

# Broke But Not Deadbeat

## Reconnecting Low-Income Fathers and Children

By  
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# CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	iv
Preface and Acknowledgments .....	vii
Executive Summary .....	ix
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Changing Expectations.....	5
3. Why Don't Low-Income Dads Pay Child Support? .....	8
4. Changing the Course .....	12
5. Pieces of the Puzzle: Understanding the Programmatic Structure.....	15
6. Building Bridges: Child Support Enforcement, the Court System and Community Organizations.....	18
7. Dads Behind Bars .....	26
8. The Trade-Off .....	28
9. Out on a Limb: Community-Based Organizations .....	30
10. No Silver Bullet: Evaluation of Parents' Fair Share .....	35
11. Lessons Learned .....	39
12. Funding for Fatherhood Programs .....	42
13. Conclusion.....	51

Notes .....	53
References .....	55
About the Author .....	59

**LIST OF FIGURES**

1. Percentage of Single Parent Families.....	3
2. State Actions Regarding Child Support Pass-Through .....	9
3. State Provisions Requiring Non-Custodial Parents to Participate in Work Activities .....	12
4. Approaches to Service Delivery .....	17
5. Welfare-to-Work Plans Targeting Services to Non-Custodial Parents .....	48

# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Low-income, unwed fathers have a difficult time keeping up with child support payments and are often unfairly labeled “deadbeat dads.” Although they want to provide support for their children, more commonly they lack the financial resources to pay their full child support obligation. More often, wages they earn—about \$8,000 per year—are not high enough to support themselves and a family.

If the mother of their children receives welfare, in most states any child support collected is retained by the state to offset expenditures for cash assistance. Fathers see this as a disincentive to pay through formal mechanisms. These fathers may choose to provide what they can directly to the mother of their child. These actions result in the accumulation of very high arrearages, leaving fathers to choose between saving face in the eyes of the state or being respected as a father by their children. “Low-income fathers are willing to take the risk that they will go to jail or have to deal with child support if it means they provide support directly to their kids. It helps them feel needed

## What the Fathers Say

“I don’t pay no child support order, but we sort of got it worked out. If she needs something, she calls me and lets me know and I try to raise it. But if I paid support to the court, I sure wouldn’t be able to give her stuff like I do now, and I know her, she wouldn’t let me around like I am now.”

“I know I don’t pay [through the government]—why should I? But I do do for him. You see, I want my boy to know that I paid for his shoes, his clothes, not the state . . .”

“I gonna make sure I guarantee that I’m a better father. Because I want my son to have what I didn’t have, you know. That’s a father right there, giving him whatever he want, talk to him, tell him how much it meant to me and how much its gonna mean to him.”

and involved,” according to Daniel Ash at the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy.

Most low-income dads are connected with their children at birth. Contrary to what some may believe, they do want to provide support for their children, although they do not know how to step into the role of financial and emotional provider. Often, these fathers share many of the same characteristics as welfare recipients—poor work history, low levels of literacy, sporadic employment or unemployment. Additionally, many low-income dads have grown up without their own fathers, so they lack true examples of what it means to be a father.

There is growing recognition that low-income fathers are in need of the same kinds of employment and family support services that typically are made available to mothers who are making the

transition from welfare to employment. This recognition is founded on the reality that income from both mothers and fathers can help prevent children from living in poverty. Likewise, the involvement of fathers and mothers enhances the emotional development and social well-being of their children. Children who have healthy connections with their fathers are at reduced risk of early parenting, high school dropout, substance abuse

#### Profile of Fathers

- Average wage was \$6.70 per hour
- 51 percent had arrears of less than \$2,000
- 70 percent have been arrested
- 75 percent live within 10 miles of their child
- 60 percent have no high school diploma or GED
- 54 percent did not live with their father

and juvenile delinquency. “Without the involvement of both parents, too many children don’t get the chance they need and deserve to reach their full potential,” says Donna Shalala, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Leaders at the federal, state and community levels have increased their emphasis on examining the effects of father absence on the lives of children. This has led to the development of many programs across communities that are beginning to target services toward low-income, unwed fathers. Some programs provide fathers with needed employment assistance, job training, or court



mediation; others help with parenting and child development education. Some may provide an array of services, including help with modifying support orders to more manageable levels. However, most programs do not have any formal connections with state systems such as child support agencies or court systems; they usually are operated by local, community organizations. Community organizations can evoke a sense of trust that the courts and child support agencies must work harder to achieve. They also may be able to offer more intensive services and case management. Without formal connections into state systems, however, they may not be as successful in helping their clients negotiate arrearages or deal with paternity issues, support modifications and simple court actions. Because many are operated with the support of private foundation grants, their viability depends on continually renewing funding sources. Additionally, programs that have formal connections across state agencies are more effective at increasing support for low-income families than those without those connections. However, these partnerships are not easily developed. Both community organizations and state agencies have varying assumptions about low-income fathers and differing goals and objectives about serving fathers. Merging these differences is key to building partnerships.

The recent evaluation of the Parents' Fair Share (PFS) project gives policymakers the first glimpse at how directing services to non-custodial parents can have a positive effect on their ability to pay child support. The PFS program was designed to test whether employment assistance helped low-income dads become better able to provide financial support for their children. In exchange for modifying child support amounts at more manageable levels, fathers were given the opportunity to participate in a variety of employment enhancement activities—job search, resume writing, basic skills and training. Fathers could participate in peer support groups and sessions designed to focus on relationship building, child development, anger management or other life-skills activities. Access to mediation services was also made available to participants.

Although results of the evaluation showed a small but significant increase in the number of fathers who paid child support, large increases were realized at only three sites. This result disappointed many who expected larger improvements. However, given the

**Lessons Learned from  
Parents' Fair Share**

- Contacting low-income fathers may have a positive effect on child support collections.
- Employment assistance can help some fathers get jobs.
- Programs that facilitate working partnerships between local providers and child support enforcement can lead to better outcomes.
- Outreach efforts can help to identify fathers who may benefit from services and those who have unreported income.
- Keeping jobs and advancing in the labor market are the most difficult challenges yet to be addressed.

difficulty of collecting from these fathers generally—the national collection rate is only about 13 percent—any increase should be viewed as progress. Also worth noting is the fact that the percentage of both PFS participants and the control group paying child support steadily increased over the course of the demonstration project, although the percentage was slightly higher for PFS participants. Increases were due in part to the additional effort that child support workers focused on both groups of fathers. In some sites, collections for program participants were more than 20 percent higher than for the control group. Additionally, during one quarter in Ohio, program participants paid an average

of \$81 more support. These small but significant increases support the idea that directing even some effort to help low-income fathers can yield positive results. States that experienced the largest increases in child support payments had forged solid relationships between child support agencies and community providers. Over time, as child support agencies and community providers become accustomed to working with fathers and with each other, larger increases may be possible.

States and communities have an unprecedented opportunity to invest in services that help low-income fathers become the emotional and financial providers that their children need. States have a variety of financial resources to make these investments. Most notable are the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant and state maintenance of effort (MOE) dollars. Other financial resources available for states include the

Welfare-to-Work grants, Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds and the Social Services Block Grant.

TANF and MOE are the most flexible resources. Both can be used to fund a variety of programs and services targeting fathers. States can use the federal block grant and state MOE funds on anything that accomplishes the broad purposes of TANF:

- End welfare dependence;
- Promote employment;
- Encourage two-parent families; and
- Reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

Resources must be spent on eligible families, and states define who is eligible to receive certain programs or services. A state can choose to establish different levels of eligibility for different types of services. For example, a state can choose to have one eligibility standard for cash assistance, while establishing a different threshold for employment services or support services like transportation and child care. If states provide services that are not used to meet basic needs, receipt of these services will not affect the time limit or work requirements imposed on a mother and child receiving welfare. Additionally, any services that are used to meet the goal of reducing out-of-wedlock births, or to encourage two-parent families are not tied to any eligibility based on income.

**Types of Services that Can Be Funded With TANF or MOE**

- Employment assistance
- Job placement
- Job training
- Substance abuse treatment
- Mentoring
- Counseling
- Marriage counseling
- Pregnancy prevention
- Abstinence education
- Mediation
- Transportation and child care
- Activities that promote access and visitation
- Pass-through of collected amounts of child support

States have resources to invest in poor families, but the opportunity will not last for long. If states continue to leave large TANF surpluses in federal reserves, Congress may be successful in reducing TANF funds below current standards. States need to ensure that they have built adequate support systems before families reach time limits and lose eligibility for welfare. Because col-

lection efforts for low-income families are so low, states have everything to gain by making an investment in fathers. Children of these fathers have far more to gain, not only by receiving regular financial support, but also by possibly reconnecting with fathers that many states have been too quick to label deadbeats.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

You can't pay what you don't earn. Some dads have the financial resources, but have chosen not to pay child support. They have earned the title "deadbeat dad," and they are the target of strengthened child support enforcement efforts recently adopted by federal and state officials. Low-income, unwed fathers often do not have jobs or have jobs that do not pay well. Consequently, they are not meeting their child support obligations on a consistent basis. These dads often face child support collection efforts that assume nonpayment is based on unwillingness to pay support. New approaches are beginning to recognize that inability to pay is critical for many low-income fathers. In response, states and communities have started to focus on improving fathers' capacity to provide for their children by offering employment assistance and parenting or child development services to strengthen fathers' emotional connection with their children.

There is growing recognition that low-income fathers are in need of the same kinds of employment and family support services that typically are made available to mothers who are making the transition from welfare to employment. This recognition also is founded on the reality that income from both mothers and fathers can help prevent children from living in poverty. Likewise, the involvement of fathers and mothers enhances the emotional development and social well-being of their children.

