

BUILDING SERVICES TO HELP FATHERS



What Policymakers Need to Know

Low-income fathers share many of the same characteristics as women on welfare—low literacy, poor employment history and low-wage employment.

Low-income men come into contact with many state systems—child support, the courts, corrections and welfare agencies.

Low-income fathers often fall behind in their child support obligations because their earnings are not enough to support themselves and a family.

Many low-income mothers and children do not receive child support.

Federal law requires states to require low-income fathers to work or develop payment plans if they are behind in child support, although many states do not have a statewide strategy to address the issue.

TANF dollars can be used to fund programs and services for fathers without risk to time limits and work requirements for mothers.

TANF dollars can be used to support of variety of services for fathers—employment assistance, counseling, parenting plans, mediation, parenting education, substance abuse and domestic violence.

Like welfare recipients, some fathers have barriers—including substance abuse, domestic violence and anger—that hinder their success in the work force.

There is no social network where men can learn about child rearing and building relationships.

Many low-income men grew up without their own fathers; often, they do not know what a real father does or what is expected of him.

What Policymakers Can Do

- 4 Develop networks of local providers to provide men with employment assistance.
- 4 Use state institutions to refer low-income fathers to local service providers.
- 4 Identify “nontraditional” partners—like voluntary paternity establishment programs, Healthy Start and Head Start—to connect fathers with needed services.
- 4 Connect with fathers through women who are participating in welfare programs.
- 4 Combine traditional cost-recovery efforts in child support enforcement with service referrals to local or community employment providers.
- 4 Inform fathers that they can request a modification of their support order if an order is set too high for them to pay.
- 4 Give judges the option of referring fathers to services instead of jail if they are behind in child support due to unemployment.
- 4 Develop a statewide policy regarding strategies to assist low-income fathers and their families.
- 4 Use the budget process to direct funding for the development of fatherhood programs and services.
- 4 Use TANF funds to make competitive grants to local programs that operate fatherhood programs.
- 4 Direct agencies to use TANF funds to assist fathers.
- 4 Use employment as the catalyst to get fathers involved with programs, but offer other types of services—like peer support, counseling, anger management and parenting—that help fathers develop skills to keep jobs and build relationships with their families.
- 4 Ensure that programs offering peer support services are among the choices offered in the referral process.
- 4 Provide parenting and relationship building education components when requiring work and child support compliance.

What Policymakers Need to Know and
What They Can Do

BUILDING SERVICES TO HELP FATHERS (CONTINUED)

Q: Why should child support agencies be involved with providing services to fathers? Isn't their primary responsibility to collect support for mothers?

A: Child support agencies do try to collect support on behalf of mothers and children, but collection rates are low for poor families. Child support agencies do not need to be the service provider for fathers, but they can act as an access point to connect fathers with services that will help them get jobs so they can pay child support. Not only will it help child support agencies meet their goals of helping families, it is a federal requirement that they have procedures to help low-income fathers work if they are behind in their child support.

Q: What kind of services do low-income fathers need?

A: Fathers need help finding jobs and developing skills that help them get better jobs. They also need help to make sure their child support orders are set at levels they can afford to pay. Fathers also need peer support to help them deal with their frustration over relationships or low self-worth at not being able to provide for their children. Services that help with anger management and developing parenting plans with their current or former partners also are beneficial.

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, which can benefit mothers and children—particularly as they move off of welfare rolls. Many programs can work with mothers and fathers together.

Q: Why do low-income fathers need specialized services?

A: 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, and providing peer support networks can help address communication barriers with mothers. Children do better with the involvement of two parents, even if 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.

Q: How can employment assistance help men be better fathers?

A: Many fatherhood programs offer employment services in tandem with other things like peer support, anger management and relationship building skills. 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 know how to be better parents.