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Minnesota Fathers & Families Network

Making Connections: Evaluation Use by Father-serving Programs



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Sponsored by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota on behalf of the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network

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Executive Summary

Making Connections: Survey reveals opportunities for father-serving programs to improve services through evaluation and research



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A 2010 survey of father-serving programs in Minnesota yielded important findings regarding the use of evaluation and the types of services offered to fathers.

The survey revealed **gaps in understanding and practice in terms of ensuring programs are effective.**

- 25% of respondents did not have written goals and/or objectives for their father-serving program.
- Few organizations use logic models (45% have a logic model, 40% didn't know what a logic model was). A logic model displays what a program intends to accomplish and what impact it hopes to have. It typically includes resources, activities, outputs, outcomes, and goals for a program.
- Respondents demonstrated confusion between outputs and outcomes and confusion about the elements of evaluation.
- Only 50% of respondents indicated that research supports their program model.
- Only 60% self-identified with the statement that they are currently using evaluation.

The survey also revealed important information about the types of services offered to fathers. Responses demonstrate **a need for many programs to connect program design with program evaluation.** For example, 80% of all father-serving organizations offer parent education. This demonstrates an important advancement in the understanding that children and families can gain huge benefits when fathers are actively engaged with their children. However, only 20% of programs stated that they support fathers through co-parenting skills development or mediation. Co-parenting education is a key service that can help unmarried and divorced fathers to remain involved in their children's lives over the long haul. Additionally, few programs cited services for fathers such as health care, housing, child care, drug abuse prevention, and supervised visitation. Through the increased use of program evaluations and client assessments, father-serving programs may find a need for some of these client services.

50% of respondents cited an interest in gaining additional support with evaluation. This demonstrates an openness and interest among father-serving program staff to find ways to improve services and to meet the needs of families in the community.

The survey reveals important guidance for the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network (MFFN) to continue efforts to support staff and leaders in father-serving programs. The survey also demonstrates the need for more work on the part of MFFN to **disseminate current research and best-practice data around program design, program delivery, and program evaluation.**

Introduction

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network's mission is to enhance healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network's Vision



The Network accomplishes the mission by:

- Informing community agencies throughout the state of the need and benefit of providing services to fathers as part of serving families;
- Maintaining information on, promoting and encouraging fatherhood and family strengthening priorities in the state;
- Providing opportunities for networking and information sharing among fatherhood practitioners, family support service providers and other interested stakeholders;
- Enhancing the capacity of fatherhood practitioners and family support service providers to provide programs and services that will strengthen families across the economic and cultural diversity represented in the state;
- Building the profession of fatherhood practitioners and other family support service providers working to increase the responsible involvement of fathers in the lives of their children;
- Promoting the establishment and the expansion of fatherhood programs and services;
- Maintaining awareness of state legislation that affects fathers and educating legislators on fatherhood issues;
- Increasing the public awareness of fatherhood involvement and family strengthening issues; and
- Providing leadership and direction to the development of an active and effective statewide coalition of individuals and organizations committed to strengthening Minnesota's families through the increased involvement of fathers in the lives of children.