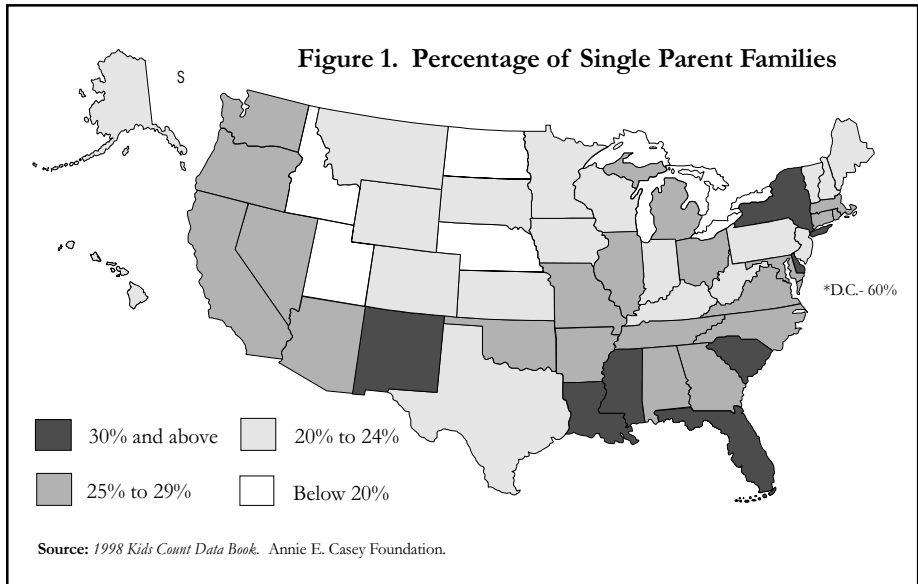
The timing is right—states and communities have an unprecedented opportunity to invest in services that help low-income fathers become the emotional and financial providers that their

children need. Changes at the federal level through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and the Welfare-to-Work (WtW) block grants give states financial resources to make investments in poor fathers and to build on existing efforts across a number of communities. It is an opportunity for community leaders and agencies to come together and work toward a common goal of supporting children and their families.

Leaders at federal, state and community levels have increased their emphasis on examining the effects of father absence on the lives of children. They have developed specialized services, programs and even public service ad campaigns that are beginning to send the message that father involvement is important. At the federal level, President Clinton issued an executive order directing federal programs and policies to strengthen the role of fathers in families. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement has funded projects that assist local child support offices to help fathers in new ways. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, along with several governors' offices, have developed work groups to discuss strategies to help fathers reconnect with their children. Governors and legislators in some states are looking at policies that can help establish and support better connections between fathers and their children. States are just beginning these efforts, but they demonstrate a growing recognition of the importance of helping to connect low-income fathers with their children. "Without the involvement of both parents, too many children don't get the chance they need and deserve to reach their full potential," says Donna Shalala, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Currently, close to one-third of children live in a single-parent household and 44 percent of those children live in poverty.<sup>1</sup> In real numbers, this means an adult with two children lives on less than \$13,650 per year. Child poverty has implications for later success in a variety of social measures.<sup>2</sup> Children in low-income families tend to fare poorly in educational achievement and they are at increased risk of juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy. All these risk factors can be softened if children have a strong family bond and a strong family support sys-

tem—including positive influence from fathers—even when they do not live in their children’s home.



Receiving child support can improve the financial situation of families and help them move off welfare. It also can prevent dependency for families that are at risk of going on welfare. Increasing child support to poor families was a goal of welfare reform in 1996. State flexibility in welfare and tougher measures to help states collect support are mandates to assist in meeting this goal. As time limits become a reality for an increasing number of families, supports from a variety of sources is essential to ensure that children are not worse off once families lose eligibility for welfare.

For many children of low-income fathers, the promise of child support is not achieved. State child support efforts focus on recovering payments to reimburse the welfare programs. Many of these dads share some of the same characteristics as welfare recipients. The Bureau of the Census reports that about one-third of all non-custodial parents are considered low-income—they earn less than \$8,000 per year. Although most low-income fathers

work at some point during a year, only 25 percent work full-time during the entire year. More than 90 percent have an employment history, but most jobs are seasonal or temporary and tend to be low wage jobs that do not include benefits. Additionally, most of these fathers are African American or Hispanic, both of whom have disproportionate contact with justice systems compared to Caucasian men. Like welfare recipients, these men can find a job but they have trouble keeping it, and the jobs they find seldom pay enough to support a family.

Although 54 percent of welfare families have received an order of support, only about 13 percent see any regular child support according to data from the Office of Child Support Enforcement. For families who do not receive welfare, the picture is not much better. Close to 60 percent have established orders but less than 20 percent actually receive support.

The sections that follow provide a contextual basis for understanding the policy barriers and personal barriers that low-income fathers encounter. Examples of various service delivery approaches and program models demonstrate how some states and localities are attempting to help fathers overcome these barriers for the betterment of themselves and their children, including the options for program financing. Lastly, an insightful look into the recent evaluation of the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration gives policymakers an understanding of the effect these types of programs have on serving low-income fathers.



## 2. CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

Recognizing the employment circumstances of low-income fathers and providing services to increase their earning capacity is a new approach. Clear answers on how to do this may take some time to develop. Program effectiveness is difficult to measure, given the fact that many communities place more emphasis on helping fathers and serving families than on conducting rigorous evaluations of programs. There is a need for valid research to fully evaluate the impacts these programs have on the lives of fathers and their children.

Changing expectations and redirecting interest may be an appropriate starting point, given that traditional child support enforcement approaches by themselves have shown only limited success in increasing the well-being of most low-income families.

The good news is that helping low-income non-custodial fathers be better parents can pay off with increased financial support and stronger connections with their children. Some assert that a father's ability to provide financially is the critical and necessary incentive to becoming and staying involved with his child, while others claim that being involved with his child is the motivation to become employed and pay support.<sup>3</sup> There may be disagreement on the process, but all agree that positive outcomes for children and their fathers can result when dads play an active role in supporting their children both financially and emotionally. Additionally, there is widespread agreement that fathers should be responsible for supporting their children. "Fathers need to

understand that even if they do not live with their children, their influence is profound,” says Deputy Secretary for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Kevin Thurm. No

As they focus on their children’s needs, fathers learn how to subordinate their own needs . . . this helps them learn how to find and keep a job. It also helps them manage their earnings so that they can contribute to their child’s financial needs.

—Ron Mincy, Ford Foundation

It’s not jobs that lead men to children, but children who lead men to jobs.

—Charles Ballard, Institute for Responsible Fatherhood

matter the process or model, the critical point is that most fathers want to be connected with their children and to be good parents. Experts agree that most men want to support their children from a financial and emotional standpoint, although they may not be currently involved with providing support. Many fathers provide some type of support on an informal basis.

Welfare and child support systems have viewed fathers as a source for financial support, while underestimating

the contribution fathers can make as nurturers. For many low-income parents who have never married, welfare has supplanted the father’s role as provider and the mother seemingly has become the sole supporter and nurturer.<sup>4</sup> Child and poverty service systems have reinforced the notion that a father’s worth is measured by his ability to provide financially but typically have neglected the emotional contribution that men can make in the lives of their children, especially if the father was never married to the child’s mother. When fathers live outside the home, the assumption is made that they do not care or they do not want to be involved with their children’s lives.

In fact, the opposite usually is true, but fathers are sometimes unsure about how to be involved, especially if they cannot provide formal or informal support for their child.<sup>5</sup> Many poor, unwed fathers are connected with their children at birth. Recent interviews with low-income fathers reveal that more than half of these fathers lived with the child’s mother at birth, and 80 percent were romantically involved.<sup>6</sup> Three-fourths of fathers provided support during pregnancy, and most mothers plan to put the father’s name on the child’s birth certificate. For a variety of reasons, over time the connection diminishes and fathers become

disconnected with their children. Finding ways to maintain the connection and the commitment will be one of the challenges that programs serving fathers will try to address.

Additionally, low-income fathers often have grown up without their own fathers so they lack a true role model to demonstrate what a father does and how a father can interact with his children. Most child or poverty service systems target women, so for low-income fathers there is not a parallel social network that can help them understand the responsibility of raising children.

Recent changes in child support enforcement and welfare reform have shifted financial responsibility away from government and back on parents. Time limits and work requirements push welfare recipients into the work force so that earned income now is replacing cash benefits. Though welfare changes have recognized that recipients need help with such things as child care and job training to become responsible financial providers, child support efforts have focused on collecting dad's paycheck without acknowledging that low-income fathers share some of the same barriers to self-sufficiency that welfare recipients face. These barriers hinder some low-income fathers from providing basic support for their children. Helping to foster a father's emotional connection with his children as well as his financial contribution can work toward strengthening the father's ability to be a providing parent.

**Stereotypes**

- All dads who don't pay child support are deadbeats.
- Dads don't care about the well-being of their children.
- A father's role is mainly that of financial provider.

**Realities**

- Dads want to provide for their children and many pay what they can, although some lack the money to pay the full amount required for their child support order.
- Dads do care, but many are not sure how to be involved, or what is expected of them.
- Dads want to provide guidance and be role models for their children, not just provide their paycheck.

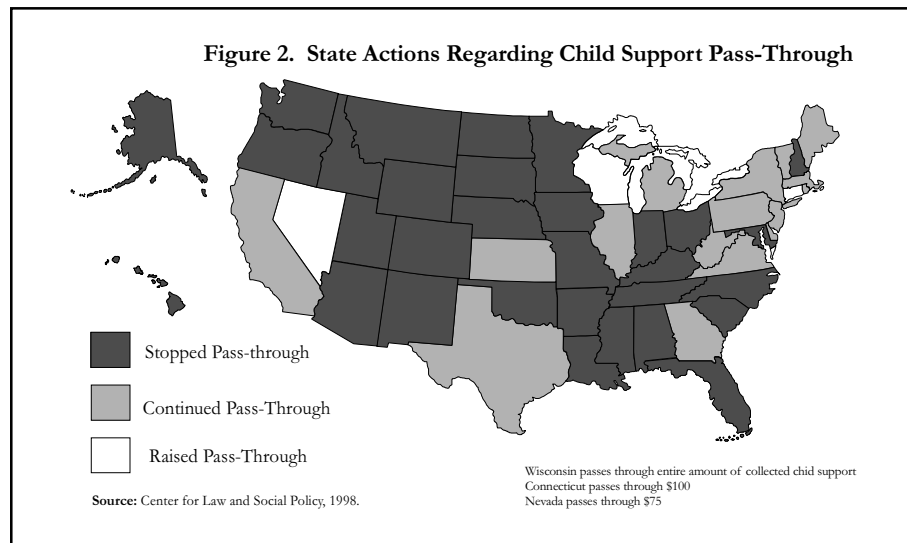
### 3. WHY DON'T LOW-INCOME DADS PAY CHILD SUPPORT?

