

STATEWIDE FATHERHOOD COMMISSIONS



OBJECTIVE

To present findings from an analysis of the history, structure, and activities of fatherhood commissions located elsewhere to help inform fatherhood policy strategies in Minnesota.

BACKGROUND

A symposium and brainstorming session on potential statewide policy strategies to promote father involvement and wellbeing was held in November 2013. During the session, attendees discussed options that could be pursued to ensure that Minnesota policies are father-friendly and that resources exist to maintain and expand fatherhood services. These options included the establishment of a fatherhood commission housed in a state agency. Fatherhood commissions are typically coordinating bodies that advance fatherhood policy and programs and seek and administer funds. Interviews and email communications with representatives from five fatherhood commissions (also called councils or initiatives) in the United States and a review of their enabling legislation provided insight into their structures and activities.

EXISTING COMMISSIONS

Five states currently have fatherhood commissions:

- John S. Martinez Fatherhood Initiative of Connecticut (established 1999)
- The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood (established 2000)
- Department of Human Resources Fatherhood Initiative - Alabama (established 2000)
- Hawaii State Commission on Fatherhood (established 2003)
- Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood (established 2003)

In four states, the commissions and related initiatives and activities were established by legislation introduced by a champion for fatherhood causes or through a collaborative process of interested stakeholders. Specific information about the legislation can be found in Table 2.

STRUCTURE AND FUNDING OF EXISTING COMMISSIONS

Administrative location

All five commissions are housed within a state government agency with responsibilities related to social services and family welfare.

Staff

The staffing structures of the commissions vary; some commissions have dedicated full-time or part-time staff, and others function solely with a council or commission chair and members. The commission in Ohio has the most staff, with three full-time staff: an executive director, a policy coordinator, and a program manager. The commission in Connecticut is staffed by a program manager and project manager/consultant. The commissions in Hawaii and Illinois do not have full-time staff, and the commission in Alabama leverages staff that work on other projects in addition to their work with the commission.

Commission or council structure

Four commissions include a coordinating body called a commission or council. Two states have commissions that consist of more than 20 members including Ohio (21 members) and Connecticut (35-40 members), and the commissions in Illinois and Hawaii have fewer members (6 voting and 3 non-voting members in Hawaii and 18 members in Illinois). The commissions meet several times a year: monthly in Illinois, four times a year in Ohio, monthly in Hawaii, and quarterly in Connecticut.

Many of the commissions have diverse membership including representatives from state agencies, advocates, university representatives, interested citizens, local fatherhood experts, faith-based leaders, and policy makers. Commission members in Illinois are appointed by the governor. The commission in Ohio has strong bipartisan support from six legislators that serve as commissioners. The commissions in Hawaii and Illinois have four committees within their councils that work in different areas including policy, education, fatherhood services, and promotional events.^{1,2}

Funding

The type and amount of funding vary among the commissions, and securing ongoing funding is challenging. The commissions in Illinois and Hawaii currently have no steady funding. Several commissions use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds; the commission in Alabama currently receives \$280,000 in TANF funds. The commission in Ohio and its staff are currently funded by \$1 million in TANF funds, though the amount of TANF funding has varied over the years. The commission in Connecticut currently receives \$566,656 in state funding, and has used TANF performance bonus funds in the past. Commissions in Alabama and Connecticut and their associated programs have been funded by federal grants including Social Services and Community Services Block Grant funds (Connecticut), and five-year Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (\$2.4 million in 2011 to Alabama and \$5 million in 2006 to Connecticut).

ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSIONS

Coordination and alignment

All of the commissions bring together stakeholders to serve in an advisory capacity for state agencies and community organizations. The commissions in Illinois and Alabama convene symposiums and fatherhood conferences. Commission representatives in Connecticut serve on the planning committee for a regional fatherhood conference. All of the commissions have compiled fatherhood program, service, and resource directories. The commission in Connecticut has formalized relationships between stakeholders by having nine state agency partners sign a non-financial Memorandum of Understanding affirming their commitment to promote fatherhood. The commissions in Ohio and Connecticut invite practitioners or experts to present on fatherhood topics and initiatives. Standardized data collection tools for evaluation are used in all fatherhood programs in Ohio, and program outcomes are linked to the status of child support payments.

Fund fatherhood projects, programs, and services

The commissions in Alabama, Ohio, and Connecticut fund organizations to provide programs and services to fathers. The commission in Alabama provides \$50,000 in TANF funding to organizations that run court mandated programs. A total of \$600,000 in Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Grant funds is also provided to 14 community-based agencies in Alabama for non-mandated programs. The commission in Ohio awards six projects with \$210,000 for two years, and provides \$10,000 in seed funds to 17 counties to mobilize fatherhood work. The commission in Connecticut currently funds programs with state funds and previously funded programs with Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grant funds.

Recommend policy and practices

All of the commissions recommend policies and practices that promote father involvement and services and raise awareness about the importance of fathers. Some policy recommendations have led to legislation (See Table 2). All of the commissions identify and promote promising or effective fatherhood programs. For example, the commission in Connecticut developed a Fatherhood Program Certification Project.³

Training and capacity building

Commissions in Ohio and Alabama provide training and capacity building activities for grantees and fatherhood programs in their states. For example, the commission in Ohio provides grantees with mobilization training and funds to implement fatherhood action plans in their counties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Commission representatives offered several suggestions on how to establish and maintain a commission:

- Find a champion for the work.
- Formalize the commission through legislation.
- Communicate program and initiative stories and successes to gain support.
- Ensure that commission membership is diverse and includes high-level officials.
- Communicate that the commission is a collaborative effort amongst participating agencies.
- Coordinate work with relevant federal initiatives.