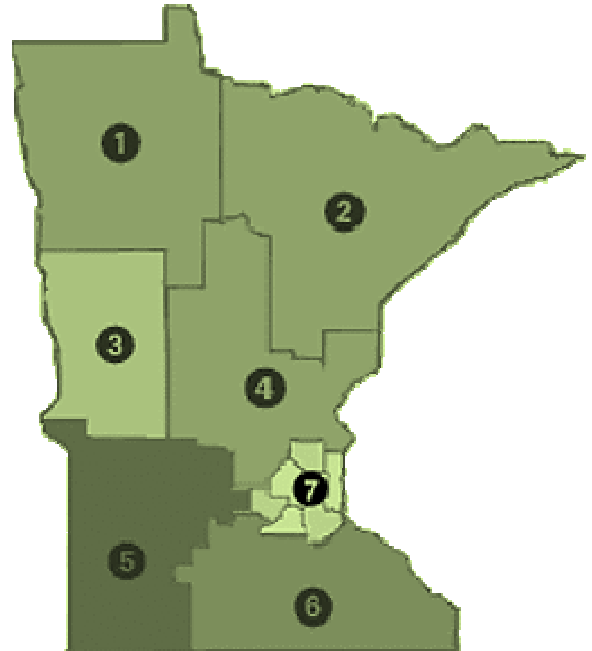
Background

Within the broad scope of social services and educational programs, father-serving programs are a relatively new addition. In 2003, the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network (MFFN) began working as an intermediary agency to support the field of fatherhood and to help improve and expand program opportunities for fathers.

MFFN undertook this survey in an effort to find ways to be more supportive of fatherhood programs. By determining the types of services offered, the ways that evaluations are being used, and the ways that research is supporting program development, MFFN hoped to find opportunities for supporting growth in services to fathers. A key aspect of this survey was to find links between program design (i.e., the use of goal setting, logic models, and research) and program evaluation (i.e., the use of surveys, focus groups, or document reviews). Many effective programs utilize an ongoing cycle of program evaluation to continually inform program design.

Evaluation

The key objective of this project was to determine how Minnesota's father-serving programs are utilizing program assessments, outcome data, evaluations, and evidence-based practices to support and improve their ongoing work with fathers. To seek information to answer this question, an online survey (Appendix A) was developed and sent out in early 2010 to 72 social service and educational organizations that serve fathers in Minnesota. To increase participation, several e-mail reminders were sent out, as well as reminder phone calls to organizations. 32 organizations completed the survey, a response rate of 44%.



Findings

Survey Respondent Characteristics

Organizations were first asked to indicate the region(s) that they served (see Figure 1). Many organizations served more than one region. Respondents overwhelmingly (74%) served Region 7 (Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, & Washington counties). The next highest region served was Region 6 with 26% of organizations serving that region. The lowest response was from organizations serving Region 5, which consisted of 13% of respondents. It is important to note that while it appears that a larger portion of respondents was from one region, the respondent demographics seem to mimic the actual population, hence it is assumed that this survey can provide insight into the population of father serving programs as a whole.