There are some very basic reasons why poor fathers do not pay child support. The first is that many fathers make little money and do not pay their full support obligation. Low-income fathers may pay large portions of their earnings to satisfy child support payments, leaving some fathers with very little to pay for rent and food for themselves.<sup>7</sup> This leads many fathers to make informal arrangements to provide what they can, rather than attempt to pay what they owe through the formalized system. One father explained, “I don’t pay no child support order, but we sort of got it worked out. If she needs something, she calls me and lets me know and I try to raise it. But if I paid support to the court, I sure wouldn’t be able to give her stuff like I do now, and I know her, she wouldn’t let me around like I am now.”<sup>8</sup>

Often, low-income fathers do not understand the legal process by which support orders are granted and modified.<sup>9</sup> Because these fathers usually lack legal representation, they have very little understanding of their rights. Most low-income fathers were never married to their child’s mother, so they do not encounter the systematic procedure that enables divorcing parents to participate in establishing support and visitation arrangements. Fathers assert that one of the main reasons they avoid court proceedings is that, mistakenly, they assume the court already has determined how much support they owe and there is no room for negotia-

tion. In fact, states can provide for considerable leeway in determining support for low-income parents, sometimes establishing awards as low as \$25 per month. Fathers also are fearful of the court system itself. Without legal representation, many associate the child support system with that of the criminal justice system, where they perceive the court's only interest is in punishing them.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, many fathers receive default child support orders for failing to attend the court proceeding. In these cases, the court must make a decision on the amount of a support award without knowing what the real earnings of a non-custodial father may be. These default orders may not be reflective of the father's real income. When a father's employment and income change due to periods of unemployment or lower paying jobs, fathers may not be aware that they can petition for a downward modification of their child support. Other fathers may work jobs that provide cash income that is not disclosed to the court.



Second, many low-income fathers express reluctance to pay support because they see that very little, if any, collected support goes directly to the family. In 31 states, if the mother and child

are on welfare, all collected amounts of child support are retained by the state to offset what they have spent on cash assistance for welfare families.

Fathers see this as a disincentive to pay through the system. They want their child support payments to go directly to the mother and child. If these payments do not go directly to the mother and child, fathers often do not pay and end up accumulating huge arrearages—more than \$10,000 in some cases—as a result of their avoidance. One father in California explained, “I know I don’t pay [through the government]—why should I? But I do do for him. You see, I want my boy to know that I paid for his shoes, his clothes, not the state . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Faced with such arrearages, dads feel discouraged and view repayment as an impossible accomplishment. One dad from Wisconsin explained, “If they come and take me to jail, I won’t care because I provide for my family when I can.”

Welfare reform in 1996 allowed states to discontinue the mandated \$50 ‘pass-through’ that gave families the first cut of collected child support. States have authority to provide pass-through amounts at any level, and can choose to give all collected support to the family—such money can be counted as an expenditure under state welfare programs. Wisconsin is the only state that allows families to keep the entire amount of collected child support.

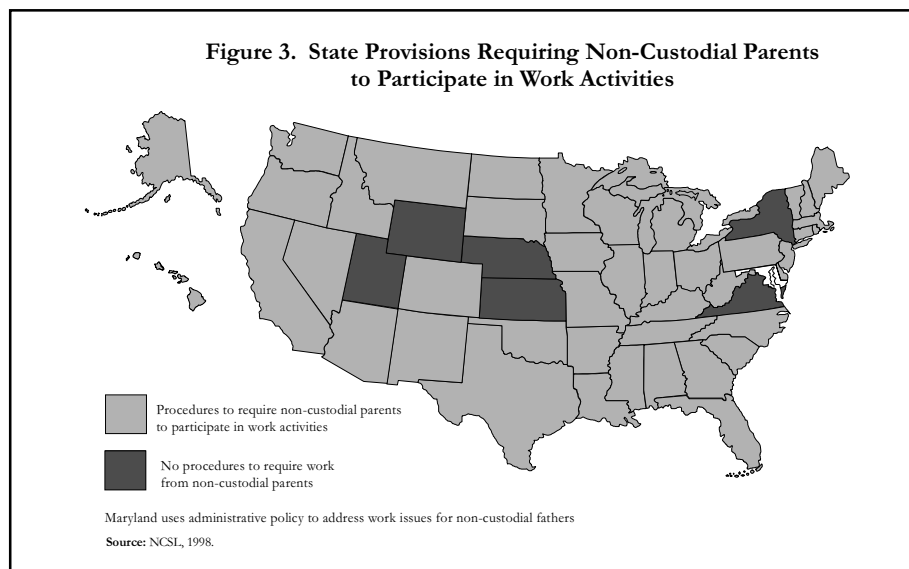
Sometimes fathers avoid paying support if they do not have frequent contact with their children. In situations where a father cannot keep his financial obligations, mothers are sometimes quick to prevent a father from seeing his child. In response, the father stops paying altogether. As many as 45 percent of non-custodial parents cite visitation disputes as reasons for not paying child support, according to recent studies in Illinois and Minnesota.<sup>12</sup> Helping fathers establish better relationships with the mothers of their children can help fathers get access to their children. Some states are helping dads prepare joint parenting plans so both parents have input about discipline, visitation, school choice and other things that usually are left to the discretion of the resident

parent. It should be noted that for most children, contact with their father can be beneficial. (This is not to suggest that contact is appropriate in all cases, especially when issues of abuse, neglect or violence are present.)

What is surprising to some is that many low-income fathers do give some type of informal support to their families; it just does not come through the child support system. They provide clothes, food and diapers for their children, or give cash directly to the mother. This strategy helps fathers feel a direct connection to their children and a sense that they are meeting their responsibility, even if the court does not see it that way. A recent study in Minnesota supports this notion—more than 50 percent of non-custodial fathers who did not pay support provided some assistance directly to the mother in the form of cash, gifts or toys. “Low-income fathers are willing to take the risk that they will go to jail or have to deal with child support if it means they provide support directly to their kids. It helps them feel needed and involved,” according to Daniel Ash at the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy.

## 4. CHANGING THE COURSE

The ability to pay child support depends on one factor—money. While punishments and enforcement mechanisms may work for fathers who have financial resources, some low-income fathers can become better providers for their children if they also get help finding jobs, keeping jobs and getting better jobs. Reforms in child support enforcement and welfare since the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 have started states thinking in new directions. In addition to strengthening enforcement mechanisms, the law mandated that states develop procedures to require non-custodial parents whose children receive Temporary Assistance to





Needy Families (TANF) to work or develop payment plans if they are behind in their child support. Currently, 45 states have provisions that give the state authority to require work. These requirements are usually not carried out on a statewide basis, or states do not completely exercise this option. Requiring participation in a program seems to be at the court's discretion, especially because concentrated services for low-income dads are not widely available in all areas. States also require mothers to cooperate with enforcement procedures by identifying the father of their children in order to receive TANF cash benefits.

In response, a few states have started to focus on helping dads find jobs or enhance their skills so they can get better jobs that allow them to provide financial support for their children. They also are trying to help fathers reconnect with their children by teaching parenting skills and child development.

Finding jobs for this population is no small task, and helping them progress in the labor market is an even greater challenge. The Bureau of the Census reports that more than 80 percent of low-income fathers have a high school diploma or less—the average earnings for individuals who have less than a high school education is under \$1,000 per month. In addition, only 25 percent of these dads worked in a full-time job for a full year, and the vast majority of them had contact with the criminal justice system.

Child support agencies have typically focused on collecting support from fathers with resources, but they have not put forth effort to help low-income fathers meet their obligations. Further, child support agencies have enjoyed only limited success at collecting support in general. Even in the most successful states, collections are never above 45 percent for all families and usually hover around 20 percent. Rarely do collections for welfare families reach this level. Child support workers have focused on processing and collecting support from those who are easy to find and who already have jobs that pay well enough to support families. This direction is based partly on the old federal incentive system that viewed overall dollar amounts collected and the asso-

ciated program cost as the primary indicator of program performance. New federal incentives have been designed to recognize state performance in a wider variety of child support service areas. The result is that states can be rewarded for doing a good job in such areas as establishing orders, collections, paternity establishment and payments on arrearages on a per-case basis.

Collecting from low-income fathers has been a low priority because of the time and effort involved. Like welfare recipients, many do not stay in one job for long periods—or at the same address—making them difficult to locate. Some live with relatives who are unwilling to provide information to child support agencies about their whereabouts. In other cases, mothers cannot or do not disclose all the information that can help agencies find absent parents—sometimes because they may risk losing the underground support they may currently be receiving.

Child support agencies are revenue driven, so focusing on the fathers who can generate the most revenue has seemed a logical way to operate. Mothers, children and taxpayers have been the sole customers of child support agencies and a shift toward providing services to fathers is a new dimension with which few caseworkers or state agencies have experience. Courts have similar goals in that they play the role of enforcer and issue punishments. The new challenge of enabling fathers to be successful and involved means states must develop a new approach. It will take some time and transformation to learn how to work with low-income fathers and to develop strategies that promote—rather than discourage—active child support and parental involvement.

## **5. PIECES OF THE PUZZLE: UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRAMMATIC STRUCTURE**

In recent years, states have focused considerable attention on transforming welfare into a work-based system to assist welfare families in becoming self-sufficient and independent of government support. They also have toughened enforcement standards for child support in the hopes of giving poor families the additional financial support they need and deserve once they leave welfare. Programs that address the issue of low-income fathers are just emerging on the radar screen in states. Without a statewide or strategic plan that addresses the issue of low-income fathers, states are proceeding slowly. They are beginning to develop policies or programs focused on providing assistance to dads in the form of small pilot programs or demonstration projects. These small programs are offering assistance in the form of basic employment services like referrals to job boards—or more intensive services—like training, job coaching parenting skills and mediation. In many states, a number of programs serve low-income fathers; many are locally run programs. They tend not to be a part of state institutions—education, welfare and child support systems. Many are unaware of each other and collaboration is an occasional or rare occurrence. Although some have formal relationships with the state office of child support or the court system, many do not. Consequently, there is not a comprehensive or strategic approach to service delivery at the local, county or state level. As a result, many programs provide similar services to the same popu-

lation, often competing with one another for participants and financial resources.

