinating fatherhood initiatives falls below levels documented in studies conducted in the early days of the responsible fatherhood movement, in the late 1990s and early 2000s.^{2, 3}

Child support leadership is critical. A key to the initiation and duration of state fatherhood initiatives is the engagement of the executive of the state's Department of Human Services and/or its director of the state child support program. Another key leadership partner is the Department of Labor, which can contribute a network of workforce programs and services that are vital to the economic security goals of fatherhood initiatives and programs. Finally, with the rise in child welfare caseloads, the worsening of the opioid epidemic, and the recent passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act, it will be important to include state child welfare agencies as collaborating partners too.⁴

Sustainable state funding is critical but rare. Statewide fatherhood initiatives are chiefly supported by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants and

state maintenance of effort (MOE) funds for programs and services that accomplish the broad purposes of the TANF program; child support incentive dollars; and direct legislative appropriations. None of these sources are abundant. Although 20 states nominally record transferring TANF or MOE funds for allowable “fatherhood and two-parent household programs,” the average transfer is only 0.5 percent of TANF funds nationwide, and many of the 20 states appear to use the money for programs to address two-parent household needs (e.g., after-school care), rather than fatherhood. Only four states use child support incentive funds to support employment services, although a recent Information Memorandum released by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (IM-18-02, Feb. 15, 2018) encourages states to do so. In a similar fashion, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) released a memorandum (TANF-ACRF-IM-2018-01) that urges states to use TANF funds to promote employment programs for non-custodial parents (NCPs).

The goal of improving the capacity of NCPs to make economic contributions is paramount. With few exceptions, state initiatives and the programs they fund target parents in the child support system who are not meeting their child support obligations because of unemployment or underemployment. The programs adopt a “work first” orientation and focus on assessing employment needs, providing employment services, and monitoring program compliance and child support payments.

Interventions that address father engagement, effective parenting, and co-parenting are less common. State-funded programs with father engagement components tend to have human services or child support agency leaders who are philosophically committed to healthy family relationships as well as employment; have long-standing partnerships with holistic fatherhood programs; and/or are convinced that holistic interventions boost the success of workforce interventions.

Parents access fatherhood and/or workforce program services through both voluntary and mandatory formats. Some parents are self-referred or hear about programs through word of mouth. Others are referred by child support workers at all stages of case processing and/or probation officers and child welfare agency staff. Still others, during contempt proceedings for nonpayment of child support, are ordered by judges to participate in program services or face sanctions, including incarceration, if they fail to do so.

Assessments of program benefits and returns on investment are very promising. Without exception, studies of the benefits of NCP employment programs and fatherhood programs that have strong employment components find that child support payments and employment increase following program participation.

Engagement in state policy is limited. With a few exceptions, fatherhood programs are focused on the delivery of services and have limited engagement in broader conversations about policies for children and families. As such, they have few opportunities to promote the inclusion of fathers in state-level programs and policies and to drive system-level change.

The biggest source of fatherhood funding is program specific: The biggest source of funding for fatherhood programs is the five-year competitive Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grant program awarded in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Human Services/Office of Family Assistance. The grant included awards for fatherhood initiatives to 39 organizations in 19 states, for a total of \$55 million per year.

Promising Approaches to Funding and Sustainability

One strategy to address the funding challenges encountered by fatherhood commissions, initiatives, and programs would be to restructure the existing HMRF grant program along the lines of the State Access and Visitation (AV) Grant Program. Unlike HMRF grants, the AV Grant Program is a continuous grant that doesn't sunset. It provides annual awards of \$10 million to states based on a formula that considers the number of children in single-parent families relative to two-parent families. Although annual AV awards to states are extremely small (i.e., \$100,000 to \$1 million) and fail to meet state needs, the predictable annual infusion of grant funds to states (\$200 million between 1997 and 2017) has led to the development of an infrastructure and programmatic strategy dealing with parenting time within each state. The proposed restructuring of the HMRF grant program for fatherhood (\$55 million per year) would generate more than five times the resources currently available to states for AV services and 15 times the resources available to states for AV, if the full amount of the \$150 million per year HMRF grant program were to be used in this manner.