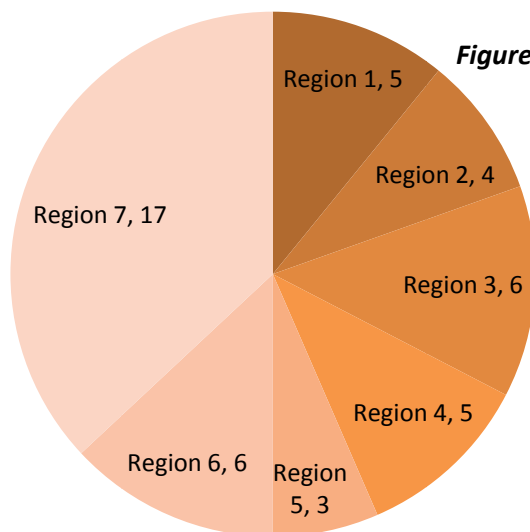
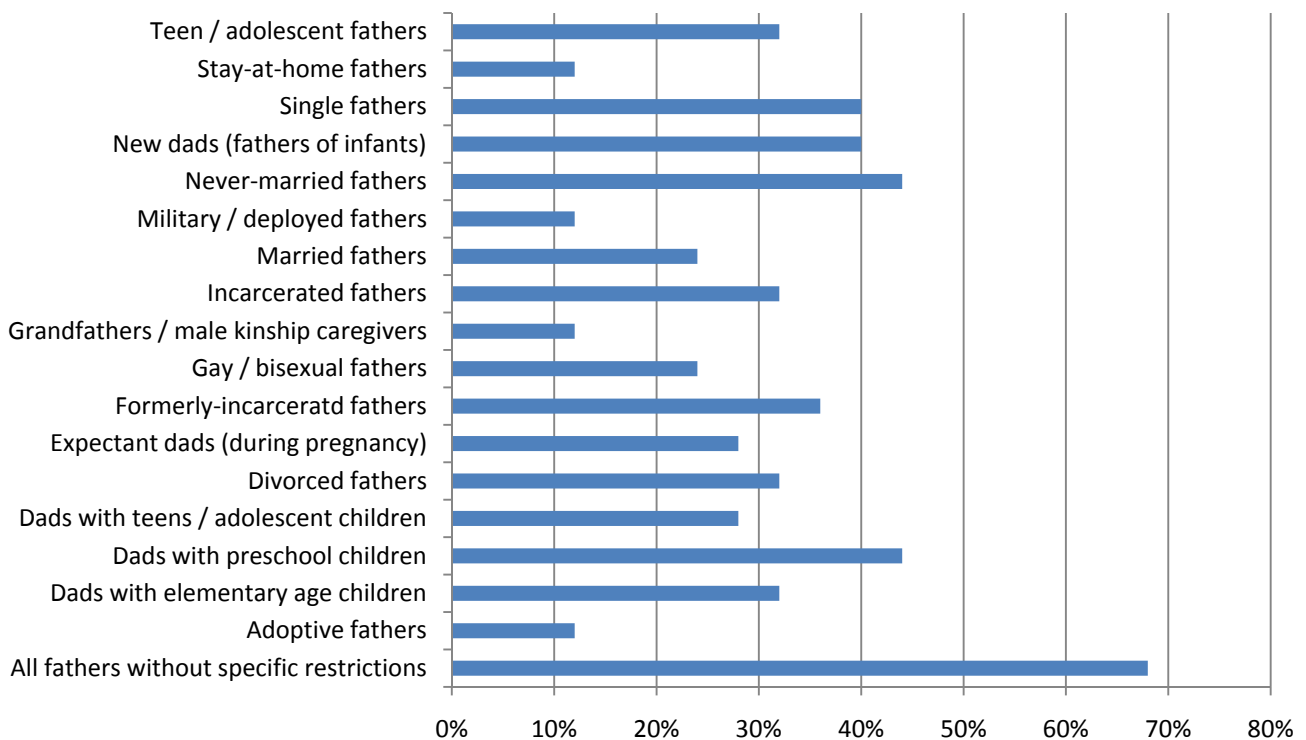


Figure 1: Number of Survey Respondents Working in Each Region

Organizations were asked to identify the population that the organization’s father programming serves (see Figure 2). Most respondents (68%) indicated that they serve “All fathers without specific restrictions or areas of focus.”

- The specific populations that were most commonly indicated as being served by respondents (40%-44%) are dads with preschool children, never-married fathers, single fathers, and new dads (fathers of infants).
- 32%-36% of respondents indicated serving teen/adolescent fathers, formerly-incarcerated fathers, currently incarcerated fathers, divorced fathers, and dads with elementary age children.
- 24%-28% of respondents serve dads with teens/adolescent children, gay/bisexual fathers, expectant fathers (during pregnancy), and married fathers.
- The least served (12%) populations of fathers were adoptive fathers, stay-at-home fathers, military/deployed fathers, and grandfathers/male kinship caregivers.

Figure 2: Percent of agencies serving each population of fathers



Respondents were also asked to identify the specific services that they provide to fathers (see Figure 3). The vast majority of respondents indicated that their services included parenting education (80%). Nearly one-half (44%) of respondents served fathers through activities, such as father-child events or play groups, and case management services. 32% of respondents had some sort of family law education or services for fathers, and 24% had in-home services/visits for fathers. Transportation, employment services/job training, and mediation/co-parenting skills were services provided by 16%-