### **Programmatic Structure: The Exception**

There are some notable exceptions to the decentralized and segregated approach to fatherhood services in states. Florida and Massachusetts developed commissions designed to address the issues of fatherhood across the state. The Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood was established by the Legislature in 1996 to develop a statewide strategy to address fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. The commission is governed by a 25-member board that includes legislators, judges, and state and local agency officials. The commission is directed by statute to identify critical issues facing fathers and their children and to make recommendations to the state about how policy can be changed to support fathers. These issues include: teen parenting, low-income fathers and fathers' access to time with their children. After identifying systematic obstacles or barriers to the identified issues, the commission informs lawmakers about needed policy changes or restructuring services that can help make it easier for fathers to be involved with their children. The Com-

#### **Goals of Florida's Commission on Responsible Fatherhood**

- To raise public awareness of problems created when a child grows up without a responsible father present.
- To identify obstacles that impede or prevent the involvement of responsible fathers in the lives of their children.
- To promote successful strategies to encourage responsible fatherhood.

mission was given authority by the legislature to address these issues, so there is a respected and notable voice that looks comprehensively at statewide policies. The recommendations also take into consideration the framework and service delivery structure for state institutions such as human services, health care and education. The recommendations try to integrate community level services with state

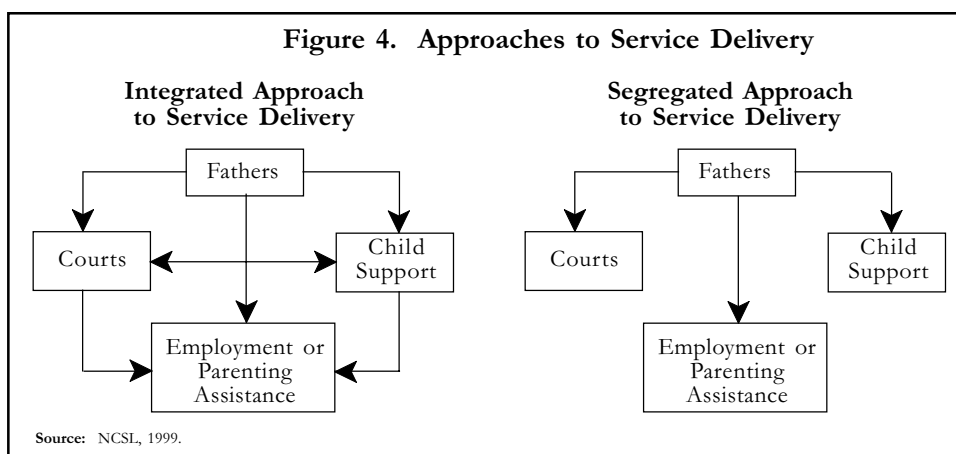
structures. In 1998, five out of six recommendations led to statutory changes addressing the needs of low-income fathers. Some recent recommendations include: restructuring support guidelines to be responsive to low-income fathers, changing visitation to interaction time, and targeting contraceptive services and education to boys instead of focusing primarily on girls.

The unique aspect of this approach is that the commission has authority to fund local initiatives based on the statewide strategic plan to serve fathers. The commission receives an annual legislative appropriation to fund programs. During 1998, the commission received \$250,000 from the Legislature that funded programs covering 35 counties. Programs funded by the commission include mentoring, job training, parenting and family counseling. Many of these projects work in conjunction with state systems like the court and child support enforcement agencies.

**Programmatic Structure: The Norm**

Service delivery becomes fragmented if there is not a clear vision for serving fathers or a statewide strategy targeted at low-income dads. Programs and agencies differ in their goals and perceptions about fathers. Child support agencies focus on collections, the courts on enforcement, and community providers on personal development for their participants.

Two basic service delivery practices are in place, as shown in figure 4. The first is an integrated approach based on a partnership between the courts, child support enforcement agencies and community-based programs that delivers an array of employment services, parenting education or mediation. The second approach involves only the community-based program operating independently of state child support agencies or the court system.



## 6. BUILDING BRIDGES: CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT, THE COURT SYSTEM AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Although there are many programs that are designed to work with fathers, only a handful have fostered collaborative relationships with all the relevant partners—child support agencies and the courts. Without the involvement of the courts and child support agencies, these programs are not as successful in bargaining modifications, arrearage reductions and payment plans. By forming partnerships, programs can deal with all aspects of a father’s situation—employment, answering to arrearages, establishing payment plans, modifying support, and helping fathers learn life skills or parenting. In addition, child support agencies and the courts can monitor the father’s situation from beginning to end.

These program models solicit participation for their program in four basic ways:

- Mandatory or voluntary referrals from the court system, when a father is involved with a proceeding about his child support and claims to be unemployed
- Through the child support system when paternity is established, usually through cooperation with a mother who is receiving welfare

- During a voluntary paternity establishment, usually before or right after a baby is born
- Volunteer fathers

Because many low-income dads have never married, their first contact with child support and the court system is usually after a default order already has been set and they must appear before the judge to explain why they are not in compliance with their child support. At this point, dads who have employment usually can negotiate a payment plan or work with the child support enforcement agency to modify their current order. Men who are without employment can be mandated or *encouraged* to participate in an employment program to help them find a job. In most states, participation is by definition “voluntary,” but the alternative to participation is to find a job on your own or risk further penalties under the legal system. Referral to employment provides judges an alternative to putting fathers in jail.

Counties in Florida and Indiana have developed a program through the court that requires fathers to work or go to jail if they are behind in their child support. The prosecutor’s office in Indianapolis helps fathers find employment by offering a choice of getting help finding a job, or doing community service or going to jail. If fathers come before the court and do not have a job, they receive an assessment to determine what type of services will help them get jobs. Like welfare recipients, some need very little help with employment, while others have multiple barriers like poor literacy skills or substance abuse problems. The prosecutor’s office works with Goodwill Industries and America Works to administer the actual job training. Both assist with resume writing, jobs searches, obtaining a GED, job training, skill development and work experience if clients do not have a job history. The prosecutor’s office has developed partnerships with 24 local employers like 7-Eleven, Federal Express and Hebrew Foods. These employers agree to hire some of the fathers who come through the program.

The court also has the option of requiring fathers to perform community service or to pay a lump sum of child support. In

the last year, community service has resulted in more than 9,000 hours of work at an estimated value of \$49,000. More than \$11,000 was collected in lump sum payments from fathers who did not want to perform community service.

Fathers who find employment usually earn wages that pay higher than minimum wage. Some fathers are earning as much as \$12 per hour after going through the program. For some families, support payments are taking the place of welfare payments for their children. More than 50 percent of fathers who participate in the program continue to pay child support, and approximately 64 percent of fathers are still employed after six months. Providing child support has given some fathers an opportunity to connect with their children for the first time.

Marion County Prosecutor Scott Newman explains, “We are finding that there are a lot of fathers in our community who want to work. They want to do right by their children and support them financially. If they need a job, we have one for them. If they need job training, we have that too. And as a last resort, if they refuse to take advantage of our job pool, we will put them in jail.”

**Indiana’s Program:  
Fathers that Work**

Through the prosecutor’s office in Marion County (Indianapolis), fathers who are more than \$500 behind in their child support obligations have an opportunity to get jobs and better skills if they are unemployed. Deputy prosecutors can recommend to the court that fathers be mandated to participate in one of the program’s three components or risk going to jail. The program has worked with the Private Industry Council (PIC) to identify employers that will hire participants. Only jobs with good wages and benefits are considered. Referrals to treatment services also are available to help clients deal with other aspects of their life such as substance abuse.

*Direct Job Referrals*

This component is recommended if clients have some work experience and job skills. They can be linked with one of the participating employers and hired if they meet minimum criteria.

*Indirect Job Referrals*

Clients who have multiple barriers to employment or who need help with resume writing, obtaining a GED, literacy, basic skills or advanced training are referred to Goodwill Industries or America Works. In some cases, participants may be eligible for up to 18 months of training. After training, they are referred to jobs.

*Community Service*

This option is used when clients refuse work or are not successful in locating work.



Using child support agencies to connect with fathers is another approach. Courts can refer unemployed fathers to a caseworker who will work with them to negotiate a payment plan and, in some cases, a modification. After meeting with the child support agency, fathers are referred to receive help finding a job or to obtain training and skills. Child support enforcement workers also can coordinate with their welfare departments to identify welfare families who have child support orders. Workers can solicit fathers who want to come forward and give them services in exchange for their cooperation.

In Illinois, unemployed fathers who come before the courts can be directly referred to child support enforcement. The agency works with the court to modify or “stay” orders while a father is in a work or training program so additional arrearages do not accumulate. The court also has the authority to forgive a portion of past arrearages if a client successfully completes a training program. The child support agency has partnerships with a variety of community organizations to administer training, which includes job clubs, skills training, resume writing and life skills. The department also works to find supportive services to deal with barriers like substance abuse and mental health. Dianna Durham McLoud, former Child Support Enforcement Administrator in Illinois says, “These dads aren’t deadbeat dads, they are deadbroke dads! If we help them get real jobs, they will pay child support and support their kids. All they need is a little help. We get a lot more out of them in terms of child support by helping rather than punishing.”

#### **A Success Story in Illinois**

The department worked with one father who was more than \$40,000 in arrears with his child support. After months of trying to locate him, they finally found him in a homeless shelter in Florida where he had been receiving food stamps. After he moved back to Illinois, the department was able to connect him with some basic employment services and a substance abuse program. The father was able to secure a job at Walgreen’s. Six months later he was promoted to a managerial position. When he appeared in court, the judge compromised \$30,000 of his arrearage because of his diligence and progress in employment. He continues to pay regular child support and continues to be actively engaged in the lives of his children.

Some states work with their welfare agencies to identify fathers of the families who receive welfare, or those who have volun-

teered paternity, before they receive a default judgment or accumulate massive arrearages. These states still use community organizations to provide employment services, although in limited cases they use the case management and employment services of their welfare department.

