



These lessons from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives were presented during a webcast sponsored by the Urban Institute, Feb. 2008.

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InfoSheet 14: Lessons from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives

This InfoSheet presents an overview of lessons learned from national responsible fatherhood programming. The findings were presented by researchers and practitioners during a webcast titled, "Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives: Lessons from Research and Directions for Moving Forward."¹

Findings from Researchers: The ten key findings from the research are not likely to be a surprise to those who work with fathers or fatherhood programs.

1. Low-income fathers and mothers face similar and significant barriers to work: Barriers to work were generally more prevalent and more severe than anticipated. Many low-income fathers work at low wages and cycle in and out of employment. Many fathers served in the programs had low education and skills levels that limited their job prospects, similar to the situation of many low-income custodial mothers (one notable exception is that criminal histories are more common among fathers).

2. Recruitment and enrollment are key challenges for programs: Combining of positive and negative incentives may be more successful than either a completely voluntary or harshly punitive program. More connection to the courts is necessary for many programs, but programs need to be able to offer something good, something tangible for the fathers when they get there and something to keep them engaged. These incentives may include peer support services, services for child visitation, or stipends for training, for example.

3. Being a good father is important to nonresident fathers: Participants highly valued program activities that focused on improving fathers' relationships with their children. These activities served as important incentives to encourage participation. Valued activities included peer support sessions or other support groups that

provided information on rights and obligations as nonresident fathers and encouraged positive parenting behaviors, father-child activities and services and information related to custody and visitation.

4. Programs had difficulty establishing employment services that improved how nonresident fathers fared in the labor market: Several reasons for this are cited in the research. One reason is the poor quality of the jobs for which the fathers are qualified. Related to this is the difficulty of getting fathers into job or skill training programs. Researchers noted that most increases in employment were among those men with the weakest work histories and that earnings remained low. Fathers had multiple barriers to employment and programs varied significantly in their ability to meet these needs. Also, programs didn't offer or incorporate post-placement services, so fathers got jobs, left the program, lost their job, but didn't return to the program for help.

5. Child support services are a critical program component: Despite the absence of major gains in employment, child support outcomes generally increased. This occurred largely by agencies finding more unreported income and through increased payment rates. Fatherhood programs served as an important resource for the father in understanding how to work with the child support system. With strong child support partnerships, many programs were able to establish more flexible child support arrangements, modify payment orders or compromise debts.

6. Child support orders are often set at levels above what nonresident fathers can reasonably be expected to pay: For example, the Parents' Fair Share evaluation found over 60 percent of men had orders that were more than half their monthly earnings. Establishing the appropriate child support amounts for low-income fathers is difficult and needs on-going attention.

7. Child support enforcement agencies need to collaborate with fatherhood programs and respond to the circumstances of low-income fathers: Involving the child support enforcement agency as an institutional partner was very important in imparting knowledge to staff and participants and in helping to establish realistic child support orders and address fathers with significant child support debts.

8. Co-parenting issues need to be addressed: Programs found that most unmarried fathers expressed consistent frustration with the nature of their relationships with the children’s mothers, yet when program services involving the custodial parent were offered (such as mediation), the services typically were not used by many parents. (One notable exception on mediation was a program in San Mateo, California in which mediation services were used with a good degree of success.) Program evaluations noted that greater efforts and incentives are needed to address co-parenting. In general, programs did not achieve major changes in the level of father-child contact.

9. Lack of long-term sustainability inhibits the development of program capacity and innovation: With some exceptions, few fatherhood programs that operated under these early initiatives still exist today, in large part because funding could not be sustained.

10. Systemic change is difficult: Systemic change was a particular goal of some fatherhood programs. However, local fatherhood program changes generally did not produce comparable changes at a systemic or statewide level.

Lessons from Practitioners: A panel of practitioners shared key challenges and successes of responsible fatherhood programs. Several panelists focused on the need for leadership at the state and federal level, for coordination among agencies, for fatherhood to have a voice in the policy field, and for private donors and foundations to invest more funding in fatherhood programs. Some exciting programs were shared by Michael Hayes with the Texas Office of the Attorney General, such as prenatal education with fathers and a focus on parenting and paternity awareness for teens and young adults that is now mandated to be included in high school health classes. Mr. Hayes provided data from some programs in Texas that showed fathers paid a higher percentage of their child support obligations when they were ensured access and visitation with their children. Ronald Warren, from the National Fatherhood Initiative, shared data from the 2006 “Pop’s Culture Survey” – a national survey of dads’

attitudes on fathering. Results that he shared included three findings: (1) over half of dads feel they can be easily replaced by moms or other men, (2) half of men felt unprepared to be fathers, and (3) the top two sources of information for men on being a father were the mother of their child and their own mother.

Fatherhood practitioners in Minnesota can take away many lessons from the webcast. Research shows the complexity and difficulty of improving the lives of low-income fathers and families, yet many successes do exist. The findings make a compelling case for why a comprehensive range of services is needed to address fathers’ varied needs – simply getting a father a job or putting together a “soft skills” job program isn’t going to result in lasting changes for most poor fathers. Programs learned that low-income fathers have much more difficult and varied problems than previously understood and that fathering programs are still underdeveloped and under-funded in key areas, such as successfully addressing the co-parenting relationship.

A closer look at the findings can help programs pinpoint additional programming needs or figure out why existing programs may not be getting the desired outcomes. Successful programs in other states, like access and visitation programs in Texas and mediation programs in California, can be used as models to add onto existing programs or create new programs and ultimately, to push for more funding and changes in law and practice that are needed to produce better outcomes. Additionally, strong collaboration with child support agencies is a key part of a successful fathering program for low-income fathers. And finally, this research validates that low-income fathers themselves—men who have often been viewed in popular culture and institutional agencies as absent or uncaring—value fatherhood and care about being a good father.

¹ On February 13, 2008, the Urban Institute in Washington D.C. held a three and half-hour panel discussion on “Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives: Lessons from Research and Directions for Moving Forward.” Melissa Froehle, Policy and Program Director at MFFN, and Andrew Freeberg from the FATHER Project, Goodwill/Easter Seals MN, produced this summary of the webcast. An audio replay and powerpoint slides from the presentation are available at the Urban Institute website, www.urban.org. Also available is “Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives,” a February 2008 publication by the Urban Institute.

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