

10 Things States Can Do to Help Low-Income Fathers

Develop a statewide strategy

There is no single access point where fathers can go for services if they need help, though services to help women and children ease the pressures of poverty exist through statewide access points. Little has been done to examine how fathers fit within the state's service delivery systems outside of punitive measures.

Determine how your state institutions (welfare and child support agencies, the courts and education systems) involve or deter fathers

Many policies and procedures are designed to recognize fathers only for their financial contribution or after they fail to provide financially. Agency practices can provide linkages to services when fathers need them to help support their families.

Facilitate Programmatic Support

States have an opportunity to use federal TANF dollars to help support programs that assist fathers to pay child support and maintain involvement with their children—without jeopardizing resources directed to mothers and children.

Use state institutions as a connection point to refer fathers to needed employment and parenting services

State institutions have access to fathers through child support and court proceedings; these entities can connect with local, community providers who can help fathers get jobs to meet their legal responsibilities.

Use employment as a catalyst to get fathers involved with programs

Low-Income fathers want jobs and they want to provide for their children, but they can benefit from other services like peer support and parenting education. They will join a program for the employment prospects, but stay involved because of the network of support. Fathers report better relationships with their children and more confidence in their parenting abilities as a result.

 **Identify areas for systemic change and assist child support agencies to include service delivery alongside cost-recovery efforts**

Many state child support and other policies have no mechanism to sort the deadbeat dads from the deadbroke dads and end up applying a one-size-fits-all strategy that doesn't generate much of a return on state investment or benefit families and children. Less than one-fourth of families receive support through the formal system.

 **Develop forgiveness programs that reduce arrearages**

Many low-income fathers have accumulated large arrearages-over \$5000 in many cases-that they are unable to pay because of unemployment or low-wage employment. Much of this debt is owed to the state to offset welfare expenditures and does not go directly to their children. Forgiving arrearages in exchange for cooperation for future support can bring fathers back into the system and help to ensure future child support payments.

 **Establish flexible policies regarding charging interest, establishing support order amounts and accumulation of arrearages**

States can establish policies that apply punitive measures for fathers who evade responsibility, but allow some flexibility for fathers who want to provide for their families but lack the financial resources because of unemployment or underemployment.

 **Use voluntary paternity establishment at birth to connect fathers with parenting and employment services**

Most low-income fathers are present at the birth of their child and 80% are either cohabitating or romantically involved. Intervention at this point can help to facilitate working relationships between unmarried parents and in some cases the possibility of permanent or married relationships.

 **Get rid of the stereotypes that low-income fathers don't care about their children, don't care about the mothers of their children and that mothers don't want fathers involved.**

The majority of low-income, unmarried fathers are present at the birth of their child, provided financial and emotional support to the mother during pregnancy and 80% are romantically involved

or cohabitating. Mothers report wanting the father involved with their child, even if romantic relationships have ended.