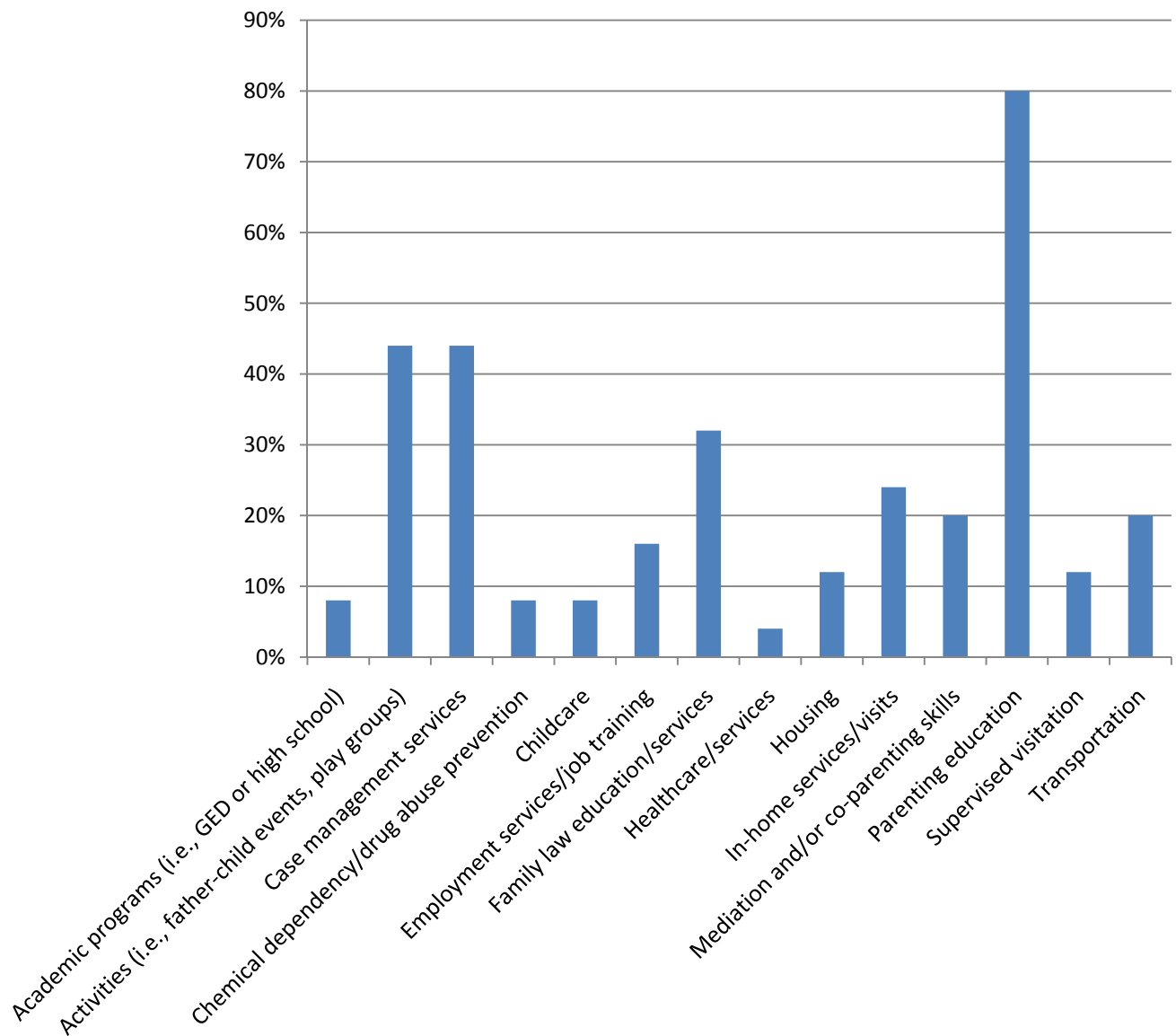
20% of respondents. 12% or fewer respondents provided the following services to fathers: housing, supervised visitation, academic programs, childcare, chemical dependency/drug abuse prevention, and health care/services.

When comparing these responses to a survey completed in 2006 by the Minnesota Fathers & Families Networkⁱ, there are some interesting comparisons.

- First, the demographics of the respondents have shifted noticeably. In 2006, only approximately 10% of respondents served more than one region. That has doubled in this survey, with 22% of respondents serving more than one region.
- Additionally, in 2006 Region 7 (the Twin Cities Metro area) was served by the most respondents, which was similar to this survey – yet in this survey there has been a significant increase in the percent of organizations serving this Region (53% in 2006, 68% in 2010)ⁱⁱ.