In Iowa, the human services department convened a pilot collaboration between child support and welfare agencies to locate parents of welfare clients in the hopes of conducting outreach to fathers who may need help with employment or child support. Iowa's model is based on a three-tiered approach—employment assistance, access and visitation, and parental responsibility. The legislature provided the seed money to start the program with the expectation that local funds and foundation grants will supplement the initial investment.

The department addresses parental responsibility by trying to locate fathers to modify support orders and make child support payments more realistic for dads who have accumulated arrearages. A current proposal would allow a graduated portion of the father's state debt to be reduced for continual participation in an employment component and continual payment of child support. Although the participation credit would not be passed through to the family, it would reduce the amount of money a father owes to the state in exchange for the mother and child receiving welfare. The goal of this approach is to make payments on arrearages more realistic and achievable for some fathers and to encourage ongoing payment of child support. The program will conduct outreach at hospital paternity programs and Healthy Start programs to get fathers involved before their children are born to ensure that initial child support orders are set at realistic levels, and to ensure that fathers who may need help finding jobs can obtain assistance before arrearages accumulate.

Iowa's Human Services department has contracted with other providers to administer mediation services to help fathers get time with their children. Funding for these services came from federal access and visitation grants which are designed to help states develop policies to allow fathers more time with their children. The

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Iowa Private Industry Council will work with fathers who have barriers to employment and target specific services on a case-by-case basis.

Maryland operates a handful of programs based on the same concept of using state agencies and community providers to address issues of employment and personal development as a way to stimulate child support payments. The Maryland sites have served more than 1,200 low-income fathers and report increases in educational levels, employment and active child rearing for fathers who have participated in programs. Programs provide the typical array of services, ranging from help with jobs to mentoring and support groups to educational classes. Specific programs are designed to deal with custody and visitation issues that fathers face. These programs help fathers develop joint parenting plans with the mothers of their children and serve as advocates or mediators. Classes in parenting or other necessary services are provided as well. Various sites report that between 50 and 100 percent of fathers participating in the programs are consistently paying child support.

Tennessee has taken a different approach by focusing on lifestyle change and behavior modeling. The goal of the project is to assist fathers whose children receive public assistance to establish a relationship with their children and to pay child support. The program uses behavior modification principles to build mentors within families, based on the philosophy that people can solve their own problems with some strong role models, targeted direction and support. Viewed as a more holistic approach, the program tries to address all the emotional programs that clients bring with them in hopes of helping the person as a whole, rather than working on short-term solutions to multiple problems. Mentors also try to work with the entire family structure.

The program is a collaborative effort in Nashville between the Department of Human Services, the courts and the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood. The program operates under the principles and curriculum established by the institute to “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and hearts of children to their

fathers,” according to institute founder Charles Ballard. The Nashville project is one of a handful of programs run by the institute, but is the only one with an established partnership with the welfare department. Other sites include Cleveland, Ohio; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; San Diego, California; Washington, DC; and Yonkers, New York.

The institute and the department work collaboratively to deliver services to fathers. The program solicits participants on a voluntary basis, although department caseworkers can refer clients for services. Once a participant becomes involved with the program, caseworkers from the department and the institute share information about the client to document his participation in the program. Actual case management is carried out by institute staff, although department caseworkers participate in establishing goals and resolving problems with participants.

Outreach specialists work with participants—or protégés, as the program calls them—to establish goals and develop an action plan based on their needs. Outreach specialists live in the community and are available 24 hours a day to assist fathers or their families with whatever services or assistance they may need, including attending court appearances or appointments with child support enforcement. The core element of the program is peer counseling and support focused on modeling targeted values and behaviors—establishing paternity, developing fathering skills, improving work ethic and employment status, and providing financial support. According to Ballard, the success of his approach lies in showing—rather than telling individuals—what it means to be a responsible father and an adult.

Surveys conducted with protégés and outreach specialists indicate the positive effects from the program—fathers are spending more time with their children and constructive changes have occurred in the lives of children and fathers who are involved with the program. Institute and department staff observe that fathers are more likely to pay child support and retain employment after completion of the program. Similar observations from other institute sites report that the vast majority of participants establish

paternity and continue to work. Additionally, three-fourths of program participants report having no additional children out of wedlock.

In some of these cases, fathers are actually in the home, but are reluctant to come forward for fear of jeopardizing the mother's eligibility for welfare. Illinois responded by changing its eligibility standards to include fathers who live in the home. Recognizing father presence from has helped to encourage participation with child support from the beginning, without creating the fear that welfare benefits will be terminated. Ohio has a similar provision.

Offering dads proactive services can discourage them from going "underground" and they can find jobs to support their children before the courts become involved. Underground dads are those that provide in kind supports to their family—cash, clothes, diapers, shoes etc.—rather than pay their required support through traditional means. A simple step towards discouraging underground support is making sure fathers establish paternity as early as possible. Fathers who establish paternity have a better chance of paying support because they can get initial child support orders set at an amount reflective of what they really earn. As discussed, streamlined communication between welfare and child support workers can help states match TANF cases with child support cases and may make communication with fathers easier and faster. If states conduct outreach to advertise the fact that the agency wants to help them, they can avoid costly time and effort in trying to locate and punish dads who have gone underground. They also reduce the risk of having to modify orders or establish payment plans for dads who have arrearages. Establishing paternity is only the beginning, and it does not automatically translate into dollars for mothers and their children. States will need to consider what incentives and support they give to low-income dads to complement their efforts to be compliant. No one would dispute that punitive measures need to be in place to enforce obligations, rethinking the strategy with regard to low-income men can help to improve the process.

## 7. DADS BEHIND BARS

As many as 70 percent of low-income dads have had contact with the justice system, and the majority of incarcerated men are fathers. This presents an interesting dilemma because in most states, fathers continue to accrue arrearages while they are locked up, despite the obvious fact that they have no resources to pay support. When released, they may have satisfied their debt to society, but are met with a new debt because of child support arrears.

Research has shown that a job and a strong family connection are the two most important elements than an individual needs to keep from returning to jail. There are few available support systems to help these men re-enter society by finding jobs, and even fewer that assist them with rebuilding relationships that have suffered or ceased while they were incarcerated. While in jail, it is very difficult for fathers to keep in contact with families. The nature of some men's convictions warrant that they do not have contact with their children, but for most, this is not the case.

A handful of states—including Colorado, Florida, New Mexico and Massachusetts—have developed programs designed to serve fathers while they are in jail or upon their release to strengthen their role as fathers and to help link them to employment.

In Massachusetts, parolees can enroll in a program designed to teach them about how to foster relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. Dads can obtain some job training through the Inner-city Job Training Program sponsored by Polaroid. There are 102 program locations, five of which are

offered in partnership with churches. The program is run by probation officials and requires attendance at 12 weekly group sessions. The sessions require participants to live by the program's five principles of fatherhood and to report to the group what actions they took during the week to meet these goals. Topics in the weekly sessions include, self-esteem building, affection and guidance, financial support, respect and living a substance-free lifestyle.

Fathers must make a commitment to stay substance-free and provide love and encouragement to themselves and their children. Participants who complete the program can earn a reduction in fines and court costs, and some may have probation reduced.

The Colorado Department of Corrections operates a reemployment program for inmates who are being released from jail. The program attempts to provide individuals with basic job skills so they can get jobs once released, and provides referrals to support networks that can help fathers work with child support enforcement and establish family linkages. New Mexico targets its services to teen fathers who are serving time in detention facilities by providing conflict resolution, contraceptive information and basic job skills services. Florida helps inmates with literacy skills by teaching them how to read books and write letters to their children. Dads make tape recordings of themselves reading stories that are sent to their children. "These people are going to go back into society. We have two choices: we can help them to establish relationships with their families, or we can do nothing and see them end up back in jail," asserts Buddy Whitman, director of the Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood.

**Massachusetts' Five Principles of Fatherhood:**

*As a father, it is my responsibility to:*

- Give affection to my children.
- Give gentle guidance to my children.
- Provide financial support to my children and the mother of my children.
- Demonstrate respect at all times to the mother of my children.
- Set a proud example for my children by living within the law and without the taint of alcohol or drug use.

## 8. THE TRADE-OFF

There are trade-offs to operating work programs that involve partnerships between child support agencies, the courts and community organizations. The greatest advantage is that the courts and child support enforcement agency are working together to try and create reasonable options for low-income fathers.

However, fostering successful partnerships is often the biggest challenge. Child support agencies, community organizations and the courts usually have competing goals and assumptions about the populations they serve and to whom they are accountable. Differing goals can affect whether entities can actually work toward a common interest. Community organizations may be reluctant to forge partnerships with the courts or child support enforcement agencies for fear that clients may view the program as an extension of their authority. As such, programs must to overcome these assumptions to provide services to fathers who may benefit, at the same time demonstrating to the courts and agencies that they are willing to help their clients ‘play by the rules’. Alternatively, courts and child support agencies may be reluctant to embrace partnerships if they are skeptical that any of their goals will be realized. Opening lines of communication, overcoming faulty assumptions and building a workable framework are perhaps harder than the actual service delivery that agencies and organizations provide.

Child support offices collect money and focus on locating parents for the sole purpose of collecting money from them. They provide services to mothers and children, and they are account-



able to taxpayers. The courts uphold punitive enforcement measures on behalf of mothers and children. The challenge is to create an environment that is nonthreatening for the father, while maintaining the goal of collecting child support. If fathers feel as though caseworkers are working on their behalf, they are more likely to comply with program requirements, especially if they are given access to other types of services like substance abuse treatment, child development, planned parenting and peer support. A father who feels the state's only interest is punishment or collecting from his paycheck is much more likely to revert to underground tactics as a way to support his family. Achievements in Illinois, Indiana, Maryland and Tennessee are due largely to the fact that programs and agencies have been able to evoke a sense of trust, provide real employment opportunities, and give some fathers "breathing room" by temporarily modifying orders. Participants are able to witness the benefits of their actions as they strengthen connections with their children and provide financial support.

