

WHY FOCUS ON FATHERS?



What Policymakers Should Know

There is no social network where low-income fathers can go for help.

Unlike welfare services for women, there is no single point of access where fathers can obtain services.

Most fatherhood programs exist at the local level through community organizations; few have formal relationships with state institutions.

Most states do not have a statewide strategy regarding low-income fathers.

Children who have access to two parents are at reduced risk for school dropout, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and substance abuse, even if their parents are not married.

Service delivery systems were created for married or divorced families; there is no mechanism to deal with intact families that are not married.

Most low-income fathers are in committed relationships with the mother of their children at the time their child is born.

At birth, many low-income mothers and fathers indicate their interest in marrying.

Most low-income fathers care about their children and want to be involved, and many women want fathers to be involved.

Many low-income fathers grew up without their own fathers; they lack realistic examples of what a father should do and think that if they cannot provide financially, their families are better off without them.

What Policymakers Can Do

4 Use state institutions—child support and welfare agencies and the courts—as access points to connect low-income fathers with services.

4 Develop a statewide strategy for service delivery that combines state and local partnerships.

4 Develop outcome-based performance measures to assist state agencies to direct efforts toward developing comprehensive fatherhood services.

4 Use independent boards or commissions to oversee fatherhood projects.

4 Use the budget process to direct money for fatherhood programs administered by an independent board that will solicit proposals from service delivery entities.

4 Review policies within the child support and welfare agencies, judicial and educational systems to determine whether laws, regulations and policies deter or prevent father involvement.

4 Develop mechanisms that recognize fragile families and provide appropriate intervention.

4 Develop flexible service delivery options within welfare and child support agencies that address the needs of different types of families—referral to services, traditional enforcement or diversion.

4 Use voluntary paternity establishment to connect low-income fathers and mothers with parenting and child development skill-building activities.

4 Ensure relationship building and peer support networks are available to help fathers develop skills that allow them to be better fathers.

4 Include mothers in the recruitment process for fatherhood services; they can help reinforce father involvement beyond financial contribution.

4 Provide access to mediation and parenting plan development to never-married families similar to the way these services are made available to divorcing parents.

What Policymakers Need to Know and What They Can Do

WHY FOCUS ON FATHERS? (CONTINUED)

Q: Won't providing services to low-income fathers take away from services that help mothers and children?

A: No. Fatherhood services help fathers to be financial providers and help them become better partners and parents. This can benefit mothers and children, particularly as they move off welfare rolls. Many programs can work with mothers and fathers together.

Q: There are lots of fathers out there doing the right thing without any special help. Why should we direct time and money into helping fathers who can't meet their obligations?

A: There are a group of low-income fathers whose partners are making the transition off welfare or could be at risk of going on welfare. These fathers share many of the same characteristics as their female counterparts—low levels of literacy, unemployment, poor work history or low-wage employment. Mothers and children may not receive formal child support from these men because they do not make enough to pay child support. Other times, low-income fathers feel as though they have nothing to offer their children if they cannot provide financially. Through welfare agencies, women and children have access to a variety of programs and services in all parts of a state. However, no formal network exists where fathers can turn for assistance. Helping fathers get jobs can help them reconnect with families; providing peer support networks can help address communication barriers with mothers. Children do better with the involvement of two parents, even if the parents are not married. Developing services to help men be better fathers can provide children with access to parents who work together to raise their children and help ease the hardship many single mothers face.

Q: Why do fathers need help learning how to be a father? They had no problem fathering their child.

A: Many low-income fathers grew up without the presence of their own father, so they lack real-life examples of what a father should do and what he should provide. Many men equate their worth as a father by the financial contribution that they can make. In the eyes of fathers, this notion often is reinforced by the attempt to collect child support in the absence of other types of assistance to help fathers gain access to their children. Helping men feel as though they contribute in a positive way to their families fosters self-esteem, and fathers feel as though they have something to offer their children. Access to other types of services can help fathers develop better communication skills to interact with their partners and skills that help them be better parents.

Q: Won't directing funds to fathers reduce the amount of money that goes to programs that serve mothers and children?

A: No. Under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, states can provide services to both mothers and fathers even if they are not married or do not live together. Welfare caseloads have declined by more than 40 percent nationally, leaving resources that would have been spent on cash assistance available to reinvest in other types of programs or services. Additionally, the new welfare allows states to target resources to poor families—including fathers—to reduce the likelihood that mothers and children will sink deeper into poverty once they leave welfare, or to prevent them from going on welfare in the first place.