Both of these facts may point to the need for more father-serving programs in Greater Minnesota. It is quite possible that a paucity of father-serving programs in Greater Minnesota has led more agencies to work across broad geographic areas.

Figure 3: Services Provided by Survey Respondents



There also has been a noticeable shift in services when comparing this survey to 2006. This survey saw an increase in the percent of respondents providing parent education (64% in 2006, 80% in 2010), yet a decrease in those providing activities (59% in 2006, 44% in 2010). Other significant changes were seen in the percentage of organizations providing supervised visits (28% in 2006, 8% in 2010) and health education/healthcare/health services (36% in 2006, 4% in 2010).

Evaluation Use

The survey revealed significant gaps in understanding and practice in terms of ensuring programs are effective. The basic foundation of a program is the model on which it is based. To examine how organizations came up with the programs they are implementing, the survey asked whether research

Evaluation consists of collecting and analyzing information about salient aspects of a program or activity in order to make decisions about the relative worth of the program in order to improve, change, or end the program.

supports the organization's program model. Only 50% of respondents indicated that research supports their program model. Although, after delving further into how exactly research supports each organization's program model, one can quickly see this number may be overstated. For example, one organization indicated that research supports their program model because "through the years we have provided programming that the fathers said that they wanted. We work at adding more to that model yearly." While this certainly demonstrates the organizations' willingness to fill gaps in the needs of fathers, it does not explain how they used research to design their program and ensure it is effective.

One of the most basic things an organization can do to understand how their program works is to use a logic model. A logic model displays what the program intends to do and what impact it hopes to have. It typically includes resources, activities, outputs, outcomes, and goals for a program. Almost half of respondents (45%) indicated that they do have a logic model for their programs. Meanwhile, a large percentage (40%) of respondents indicated that they were "unsure what a logic model is." Only 75% of respondents had written goals and/or objectives for their father-serving program. This begs the question, how can an organization successfully implement a program when they have not documented what they hope to achieve?

"[Our program] is based on a family systems theory of a mother-father-child triad. The theory, supported by research, states that external factors have greater influence on non-custodial father-child relationships than they do on mother-child relationships, in particular the father-mother relationship, but also other factors such as community, extended family, employment, housing, education, and external parenting supports (Doherty, Ericsson, and Kouneski)."

One of the first steps to determining whether a program is effective is to track the outputs and outcomes. Most organizations (75%) did track the outputs of their program(s). Some examples of how organizations tracked outputs were:

- “Pre and post surveys, case advocacy contacts and support group input and attendance.”
- “Intake forms & attendance sheets”
- “We track the number of clients we serve and the number of classes we hold in a database.”

Additionally, most organizations (67%) also tracked outcomes for their programs. Respondents gave some great examples of how they tracked outcomes for their programs:

- “We give entrance and exit surveys to all participants.”
- “Primarily through retrospective surveys after participants complete certain program components. We also use other pre/post standardized parenting surveys and self-report measures. Finally, we utilize information maintained by partners, such as legal services and child support.”

Most organizations demonstrated a clear understanding of the difference between an output and an outcome by explaining how they tracked outputs versus outcomes; others did not. One organization listed the same thing for how they tracked outputs and outcomes, and did not clearly explain what they were tracking. The organization simply said they added participant information to their database, and that was how they tracked outcomes and outputs.

One surprising finding of the survey was that 90% of respondents indicated that they evaluate their programs. This number seems high given that only 75% of programs cited the use of program goals. This may also indicate a lack of connection between program design and program evaluation. Additionally, as shown below, fewer than half of all programs cited ongoing use of an effective evaluation process. Further research may need to be done to examine how organizations are classifying “evaluation.” In the survey, a definition for evaluation was given to respondents.