## 9. OUT ON A LIMB: COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

The majority of programs that serve fathers are operated at the community level, most without a formal relationship with the courts or child support enforcement agencies. They provide a variety of services that are not limited to employment. Unlike the state, where the main focus is to collect child support, local programs have multiple goals, one of which is child support. Of equal importance are helping fathers develop good parenting skills, learn about child development and negotiate visitation arrangements. Participation in community programs is usually voluntary; fathers hear about particular services by word of mouth, rather than through child support agencies or the court systems. In some cases, the court or child support agency may refer fathers to community programs where their participation may be used as an alternative to jail. Other times, fathers may be directed to find employment, and a referral to a community program is viewed as a helping hand to assist them rather than as punishment.

Most programs do focus on helping fathers find jobs, because that is foremost on the minds of participants. In tandem, they offer mentoring and peer support as well as mediation and access to other services. Community and local organizations are in good positions to devote considerable attention to fathers because that is their primary goal. These organizations developed specialized

resources and curriculums to help fathers develop in their roles as providers and as men. They can help fathers earn a GED, learn to write resumes, develop interview skills, and can provide access to local community or vocational schools where fathers can learn specialized skills.

The Center on Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (CFWD, formerly known as Baltimore City Healthy Start, Employment and Men's Services) is a nationally recognized community-run program in Baltimore, Maryland, that uses peer support networks and a manhood development curriculum to teach fathers about being financially responsible and emotionally supportive to their children. Once in the program, all fathers receive an assessment and are assigned a case manager to help them establish achievable goals, part of which can include preparation for entry-level employment by teaching basic job skills. "Unless we can get these men in economic situations that support their families and communities, we are missing the boat," according to Joe Jones, founder of CFWD.

After fathers get jobs, they are eligible for post-employment training that focuses on wage progression to help them get better jobs. As with other programs, CFWD has developed extensive relationships with other providers that can help fathers with substance abuse, domestic violence, or visitation mediation.

One way CFWD solicits participants is by recruiting pregnant mothers to participate in Healthy Start, then engaging fathers. Home visits are conducted in an attempt to connect with these fathers. Jones asserts, "We conduct as many home visits as necessary to get fathers involved with the program. These dads don't want to be found because they think we are going to report them [to the welfare or child support agency]. Sometimes it takes a few visits before they understand that we are not child support or probation officers checking up on them. We want to help them deal with their economic situation so they can provide for their kids."

STRIVE (Support and Training Results in Valuable Employees) and Goodwill Industries are nationally known programs that work in many communities to provide employment components at the local level to serve fathers. In addition to the Indianapolis site mentioned earlier, Goodwill Industries has contracted with the Parent Opportunity Program (POP) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, to provide the education and training component for the fathers that its program serves. Fathers receive an initial intake assessment at POP to determine what types of services or assistance they need. They are then referred to Goodwill, which can help them earn a GED, write resumes, learn work etiquette or obtain targeted skills and training through a community or vocational school.

STRIVE focuses on promoting “soft skills” that employers look for while providing short term training and support services. STRIVE conducts intensive post-employment follow-up to help their clients stay employed once they get jobs. The STRIVE program in East Harlem, New York, has developed a Fragile Families Initiative to help fathers get jobs with good pay and benefits. As part of the program, they mandate completion of a fatherhood development and relationship building class. These workshops include, fatherhood development, father influence on children, decision-making, dealing with stress, understanding the child support system and becoming self-sufficient. To assist clients with navigating the court and child support systems, STRIVE helps connect participants with free or low-cost legal services. Recently, Broadway Video, a major production company, agreed to relocate in Harlem, partly because of empowerment zone incentives but also due to STRIVE’s commitment to provide quality training and placement with employers. Broadway Video hired 20 employees in career track positions from the STRIVE program because of its commitment to training well-qualified employees.

The East Harlem STRIVE also gives participants an opportunity to gain advanced skills once they have jobs. The ASAP program conducts night courses that provide a combination of direct skill training and social and business skills like long-term goal setting, time management, risk taking, conflict resolution and utilizing

corporate resources. Hard skills training can last from 10 to 24 weeks and is geared toward the emerging skill needs of local employers. The program reports that in two years, more than 300 graduates have been placed, most earning over \$20,000 per year within 12 to 18 months. Retention rates above 95 percent are reported.

As part of local economic development initiatives, housing projects in Connecticut and Pennsylvania are connecting with fathers to provide apprenticeship opportunities at housing facilities. Some starting wages are as high as \$15 per hour. The community action agency in Boston supports the CLUB (Career and Life United in Boston) program, which provides education, job placement and career planning services to low-income African-American and Hispanic males. The program was highlighted by the Governor's Commission on Responsible Fatherhood and Family Support as a successful model to serve the needs of low-income fathers. Other community-based approaches include utilizing private industry councils, workforce development boards, and local churches or faith-based services like Catholic Charities.

Community-run programs can offer an intensive and holistic array of services, and fathers are less intimidated by these programs because there is no threat they will be "turned in" to child support or welfare agencies by caseworkers. Caseworkers have the time to develop relationships with fathers and they are respected within the community. They are viewed to be more objective about a father's situation because they have no authority to issue a "punishment". They can deal with an entire family structure—mother, child and grandparents—to help fathers learn effective ways of communicating, or to help mediate simple disputes. Because these programs depend on outside help for legal assistance, it can be challenging to negotiate arrearage forgiveness or modifications because they are not dealing directly with the child support agency.

Because community-run programs are not part of an institutionalized approach to serving low-income fathers, they risk fading away without the influx of financial support, while child sup-

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port agencies and court systems are built into the framework of state government. Many governors have established special task forces to look at the plight of low-income fathers, but those efforts risk being dropped once governors are out of office. If collaborative partnerships between the state and community-based approaches can be developed, both stand to gain. The real winners are children who benefit from receiving financial and emotional support from fathers, and fathers who establish a sense of worth through becoming financial providers and nurturers. “Indeed, what children need to grow up to become well-adjusted adults is the combination of parenting styles that mothers and fathers provide,” asserts Wade Horn, National Fatherhood Initiative.

## **10. NO SILVER BULLET: EVALUATION OF PARENTS' FAIR SHARE**

There is no quick fix to poverty facing either low-income mothers or fathers, but directing resources and support to fathers seems to be a start in the right direction. Generations of poverty and behavior patterns will not be changed with a crash course on writing resumes and a few classes on parenting. It takes time and effort to reverse the stranglehold of unemployment and low wages. The true, lasting effects of these programs are not easy to measure and are hard to evaluate in the short term—some results may not materialize for years.

These challenges have left some policymakers skeptical of the real impact programs can have on fathers, particularly because many local and community-run programs have not been subjected to rigorous, formal evaluation. Still, states have nothing to lose and everything to gain by switching gears. Efforts in collecting child support from this population so far have proved futile, and even small increases in collections could be beneficial to low-income families. Child support collections have a long history. After years of applying a one-size fits all approach to welfare and child support, the pendulum has started to swing back towards looking at the root causes of poverty—low wages, unemployment and a support system that discourages responsible parenting. Just as in welfare, not all parents will benefit from a new approach.

The lasting benefits for children who can gain from better parenting and additional support are difficult to argue against.

There is a considerable amount of information detailing particular fatherhood initiatives or program profiles, but less on actual impacts the programs have on the fathers. Limited follow-up studies by programs or small, university-directed reports have been conducted in a few sites, but there are none using a full range of evaluation tools like control groups, quantitative measures or longitudinal studies. Local programs lack the financial resources that are necessary to conduct rigorous evaluations, and many see using their resources to provide direct services to families as a greater priority. Clearly, there is a need for more information about the impact that father-centered services may have on fostering better relationships between fathers and their children and increasing child support payments.

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) recently conducted an evaluation of the Parents' Fair Share (PFS) project. This evaluation gives policymakers and researchers the first comprehensive glimpse at how directing services to non-custodial parents can have a positive effect on their ability to pay support.

The PFS program was designed to test whether employment assistance helped low-income dads become better able to provide financial support for their children. In exchange for modifying child support amounts at more manageable levels, fathers were given the opportunity to participate in a variety of employment enhancement activities—job search, resume writing, basic skills and training. Fathers could participate in peer support groups and sessions designed to focus on relationship building, child development, anger management or other life-skills activities. Access to mediation services was also made available to participants.

Parents' Fair Share operated in one county in each of seven states—California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio and Tennessee. Program sites were expected to be a collaborative effort between child support enforcement agencies and the local



providers that administered actual services to fathers. Funding for PFS combined both federal and private foundation funds.

Results of the evaluation showed a small but significant increase in the number of fathers who paid child support, but large increases were realized only across three sites. This result disappointed many who expected larger improvements. Given the difficulty of collecting from these fathers generally—the national collection rate is only 13 percent—any increase should be viewed as progress. It is also worth noting that the percentage of both PFS participants and the control group paying child support steadily increased

over the course of the demonstration, though the percentage was slightly higher for PFS participants. Increases were due in part to the additional effort that child support workers focused on both groups of fathers. In some sites, collections for program participants were more than 20 percent higher than the control group. Additionally, during one quarter in Ohio, program participants paid an average of \$81 more support. These small but significant increases support the idea that directing even minimal efforts to reach low-income fathers can yield positive results. Over time, as child support agencies and community providers become accustomed to working with fathers and each other, larger increases may be possible.

The evaluation did not provide clear results indicating whether participation in the program led to an increase in earnings. This is due in part to the fact that most participants did not participate in skill-building activities—they were focused on finding a job so they could pay support. Most participants were immediately referred to a job club that necessitated an immediate job search. Although some received GED assistance, few participated in any vocational training or other skill-based services. Focusing less on an immediate job or combining employment with skill building

**Profile of Parents' Fair Share Fathers**

- Average wage was \$6.70 per hour
- 51 percent had arrears of less than \$2,000
- 70 percent have been arrested
- 75 percent live within 10 miles of their child
- 60 percent have no high school diploma or GED
- 54 percent did not live with their father
- 17 percent were employed at the time they were referred to PFS

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may help to address this issue. Individuals who have advanced skills can earn almost 60 percent to 80 percent more than those who do not. Investments focused on training may lead to higher earnings and child support payments. Additionally, the problem for many fathers seems to be keeping a job once they become employed. Behavior and attitude issues need to be addressed before fathers can successfully move up the job ladder.

