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Fatherhood Programming Yields High Social ROI



(Photo by Family Service of Greater Boston)

More than 24 million children in America are growing up without fathers. One in three—two out of three for African American children—don't live with their biological father.(1)

These statistics are worrisome, since several studies have suggested that many social problems experienced by

children are impacted by father absence: poverty, crime and recidivism, teen pregnancy, child abuse, school dropout rates, substance abuse, infant mortality, and physical and mental health issues.

It costs American taxpayers nearly \$100 billion each year to address social problems caused by absentee fathers, reports the National Fatherhood Initiative in its 2011 publication, *The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man*.

“Why put so much money into problems after the fact, rather than invest in known solutions to prevent father absence?” asks Randal Rucker, president and CEO of Alliance member Family Service of Greater Boston (FSGB), Jamaica Plain, Mass. “Prevention is where we’ll have the greatest return down the road, because we’ll create stronger children and families, and more stable communities.”

Shift in Focus

Since their inception, public assistance programs and human service organizations traditionally focused on programs that strengthen mothers and children. This started changing during the 1990s. First, federal welfare reform created new efforts to increase financial support from noncustodial fathers. At the same time, emerging research demonstrated the important financial and emotional roles fathers play in children's lives.

Some federal dollars became available to support demonstration projects to help low-income fathers become more involved in their children's lives. The Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002 and the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 included funding to promote responsible fatherhood.

A number of Alliance member agencies have developed their own fatherhood programming.

Although each is unique to the needs of the organization's client population, programs are characterized by early intervention, a strength-based perspective, collaborative strategies, and responsiveness to diversity.

Programs typically are built upon a structured educational curriculum that addresses child development and parenting skills, job readiness, personal health, relationships, and life skills. The curriculum often is augmented with case management and wraparound services.

Individualized Approach, Clinical Base

Research corroborates the experiences of Alliance members, that most fathers want to be both financially and emotionally involved in their children's lives.

"We learned that most of these dads aren't deadbeat; they're dead broke," Rucker says.

FSGB created its Helping Fathers Be Fathers program in 1997. It was designed



(Photo by Family Service of Greater Boston)

as a three-year pilot project funded with a mix of federal and private dollars. Public funding eroded after the first several years, and the program now is entirely privately funded.

The first generation of the program revealed that the young men who participated had substantial clinical needs, including depression, prescription drug misuse, trauma, and abuse. FSGB responded by creating a multimodal approach that is individualized for each participant.

The program utilizes evidence-based parenting education courses that are targeted to specific ethnic groups, intensive case management, and clinical approaches. Children, mothers, and other family members or significant others often are included in the process.

More than 200 young fathers have come through the program during the past four years. Pre- and post- program evaluations demonstrate that more than 90 percent of participants report better parenting skills and a healthier relationship with the child's mother.

Need for Father-Friendliness

Getting fathers to participate in programming is a significant challenge.

Alliance member Village for Families & Children, Hartford, Conn., began proactively providing services for young fathers about five years ago.



“We’d always tried to involve fathers, but it has been a challenge to find the right strategies to engage fathers,” says Galo Rodriguez, president and CEO of the Village.

One reason is that many organizations often don’t promote father-friendliness. The National Fatherhood Initiative provides a Father Friendly Check-Up for organizations to analyze their physical environment, organizational philosophy, and staff attitude. Organizations

(Photo by Village for Families & Children)

receive several solutions for better engaging fathers at the end.

The Village conducts its own assessment and relies on the results to inform its decisions about programs for fathers. It has completely altered how it thinks about fathers, engages them, and delivers services.

Employment Motivates Involvement

Alliance member Metropolitan Family Services (MFS), Chicago, has a different approach to engaging young fathers. “Employment is the incentive,” says Doug Brown, program supervisor.

The agency implemented a five-year, federally-funded pilot apprenticeship program in the 1990s. A program evaluation showed that when young men gained employment they not only became more financially stable, they also became more involved in their children’s lives. This held true even if the father and child were living apart.

The agency drew on its experience with the apprenticeship program to create the Young Fathers Program in 2002. It includes an intensive week of classroom and hands-on activities that focus on employment, parenting, financial literacy, and personal health.



(Photo by Family Service of Greater Boston)

Each participant works with a case manager to create an individual plan for self-sufficiency. Wraparound services encompass almost every area of the agency’s programming, and referrals to other community resources are provided as needed.

Strong street outreach and word-of-mouth marketing attracts more than the 50-75 participants the program can accommodate annually. Many of the men who participate are felons, most for drug convictions.

“Selling drugs is often the only way they have to support themselves and their

families,” says Quincy Roseborough, case manager at MFS. “It’s probably 100 times harder for a convicted felon to get employment.”

Yet, program outcomes demonstrate that fathers with felony convictions had about a 72 percent job placement rate, compared to the cumulative job placement rate of about 61 percent. “We think fathers who have felonies see the benefits of the services we provide and work harder to get ahead,” Roseborough says.

The program even has achieved other outcomes that refute national research. While national research indicates that the correlation between employment and positive involvement with children fades as children age, the Young Fathers Program demonstrated long-term father involvement with children over the five years of study.

Resource Gap Persists

Despite documented, positive, and prevention-focused outcomes, funding for fatherhood programming has lagged significantly.

“The state of Illinois has made deep cuts, and these kinds of programs are the first to go,” says Brown, of MFS.



(Photo by Family Service of Greater Boston)

As for federal funding, it often is time-limited and restrictive. It may be directed to narrow populations, such as incarcerated or military fathers, or to narrow program areas, such as pre-fathering or mentoring.

President Barack Obama has championed fatherhood and parental responsibility, and the federal government recently authorized \$75 million for fatherhood programming in the 2011 fiscal year. The Alliance and United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA), which share a public policy office, offered a webinar in January to help members prepare to apply for these funds.

“The Obama administration is especially interested in high-quality, culturally-

relevant programs that promote healthy relationships, economic stability, and collaboration,” says Patrick Lester, senior vice president for public policy at the Alliance and UNCA. “It is essential to be able to measure and demonstrate effective outcomes.”

The Alliance and UNCA continue to work in partnership with the National Fatherhood Initiative and other lead organizations that advocate for fatherhood policy, program initiatives, and funding.

Alliance members also are working at the state level to raise awareness and educate policymakers and funders.

“It is essential to change the discourse. Otherwise nothing will change,” says Rucker, of FSBG. “We have to demonstrate that prevention-oriented fatherhood programming is a way to help disadvantaged youth become societal assets, not public funding burdens. We have to set an expectation of greatness instead of mediocrity.”

ENDNOTE:

1. These statistics are from 2009 U.S. Census Bureau data.

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