The survey asked respondents to self-identify with a description that best represented the role of evaluation in their organization (see Figure 4):

Outputs vs. Outcomes

Outputs are the direct products of program activities, for example: the number of parenting classes you hold for fathers, the number of fathers served, etc. Outputs are not the end goal – they lead to the end goal (or outcome) and often do not explain or indicate the actual impact on those you serve.

Outcomes are the actual impacts or benefits for those your program serves, for example: fathers pay more child support, fathers gained knowledge in early childhood learning (knowledge/skills, behaviors, values, etc). It is the benefit of your work – not the activity/product that your program strives to accomplish.

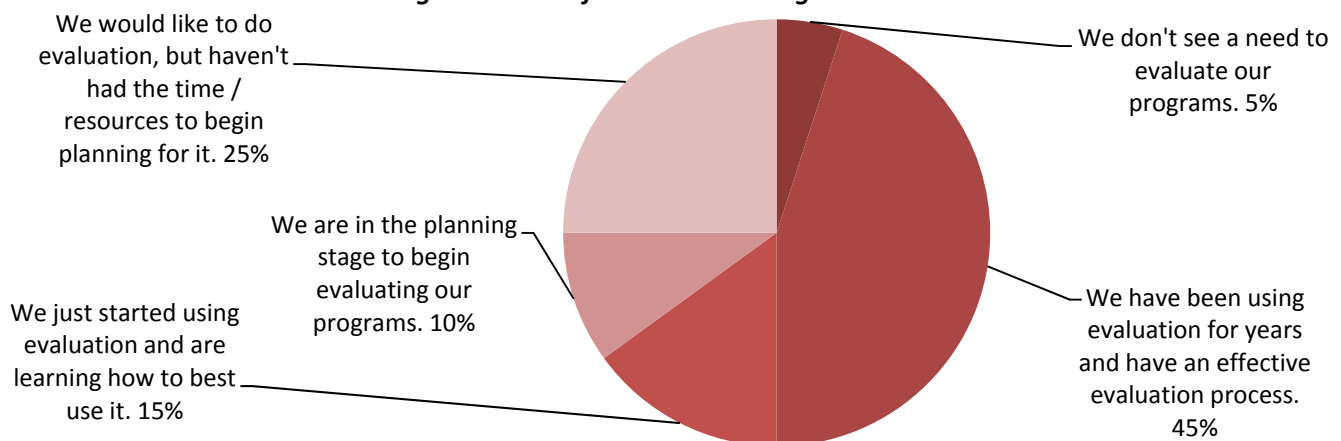
- We have been using evaluation for years and have an effective evaluation process (45%)
- We would like to do evaluation, but haven't had the time/resources to begin planning for it (25%)
- We just started using evaluation and are learning how to best use it (15%)
- We are in the planning stage to begin evaluating our programs (10%)
- We don't see a need to evaluate our programs (5%)

These responses seem to conflict with the question that asked whether respondents currently evaluate their programs. 90% indicated that they do currently evaluate their programs, yet only 60% self-identified with the statements that they either just started using evaluation – or have been using it for years. A possible reason for this is that many organizations (70%) indicated that they have worked with an external evaluator. Such organizations may indicate they do evaluate their programs – but may answer the self-identification question differently because the evaluation is not done internally.

To examine this further, the survey asked what methodology the organizations used in their evaluations. Most respondents (84%) indicated using surveys, questionnaires, and tests. The second most common methodology was observations (68%), followed by interviews (52%). The least common methodologies (37%) were focus groups and document review.

Respondents were also asked to provide examples of how specifically they evaluated their programs. Some responses indicated an effective and well-thought out evaluation process, “We use a homegrown Father Involvement survey that is administered approximately every 3 months to on-going participants as well as a group feedback form that is given every week in one group, every 5-6 weeks in another”, while others explained a need for more assistance or support in this area, “I think we could do more than what we are doing. Our program evaluates itself based on federal requirements and guidelines. Reporting requirements and incentives appear to be what drive the evaluation process” and “we need more attendance. Getting dads to come is difficult. We don't have funding for marketing and/or outside assistance with evaluation.” These types of responses support the final question of the survey, which asked respondents whether their organization needed additional assistance or training in evaluation. Half of respondents (50%) indicated that they do need additional support in evaluation.