Many of the partnering agencies responsible for providing skill building activities were reluctant to take on fathers. They viewed these clients as “high risk,” and were not willing to invest wholeheartedly in training them for jobs. Many of the PFS sites tried to work with local employment and training agencies who received JTPA (Job Training Partnership Act) funding. These agencies had built strong relationships with the local business community and were reluctant to help these fathers for fear of “spoiling” their reputation and jeopardizing ongoing relationships. Results could improve if providers become more committed to working with low-income fathers.

## 11. LESSONS LEARNED

Building partnerships between government agencies and local service providers is a task in itself. Across PFS demonstration sites, the success of the programs depended on the level of commitment across agencies and their willingness to work with each other. The most successful sites in PFS were those that had built working relationships with local providers while the child support agency played the lead. As discussed earlier, child support agencies and local organizations often differ in their goals, objectives and assumptions about serving low-income fathers. Local organizations view their role as advocating for fathers, while child support enforcement agencies focus on collecting money. In PFS, states that experienced the largest increases in child support payments had forged solid relationships between child support agencies and community providers. For fatherhood programs to work, both entities must agree to support a joint mission and reach a common understanding of how their respective offices will work with fathers and each other.

### **Lessons Learned from Parents' Fair Share**

- Contacting low-income fathers may have a positive effect on child support collections.
- Employment assistance can help some fathers get jobs.
- Programs that facilitate working partnerships between local providers and child support enforcement can lead to better outcomes.
- Outreach efforts can help to identify fathers who may benefit from services and those who have unreported income.
- Keeping jobs and advancing in the labor market is the most difficult challenge yet to be addressed.

In the demonstration sites where the child support agency played the lead, activities and case management were easier to monitor because both child support enforcement staff and PFS staff were

able to administer a team approach to solving problems. Agencies were quick to respond to a downward or upward modification based on frequent updates from local providers. Because both partners were involved from the start, fathers received a clear and united message about the willingness of both partners to assist in their situation. Regular meetings were convened to allow child support enforcement and PFS workers to talk about a participant's progress, develop a working plan, and to assess appropriate follow-up. According to MDRC, "As enrollees interacted with PFS staff over time, the image that the staff were working closely with, and were perhaps even part of, the child support agency probably increased the staff's effectiveness in getting participants to pay child support. In sites where these partnerships were not formed, workers and agencies tended to revert to their respective corners and return to business as usual."

Additional efforts to identify and locate fathers helped PFS to weed out those who were avoiding child support by not reporting employment, or to change the status of other fathers who had physical barriers to employment like disability or incarceration. This process allowed child support caseworkers to clean out old case files that had been low priority. It also helped to target the fathers who may benefit from the type of assistance that PFS could provide. This initial process began with trying to identify fathers who may be eligible for PFS services. By comparing welfare, child support enforcement, and employment records, caseworkers were able to contact fathers and bring them in for hearings to discuss their case. This "smokeout" resulted in 25 percent of fathers reporting previous unreported income or resources, and identified another 25 percent who were unable to pay because of disability or incarceration or because the child was legally emancipated. Some fathers had never received the order for support. According to MDRC, the additional outreach does not guarantee the receipt of child support, but fathers contacted in this way were more likely to pay than fathers who were subject to traditional child support enforcement methods. States can benefit from looking at case files that have been low-priority and instead of wasting efforts and resources on enforcement meth-

ods that have not produced results, they may find that dads who are approached in new ways can and will pay child support.

Even though PFS participants had a variety of services available to them, peer support and job club were the most widely used. Across PFS, 70 percent of those eligible for the program participated in at least one component. Support groups allowed participants to share experiences with other fathers under the direction of a facilitator. Socially, fathers rarely have support mechanisms that allow for the free exchange of information or ideas about children or being a dad. One administrator explained, “Guys may not be able to say to their buddy, ‘Hey, what do you know about potty training?’ or ‘What can I do to become a better father?’ In a support group, they can freely express themselves without the fear of being laughed at.”

Facilitators were able to help fathers identify barriers and generate solutions to many problems through open dialogue. In one site, facilitators planned weekly assignments for fathers like “take your child to the park” or “make dinner for your child” to give fathers structured guidance on how they can spend time with children. Other sites planned monthly outings and special events like Easter Egg hunts to provide a supportive atmosphere for fathers and their children. One participant summed up what peer support can mean for these fathers:

“I have a lot to thank for this [facilitator] in here...because he’s instilled in me one thing: I have no fear of sharing anything that has hurt me. There was years and years of me walking around not trusting anybody to talk to about it. Now...I don’t walk around feeling as though the top of my head is going to explode from blood pressure because I keep holding all this crap in me. It’s got to come out. It helped me be a better father.”<sup>13</sup>

## 12. FUNDING FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

States have unprecedented opportunities to invest in services for low-income fathers. Welfare caseloads have dropped sharply so states can redirect resources that would have been spent on cash assistance to redesign services that assist mothers and fathers in supporting their children. Currently a variety of financial resources are available to fund programs or services. These resources include:

- The TANF block grant
- State maintenance of effort (MOE)
- The Welfare-to-Work grants
- Workforce Investment Act funds (WIA)
- Child Support Enforcement funds
- The Social Services Block Grant
- Private foundations

### **Using TANF and MOE Funds**

States have substantial resources and flexibility under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program to fund services to help non-custodial fathers with employment and parenting. The federal welfare reform law in 1996 created a block grant for state programs serving that serve needy families. States were released from the restrictions of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC). They can design their

own assistance programs. Funding for the TANF block grant was based on welfare spending in FY 1994, when caseloads were high. Caseloads have now dropped by more than 40 percent nationwide, so states have money for programs that otherwise would have gone to cash assistance. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that states receive about \$4.7 billion dollars more per year than they would have under the AFDC program. States can use some of this money to fund fatherhood programs.

States receive a block grant from the federal government to use for poor families in ways the states determine will best meet the needs for their populations. Unlike AFDC, TANF does not require states to get federal permission to develop new services or programs, and spending can be used to support poor families, not just families that receive cash assistance. Providing services to fathers is considered within these boundaries, even if they are not married or living with the mothers of their children.

The new welfare is funded using a combination of state and federal funds. States receive the federal TANF block grant, but must also maintain historical expenditures on welfare-related programs using state funds. The maintenance of effort requirement (MOE) mandates that states spend 80 percent of what they spent in 1994, or 75 percent if they ensure a certain percentage of welfare recipients are working.

States can use both the federal block grant and state MOE money on anything that accomplishes the broad purposes of TANF:

- End welfare dependence;
- Promote employment;

**Points to Remember about the New Welfare**

- States do not need federal permission to develop new programs or services
- The federal government does not have authority to approve state programs—states decide
- States define who is eligible to receive services and they can have different standards of eligibility for different forms of services
- States can target services to low-income fathers even if they do not live with the mother of their children

- Encourage two-parent families; and
- Reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

Resources must also be spent on eligible families, and states define who is eligible to receive certain programs or services. A state can choose to establish different levels of eligibility for different types of services. For example, a state can choose to have one eligibility standard for cash assistance but may establish a different threshold for employment services or support services like transportation and child care.

If states include non-custodial fathers in their eligibility definitions, they can use TANF and MOE funds to provide services to them. These fathers will not face time limits or work partici-

ation rate requirements if they are provided services—such as job training or help finding a job—that do not have a direct cash value. Final regulations issued by HHS clarify that federal time limits and work requirements apply only for programs or services that have a direct monetary value—cash assistance, vouchers or assistance used to meet ongoing basic needs. Child care and transportation for families who are not employed are also considered to have a monetary value, although for employed families these services are excluded from the definition. States can use federal dollars to provide

**Types of Services that Can be Funded With TANF or MOE**

- Employment assistance
- Job placement
- Job training
- Substance abuse treatment
- Mentoring
- Counseling
- Marriage counseling
- Pregnancy prevention
- Abstinence education
- Mediation
- Transportation and child care
- Activities that promote access and visitation
- Pass-through of collected amounts of child support

needed training, mentoring or counseling services, substance abuse treatment, parenting and life skills and a range of other services to non-custodial fathers whom they define as eligible. Additionally, any services that are used to meet the goal of reducing out-of-wedlock births, or to encourage two-parent families are not tied to any eligibility based on income. Some of these services may include teen pregnancy prevention, abstinence education, pre-marriage or marriage counseling, mediation, activities to promote access and visitation and crisis intervention.



State MOE funds have even more flexibility in that they do not trigger time limits or work participation rates as long as they are not combined with federal dollars. Like the federal block grant, MOE funds must also be spent on poor families and used to accomplish the goals of TANF, but states have considerably more flexibility. If states develop programs funded with MOE dollars that are separate or outside of the TANF program, there are no federal time limits, work requirements or work participation rates to consider. States reap the benefit of being able to count separate state programs as a MOE expenditure, but without federal constraints.

A state can set up a program by creating an eligibility category to include a non-custodial father based on his income, then define the services that he would be eligible to receive—paying close attention to services that are considered to have a cash value or that are used to meet ongoing basic needs so that time limits and work participation rates do not apply. These fathers need not have children who receive welfare, but must have low-incomes according to state standards. For example, a state could define income eligibility for fathers at 200 percent of the federal poverty level—roughly \$16,000 per year. Examples of non-monetary services that a state could offer include, employment assistance and skill-based training, parenting education, peer and mentoring groups, anger management, conflict resolution, treatment programs, and family planning.

State legislatures have appropriation authority over both TANF and MOE, and can direct agencies to develop services or programs targeted at specific groups such as non-custodial fathers. States can use their budget process to redirect resources or create participation requirements for departments to ensure spending on fathers.

