



2010 Public Policy Agenda

www.mnfathers.org

The **Minnesota Fathers & Families Network** (MFFN) enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

MFFN works with state, county and other systems to support public policies that benefit father-child relationships, fathers, and families as a whole. Such policies should be grounded in solid research and we support initiatives to research what works to support fathers and healthy families. We believe that children's wellbeing and the safety of all family members are essential. We believe public policy should clearly embrace the role of fathers as assets for healthy child development. See www.mnfathers.org for more information, including positions on current legislation.

Child Support - *We Support:*

- Policies that allow child support agencies to respond quickly, efficiently, and flexibly to changes in family situations, including simplified and streamlined child support modifications.
- Better resolutions of, and alternatives to, driver's license suspensions for parents who are unemployed, in treatment, or otherwise unable to pay the full amount of child support.
- The "Mind the Gap" reentry initiative demonstration project to improve child support outcomes.

Child Welfare - *We Support:*

- Improvements in policy and practice on father engagement.
- Efforts to reestablish parental relationships where safe, possible and good for the child, including the Family Reunification Act.

Corrections/Incarcerated Fathers - *We Support:*

- Policy changes to limit the impact of incarceration on children and families, and the Second Chance Coalition.

Family Court/Paternity - *We Support:*

- Family law and policy that demonstrate promise to improve coparenting relationships, reduce conflict, and support long-term father involvement.
- Family law policies and practices that consider the entire family system and keep the child's needs central. We do not endorse a statutory presumption of joint physical custody.
- Paternity establishment practices that improve the accuracy of birth records and father identification while ensuring that each parent is accurately informed of paternity establishment options and their effects.
- The Plan to Conduct a Comprehensive Family Law Study submitted to the Legislature in 2009.
- The CoParent Court Initiative demonstration project in Hennepin County.

Health & Education - *We Support:*

- Policies to increase father involvement in prenatal and postnatal care, family home-visiting, and educational settings.
- Education on parenting, coparenting, and pre-parenting for teens, including Univ. of Minn. Extension initiatives.

Workforce Development - *We Support:*

- Increases in job and career development programs for parents who have barriers to employment.

Across Systems - *We Support:*

- Increased support services for fathers—especially low-income, noncustodial, and young fathers—to improve their financial and emotional involvement with children.
- Consistency across systems about who a father is, and how to serve him and his children.
- More resources, support and training for practitioners who work with fathers.
- The federal Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009.





2010 Public Policy Rationale

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Child Support - Navigating the child support system is difficult and costly. Setting the appropriate amount of support and keeping it right is important for fathers to maintain financial and emotional involvement in their children's lives. Because retroactive modification of support orders is prohibited, changing orders quickly is key to the financial viability and stability of low-income families. Changes can often be done faster and more efficiently through the child support agency than by requiring one of the parents to seek a new court order, saving everyone time and money. • As of June 30, 2008, there were 30,000 driver's licenses in Minnesota suspended for noncompliance with child support. The goal of license suspension is to induce compliance by the threat of suspension. In 71% of cases licenses are suspended anyway, most likely because of inability to pay. License suspension often has counter-productive repercussions, such as hampering the ability of the parent to find work or to drive to parenting time. If an obligor is unemployed or underemployed, he has extremely limited options to avoid a license suspension as he is likely prevented from signing repayment agreements to avoid license suspension. Alternatives to license suspension are needed.

Child Welfare - According to audits of child welfare practice in Minnesota, mothers receive more assistance than fathers. For example, 79% of mothers had their needs assessed, compared to 55% of fathers. Mothers were involved in case planning 80% of the time, compared to 54% for fathers. Almost all mothers (99%) had at least one visit from the case worker and 76% were visited monthly, compared to 80% of fathers who had at least one visit from case worker and 31% with monthly visits. As recognized by DHS and others, improvements in policy and practice on father engagement are clearly needed. There is also increasing recognition that a procedure is needed to reestablish parental relationships after termination for some children, such as those who languish as state wards, under specified conditions (when parents have rectified conditions leading to placement and it is in the child's best interests).

Corrections/Incarcerated Fathers - 92 percent of parents in prison are fathers. 47 percent of fathers lived with at least one of their children prior to imprisonment and 26 percent provided most of the child's daily care. In a recent study, support from families and seeing their children were rated by men recently released from prison as the most important factor that kept them from returning to prison. But many policies make it difficult to keep family relationships during incarceration, including restrictive visitation policies, child unfriendly facilities, assigning inmates to prisons far from home, and excessive charges for phone calls. In several states, policymakers have required broad-based policy reviews, multidisciplinary planning, and data collection to address these issues, along with other state law reforms.

Family Court/Paternity - The evidence for a presumption of joint physical custody is not strong and the risks to child wellbeing of a broad scale presumption are becoming increasingly clear. To sustain father involvement long-term, (1) better data is needed to determine barriers in Minnesota's family court system to such involvement; (2) child custody procedures should be revised and longer-term interventions put in place to improve coparenting relationships and reduce conflict, a key factor for long-term father involvement; (3) the best interests of the child factors should be reexamined; and (4) paternity establishment practices should be improved so that unmarried parents are accurately informed of paternity establishment options and their effects.

Health & Education - When fathers are involved in prenatal and postnatal services, and in their children's schooling, children have better outcomes. Yet the younger the child, the more that contact with parents focuses on the mother and child. Explicit policies are needed to increase father involvement. Likewise, more education on coparenting and on pre-parenting for teens is needed so that young adults and new parents are better equipped to understand the responsibilities of parenting, the characteristics of healthy relationships, and how to maintain both parents' long-term involvement.

Workforce Development - The financial support of both parents, whether living together or not, is needed to lift most poor families out of poverty. Low-income noncustodial fathers face many of the same barriers to employment that affect low-income women, but often do not qualify for the same services. Many have additional barriers to employment because of criminal records. Parents need access to more programs that combine work and training to increase earnings.

Across Systems - Fathers, especially low-income, noncustodial, or young fathers, often aren't provided with the services and supports necessary to remain financially and emotionally involved with their children. Many services and public benefits focus on mothers and kids, lack outreach to fathers, or require custodial status. Fathers have unique needs to maintain involvement, such as help with legal aspects of fatherhood, employment, child support, and coparenting. More resources, support and training are needed for practitioners who work with fathers, who, more often than not have not received training in understanding and serving the different needs of fathers. Consistency across systems about who a father is, and how to serve him and his children, is also needed. One example is discrepancies in practice between child welfare and child support.