A second way to boost father engagement in programs dealing with families and children is to incorporate fathers in newer initiatives dealing with Two-Generation and Whole Family Programs. Only one state (Colorado) in the five-state National Governors Association's Two-Gen initiative, Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network (PACTT), involves a statewide program that includes nonresident fathers, and its program was initiated before the inception of PACTT. ASCEND at the Aspen Institute, a national leader in the advancement of two-generation policies, is beginning to redress this imbalance and lists the support and promotion of work opportunities for NCPs as one of its top 10 priorities for action.⁵

A third way to strengthen father engagement initiatives is for the child support agency to play a stronger leadership role. As the agency that establishes legal fatherhood for 1.4 million men per year, adds nearly 1 million new orders annually to its caseload of 14.2 million, and collects \$28.6 billion dollars on behalf of more than 15 million children, child support plays an unparalleled role in the lives of nonresident fathers and their children.⁶ More to the point, child support agencies need to improve collections from the very fathers that are targeted by fatherhood programs. This includes the 13 percent of the caseload that the Office of Child Support Enforcement estimates to be unemployed and underemployed,⁷ and the many NCPs who report wanting help with the things that fatherhood programs offer: (1) more access to their children, (2) more relationship skills so that they can co-parent their children, and (3) help finding and maintaining employment.

Given its lengthy involvement with families (i.e., 18 to 22 years), its ability to identify and reach fathers who fall behind in their payments, and its ability to suspend punitive sanctions and deliver positive ones, such as driver's license reinstatement and state debt forgiveness to support pro-social behavior, the child support program has a unique opportunity to intervene in a positive way to improve the capacity of fathers to become legal fathers and engage more fully in the financial and emotional lives of their children. Indeed, the recently formed U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty takes a similar view and has issued a call to transform child support into a family-building system.⁸

Figuring out how child support agencies can become “family-building systems” and fund fatherhood program services is challenging, but a few states have found some paths. One is to use TANF and MOE funds for those purposes. More states should explore the use of both funding sources and follow the example of their peers in states that favor “holistic” programs that include services for both employment and parenting. Another option would be for Congress to change its rules about allowable IV-D agency expenditures. The federal government reimburses states for 66 percent of their expenditures for allowable expenses, but does not allow states to obtain federal reimbursement for employment services, fatherhood programs, or parenting time activities, despite recent encouragement to states to find ways to build fathers' financial capacity to pay⁹ and a Congressional provision that established safe parenting time in child support orders as an “important goal.”¹⁰ For child support agencies to realize their full potential to enhance family well-being, they will need to be able to use regular program funds to support job training and such services as fatherhood programs and parenting time activities to help fathers secure and maintain employment, enhance access to their children, and improve their ability to engage in positive parenting and co-parenting behaviors.

FRPN is interested in working with states that would like to establish or enhance initiatives to strengthen father engagement. For further information, contact Jessica Pearson at jspearson@centerforpolicyresearch.org.

¹ Pearson, J. (2018). *State approaches to including fathers in programs and policies dealing with children and families*. FRPN Brief. <http://www.frpn.org/asset/frpn-research-brief-state-approaches-including-fathers-in-programs-and-policies-dealing>

² Bernard, S. N., & Knitzer, J. (1999). *Map and track state initiatives to encourage responsible fatherhood*. New York, NY: Columbia University National Center for Children in Poverty.

³ Committee on Human Resources, Employment and Social Services Policy Studies Division. (1998). *Promoting responsible fatherhood: An update*. Washington, D.C.: Committee on Human Resources, Employment and Social Services Policy Studies Division.

⁴ Institute for Research on Poverty. (2018). *Are recent increases in child welfare cases and the opioid epidemic related?* (Fast Focus: Research/Policy Brief. No. 34-2018). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison.

⁵ Mosle, A., Patel, N., & Stedron, J. (2014). *Top ten for 2GEN policy ideas & principles to advance two-generation efforts*. Washington, D.C.: Ascend at The Aspen Institute.

⁶ Office of Child Support Enforcement. (2018). *Preliminary report FY 2017*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Administration for Children and Families.

⁷ Office of Family Assistance. (2018). *The use of TANF funds to promote employment programs for noncustodial parents*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Administration for Children and Families.

⁸ Hahn, H., Edin, K., & Abrahams, L. (2018). *Transforming child support into a family-building system*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, Urban Institute.

⁹ Office of Child Support Enforcement. (2017). *Final rule resources: Flexibility, efficiency, and modernization in child support programs final rule*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Administration for Children and Families.

¹⁰ Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014, H.R. 4980, 113th Congress (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/4980>.

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