California has redirected some of its TANF savings from welfare caseload decline to fund seven county programs targeted at fathers. The counties submitted proposals explaining how their programs would serve fathers, the estimated cost and the number of participants they hoped to serve. Solicitation for program par-

participation would be court ordered in some counties and based on volunteers in others. Employment services at the sites include, expedited paternity establishment, career planning and counseling, basic education, subsidized work experience, community services and vocational training. The sites also offer supportive services that include transportation, a job retention hot-line, and mental health and substance abuse services, as well as courses in parenting skills development, anger and conflict management, child development, relationship building and problem solving. Some counties are offering mediation services to assist with child support and custody and visitation. One county proposed to offer a \$10 child support credit for each hour a father participated in the program. The sites each estimate serving between 150 and 450 fathers per year at a cost ranging from \$950 to \$5019 per participant. Cost estimates fluctuate depending on the types of service and the service provider. Experience figures into the estimates: community programs that have experience serving disadvantaged populations have a clearer picture of the time and cost associated with various types of services.

Arizona, Florida and Iowa are also using welfare funds for programs. In Florida, local WAGES (Work and Gain Economic Self-Sufficiency) coalitions have authority for administering the TANF program. Local coalitions have funded many programs targeting fathers, including two employment-focused programs that mandate fathers to find work and pay child support or go to jail. Another that targets fathers of Head Start children for help with computer training, entrepreneurial skills and self empowerment.

States have other resources available to fund needed services that will not subject participants to time limits or work participation rates. The Social Services Block Grant (SSBG, or Title XX as it is commonly known) could also be used to fund other services related to employment or parenting. States also have the option of transferring TANF money into SSBG with the condition that transferred money is spent on children or families whose income is under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. States define eligibility for SSBG funded services as well, so the programs can include low-income fathers.

While caseloads are low, states need to consider all of their possibilities for serving families. Money that is not directed to providing cash assistance can be reinvested if states take full advantage of their flexibility. The window of opportunity will not last for long. Congress is speculating that states have too much money, based on the fact that states have accumulated large balances of unspent TANF funds in federal reserves. Policymakers can help state agencies and local administrators understand this flexibility. In state offices across the nation, workers are accustomed to the restraints of AFDC and are tentative about trying new ideas. If state leaders demonstrate their understanding of flexibility and lead by example, middle management and front line staff may be more apt to carry out and implement new approaches without fear that the state can be penalized.

### **Welfare-to-Work**

As part of the 1997 balanced budget agreement, Congress established Welfare-to-Work (WtW) as a new federal grant to address some of the needs that face long term welfare recipients. States can receive a grant based on a formula, and local providers can submit proposals for competitive grants.

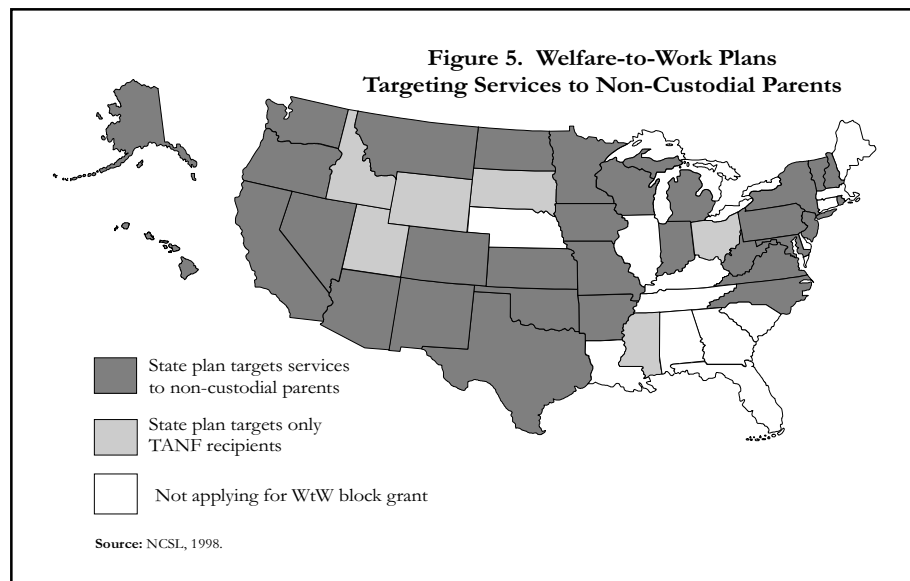
Formula grants require states to provide a match and no federal money can be used to draw down the match. There is a capped amount that each state may receive. The WtW grant also explicitly allows eligibility for services to non-custodial fathers whose children receive TANF. The Welfare-to-Work grant passes 85 percent of a state's grant to local private industry councils (PICs). The remaining 15 percent is retained by the states to operate "governors' programs," although state legislatures have appropriation authority (under the Brown amendment) and can establish conditions for how this money should be spent.

The use of WtW funds is not quite as flexible as the use of TANF and MOE funds. Seventy percent of WtW funds must be spent on recipients or non-custodial fathers who can satisfy two of the following criteria:

- Have not completed high school or have low reading or math skills;
- Require substance abuse treatment; or
- Have a poor work history.

Participants or their families must have a history of welfare dependence. The remaining 30 percent of funds can be spent on participants who have characteristics associated with long-term welfare dependency such as teen pregnancy, school dropout or poor work history.

Although most states have specified they will develop services for fathers using WtW, such stringent eligibility requirements may keep some states from fully utilizing all the available resources.



For this reason, some states have chosen not to apply for the grants. Others have focused on the WtW funds as a resource for building programs for non-custodial fathers. Arizona has developed an intensive array of services using its WtW block grant to help fathers. The program has built partnerships with the court and child support systems to mandate participation in the pro-

gram. Unlike most states, fatherhood services will be accessible through all parts of the state. Programs will offer the range of services dealing with employment and parenting issues, but local program administrators are afraid that they may not be able to fill all of the WtW participation slots because not enough fathers will be able to satisfy the criteria. This situation is mirrored in other states.

As part of its competitive grant, Oregon is using \$5 million to arrange apprenticeships and vocational skills training for non-custodial fathers. Networking with union employment and employer-sponsored training is also a component. Wisconsin is using its formula grant to serve non-custodial fathers with an employment focus—wage subsidies, job readiness, and post-employment/job retention. Wisconsin is planning to recruit fathers using many of the methods previously discussed, such as cross checking TANF and child support cases and recruiting through Head Start or child care providers. Media outreach, fliers and brochures will be available in employment offices, community centers, homeless shelters and food banks and through correctional facilities. In smaller communities, welfare caseworkers have responsibility for informing families about WtW services that are available for non-custodial fathers. New York is using its WtW grant to extend eligibility for safety-net services (case management and vouchers) to fathers.

### **Other Financing Options**

Most programs that serve fathers are not funded with welfare money. Currently, most are funded through grants from private foundations, or in combinations with federal, state or local child support dollars or federal funds that are available from the Workforce Investment Act (formerly JTPA). Pooling resources does allow programs to serve more participants and to engage other partners in providing services. Child support agencies can fund case management services within existing means, while working with PICs who often administer Workforce Investment Act funds in addition to WtW to provide employment assistance. Several fatherhood programs use this approach.

Identifying and engaging partners is the biggest challenge facing states—key players are afraid of losing authority to manage their programs in ways they are comfortable with. Agencies and organizations must think in new ways and develop new partners to expand their vision rather than retreat to their comfort zone of business as usual. State policymakers can help guide this process by creating avenues for collaboration and directing resources targeted toward a specific purpose.

## 13. CONCLUSION

Clearly there is not a quick fix solution, or even a solution that has been proven effective for large numbers of fathers. The effect that programs can have on the lives of children is difficult to measure. Helping fathers reconnect with their children can strengthen their relationships and benefit children even if the outcomes do not show up in increases of child support payments. States have devoted significant time and resources to collect support from low-income fathers without much success.

The real focus of these efforts can be to better the lives of children who can benefit from the support that both a mother and a father can give. Certainly there are fathers who should not have contact with their children because of abuse, neglect or violence—policies should reflect these concerns. But for most fathers and children, there is far more to gain, although the process may be uncomfortable and challenging.

It will take time for states to develop a successful approach to help low-income, non-custodial fathers—shifting paradigms requires buy-in from all relevant players, including policymakers and child support enforcement officials. Broadening the focus of child support agencies from that of a revenue-driven entities to that of service pro-

### Voices of Fathers

“Just sitting and listening to people can help you change your life because they go through the same thing that you went through ... you just take heed to it and listen and you be all right.”

Baltimore father

“Since becoming involved, my whole life has made a complete turnaround. My relationship is back on track, I can see my children whenever I want to, my attitude and temper have improved tremendously ... I am a better man and a better father.”

Nashville father

viders will not occur over night. Similar to the experience in shifting AFDC to TANF, workers responsible for implementing changes will need help to redirect their efforts. In practice, they will be responsible for making these programs work. Clearly, more evaluation can help illuminate the policies that assist low-income fathers to be better providers for their children.

#### Voices of Fathers

“I gonna make sure I guarantee that I’m a better father. Because I want my son to have what I didn’t have, you know. That’s a father right there, giving him whatever he want, talk to him, tell him how much it meant to me and how much it’s gonna mean to him. The same things that I went through, I’m gonna try my best not to let that happen to him.”

Baltimore father.

“I now end every conversation with my children with the words ‘I love you.’”

Massachusetts father

States have resources to invest in poor families, but the opportunity will not last for long. If states continue to leave large TANF surpluses in federal reserves, Congress may be successful in cutting TANF funds below current standards. States need to ensure they have built in adequate support systems

before families hit time limits and lose eligibility for welfare. Because collection efforts for low-income families are so low, states have everything to gain by making an investment in fathers. Children of these fathers have far more to gain, not just by getting regular support, but by possibly reconnecting with fathers that many states have been too quick to label deadbeats.





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### **Internet Resources**

The Fatherhood Project, Families and Work Institute  
<http://www.fatherhoodproject.org/>

Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood  
<http://www.fcorf.org/>

The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and  
Family Revitalization  
<http://www.responsiblefatherhood.org/>

National Center on Fathers Families  
<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>

National Center on Fathering  
<http://www.fathers.com/>

National Center for Strategic Non-Profit Planning and  
Community Leadership (NPCC)  
<http://www.npcl.org/>

National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families  
<http://www.fatherhoodproject.org/npnpage.htm>

U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement Fathers Page  
[http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cse/rpt/fth/fth\\_m.htm](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cse/rpt/fth/fth_m.htm)

Welfare Information Network: Fatherhood and  
Family Formation  
<http://www.welfareinfo.org/fatherho.htm>

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