

NRFC SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH:

RESILIENCE IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse spotlight presents key points and tips from an Urban Institute brief, *Human Services Resilience in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Responsible Fatherhood Program in New York City*, written by Peter Willenborg, H. Elizabeth Peters, Teresa Derrick-Mills, and Marla McDaniel (April 2021).

READ FULL BRIEF: [Human Services Resilience in the COVID-19 Pandemic](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103968/human-services-resilience-in-the-covid-19-pandemic_0.pdf)

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OVERVIEW

The brief describes lessons learned by the Strong Fathers, Stronger Families (SFSF)¹ program as staff and program participants adapted to address the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Note: *The observations in the brief are based on a program that had lower enrollment during the pandemic than before the pandemic. It is important to consider program size when assessing how these lessons can be applied to a post-pandemic hybrid model.*

GENERAL LESSONS LEARNED

- Before COVID-19, each staff member had their own job function (e.g., recruiter, data specialist, job developer, case manager) and did not regularly cross over into other job specialty areas. The need to operate more fluidly created the need for staff to learn how to fulfill certain responsibilities within each other's jobs.
- Service delivery strategies may need to be altered in a future crisis. Thus, programs should consider how certain jobs could change in a virtual environment and ensure that staff receive cross-training to perform other functions before the need arises.
- To ensure smooth delivery of virtual services, programs should:
 - Use data systems that allow employees to enter data remotely and securely.
 - Provide staff with the training and equipment necessary to work remotely.
 - Develop strategies to help staff cope with the less defined boundaries of home and work that online work creates.

ADAPTING TO VIRTUAL RECRUITMENT AND ENROLLMENT

- Before COVID-19, the SFSF program relied heavily on in-person recruitment.
- Recruitment was paused during the early stages of the pandemic.
- By May 2020, SFSF had digitized their intake forms and implemented a virtual enrollment process that required new participants to enter a passcode. The passcode was sent to participants via a combination of phone calls and texts or emails to ensure adequate security.
- Later in the summer, the program was able to hold some socially distanced in-person recruiting events, and some staff were able to recruit through word-of-mouth in their local communities.
- After the local stay-at-home order was lifted, program participants had three options for completing their enrollment: over the phone, online, or in-person.

¹⁹ SFSF, a responsible fatherhood initiative in New York City, was operated from 2012 to September 2020 by Seedco and two subcontracted community-based organizations, STRIVE and BronxWorks, with grant funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA).

Enrollment Numbers

- Enrollment was low during the first few months of the pandemic. Staff attributed this to various reasons:
 - The program had to wait for guidance from the funder (OFA) on implementation of virtual services.
 - Lack of access to childcare was a barrier to participation for some fathers.
 - Fathers had general health concerns related to COVID-19.
 - Increases in unemployment benefits during the pandemic may have reduced some fathers' motivation to participate.

Recruitment: Lessons Learned

- Maintaining relationships with partner organizations and individuals in the community can help programs cope with sudden changes in recruitment opportunities.
- Fathers who have increased childcare responsibilities during a pandemic or other emergency may be too busy to respond to outreach from a program. However, they may be more receptive to word-of-mouth and referrals from friends and family.
- To help fathers in need of support services directly related to the pandemic, it may be helpful to reach out to organizations that provide those services. This could ensure a smooth referral process for support services, make sure the organizations are aware of the services provided by the fatherhood program, and encourage them to spread the word among their participant populations.

Enrollment and Data Documentation: Lessons Learned

- Ensuring confidentiality is a critical part of enrollment.
 - The initial strategy of asking participants for confidential information over the phone did not work well, because it required a lengthy process to ensure data security.
 - Allowing participants to complete enrollment surveys through online links (with separate unique identifiers to maintain confidentiality) worked far better.
- Exploring a hybrid approach, where fathers complete their applications and surveys in a mix of virtual and in-person formats, would provide flexibility to use the most effective approach for a given situation.

ENROLL NOW!

MOVING WORKSHOPS ONLINE

Prior to COVID-19, SFSF offered workshops over a two-week period in three key program areas—job readiness, parenting, and healthy relationships. It took staff a few months to transition the workshops to a virtual environment and systematize virtual program delivery.

- Technical difficulties related to equipment and online availability provided challenges for both staff and participants.

Virtual Workshops: Lessons Learned

- It can be difficult for participants to effectively absorb information in an all-day online format.
- Fathers had contrasting responses to the virtual environment.
 - Some found it easier to participate in virtual workshops rather than having to travel to a physical location.
 - Some felt more comfortable sharing personal details when behind a screen, while others felt less engaged.
 - Others were challenged by the technology requirements or could not attend every session because they were caring for children who could not be in school or childcare.
- Some fathers could not attend every workshop because of other commitments (such as childcare). Other fathers were dealing with personal traumas associated with the pandemic and the racial justice movements of summer 2020. Staff responded by:
 - Providing make-up sessions.
 - Making more time for one-on-one sessions.
 - Ensuring fathers' basic needs were fully met.
 - However, these accommodations led to challenges for staff who also had to balance working at home with providing care for their children or other family members.