Figure 4: Role of Evaluation in Organizations



Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey findings provide impetus for a number of future actions by the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network, by father-serving organizations, and by the state's public policy makers.

Use program evaluation as a tool to inform program design: The survey results demonstrate an interesting mix of services currently offered for fathers. The majority of father-serving organizations offer some type of parent education within their program delivery. This is a key resource for fathers, in all family structures, to better engage with their children in healthy ways. Fathers are increasingly sought as key resources for their children in schools, in homes, and in civic activities. For many fathers, this is a change from a time when father-child involvement was under-emphasized and fathers were perceived more as a financial resource for their children. Parenting education is a vital tool to educate fathers about positive male-socialization and to provide role models for men's engagement with young children.

On the other hand, the survey revealed a paucity of services that address many of the most significant barriers to healthy father-child relationships. For example, mediation/co-parenting skills services were only provided by 20% of respondents. Housing, supervised visitation, and chemical dependency/drug abuse prevention were all provided by only 8%-12% of respondents. Before programs can help some fathers become engaged in healthy ways with their children, more services will be needed to first help men address these barriers and enhance their own wellbeing. Through the increased use of program evaluations and client assessments, father-serving programs may find significant local gaps for some of these client services.

Disseminate more research about best practices and effective programming: The survey demonstrates the need for more work on the part of MFFN to disseminate current research and best-practice data around program design, program delivery, and program evaluation. For example, only 50% of respondents cited that they use research to support their program model. As more and more work is done to identify effective strategies for working with fathers, everyone working in the fatherhood field will need to do a better job of utilizing this information to ensure quality and effective programs.

Improve staff understanding of program evaluation to ensure program effectiveness: 50% of respondents cited an interest in gaining additional support with evaluation. This demonstrates an openness and interest among father-serving program staff to find ways to improve services and to meet the needs of families in the community. The survey findings clearly demonstrate a gap in knowledge in evaluation. Many organizations are missing the foundational components for ensuring that their programs are effective. They do not have written goals or objectives, are not tracking outputs or outcomes, and are not evaluating their programs. Evaluation is a critical component in program management; it not only tells whether a program is effective or not – but can also indicate areas for improvement. The end goal is to enhance healthy father-child relationships. The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network can move closer to that goal by filling the gap in evaluation training and assistance for father-serving programs.

Appendix A: Survey of Father-serving Programs

Intro: This survey seeks information about programs that meet the needs of fathers in Minnesota. When responding to each of these questions, please only consider the services that fathers in your program are eligible for. For example, your agency may offer services that are broader than your father-serving program. However, if fathers are also eligible for these services, please include them within your responses, below.

Demographic Information for Database

1. **Organization Name:**
2. **Project/Program Name (if different from organization):**
3. **Organization Address:**
4. **Organization Phone:**
5. **Organization Contact (Name and Title):**
6. **E-mail:**
7. **Website address:**
8. **Does your agency have services that are specifically geared toward fathers?**
 - Yes
 - No
9. **What region(s) do you serve:**
 - Region 1 - Beltrami, Clearwater, Hubbard, Kittson, Lake of the Woods, Mahnomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake, Roseau
 - Region 2 - Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, St. Louis
 - Region 3 - Becker, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, Wilkin
 - Region 4 - Benton, Cass, Chisago, Crow Wing, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, Morrison, Pine, Sherburne, Stearns, Todd, Wadena, Wright
 - Region 5 - Big Stone, Chippewa, Cottonwood, Jackson, Kandiyohi, Lac Qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, McLeod, Meeker, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Renville, Rock, Swift, Yellow Medicine
 - Region 6 - Blue Earth, Brown, Dodge, Faribault, Fillmore, Goodhue, Freeborn, Houston, LeSueur, Martin, Mower, Nicollet, Olmsted, Rice, Sibley, Steele, Wabasha, Waseca, Watonwan, Winona
 - Region 7 - Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, Washington
10. **Please check the population(s) you serve (check all that apply):**
 - Adoptive fathers
 - All fathers without specific restrictions or areas of focus
 - Dads with elementary age children
 - Dads with preschool children
 - Dads with teens / adolescent children
 - Divorced fathers
 - Expectant dads (during pregnancy)
 - Formerly-incarcerated fathers
 - Gay / bisexual fathers
 - Grandfathers or male kinship caregivers
 - Incarcerated fathers
 - Married fathers
 - Military / deployed fathers
 - Never-married fathers
 - New dads (fathers of infants)
 - Single fathers
 - Stay-at-home fathers
 - Teen / adolescent fathers
11. **Please check which services you provide (check all that apply):**
 - Academic programs (i.e., GED or high school classes)
 - Activities (i.e., father-child events, play groups)

- Case management services
- Chemical dependency/drug abuse prevention services
- Childcare
- Employment services/job training
- Family law education/services
- Healthcare/services
- Housing
- In-home services/visits
- Mediation and/or co-parenting skills
- Parenting education
- Supervised visitation
- Transportation

12. Please include a description of your father-serving program(s):

Evaluation Use

13. Do you have written goals and/or objectives for your father-serving program(s)?

- Yes
- No

14. How does your organization collect information about its progress towards meeting program(s) goals?

- Asking participants (survey/test/questionnaire/interview/focus group/etc.)
- We review documents from the program
- We do not currently collect information related to outcomes

Output versus Outcome: Outputs are the direct products of program activities, for example: the number of parenting classes you hold for fathers, the number of fathers served, etc. Outputs are not the end goal – they lead to the end goal (or outcome) and often do not explain or indicate the actual impact on those you serve. Outcomes are the actual impacts or benefits for those your program(s) serve, for example: fathers pay more child support, fathers gained knowledge in early childhood learning (knowledge/skills, behaviors, values, etc). It is the outcome – not the output that your program/organization strives to accomplish.

15. Do you track outputs (direct products of program activities – see above definition) for your program(s)?

- Yes
- No

16. Please describe how you track outputs (written response).

17. Do you track outcomes (actual impacts/benefits/changes for participants during or after your program – see above definition) for your program(s)?

- Yes
- No

18. Please describe how you track outcomes (written response).

19. Does your organization have a logic model for its program(s)?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure what a logic model is

20. Does research support your program(s) model?

- Yes
- No

21. Please describe the research support for your program(s) model (you can paste text from reports/grant applications if available).

22. Does your organization track how many fathers it serves?

- Yes
- No

23. How many fathers does your organization serve? (written response)

Evaluation: Evaluation consists of collecting and analyzing information about salient aspects of a program or activity in order to make decisions about the relative worth of the program in order to improve, change, or end the program.

24. Does your organization evaluate its programs?

- Yes
- No

25. What methodology has your organization used to evaluate its programs (check all that apply)?

- Survey/Questionnaire/Test
- Focus Groups
- Interviews
- Document Reviews
- Observation
- Other _____

26. Has your organization ever worked with an external evaluator?

- Yes
- No

27. Please select the option that best describes your organization.

- We have been using evaluation for years and have an effective evaluation process.
- We just started using evaluation and are learning how to best use it.
- We are in the planning stage to begin evaluating our programs.
- We would like to do evaluation, but haven't had the time/resources to begin planning for it.
- We don't see a need to evaluate our programs.

28. Please describe in a few sentences how your organization evaluates each of its programs. You are welcome to paste text from reports or grant applications that describes your evaluation process. (written response)

29. Does your organization need additional assistance or training in evaluation?

- Yes
- No

ⁱ In 2006, MFFN worked with a graduate student at St. Cloud State University to conduct a survey of fatherhood programs. 58 programs responded to the survey. The results of the survey are available in the publication, *Do we count fathers in Minnesota?*, chapter 10, "Services and programs for Minnesota's fathers" online at www.mnfathers.org/DoWeCountFathers.html.

ⁱⁱ The percentage for 2010 is based on a total of 25 programs that answered the question about service region.