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### PROMISING PRACTICES IN EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROGRAMS FOR FATHERS: FINDINGS FROM EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

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#### Background

Over the last few decades, the United States has experienced a dramatic decline in employment opportunities for unskilled men. This trend doesn't just represent an economic problem; it also represents a threat to the well-being of children. Men who are experiencing financial hardships or problems with employment often have trouble being responsible fathers.<sup>1</sup> This appears to be especially true of young fathers and nonresident fathers (i.e., those living apart from their children), who are more likely to have low levels of education and job experience, to be in poor health, to have a history of involvement with the criminal justice system, and to earn low hourly wages and work fewer hours if they do hold jobs.<sup>2</sup> Lack of stable employment and adequate income limit fathers' abilities to financially support children, including making child support payments.<sup>iv</sup> Studies show that fathers often want to provide financial support to their children, but lack the means to do so.<sup>v</sup> Yet relatively few policies or programs are aimed at helping such men.<sup>ii</sup> While some programs do exist to help fathers gain stable employment, increase their incomes, and make child support payments, few fathers are currently served by such programs.<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, more needs to be learned about the effectiveness of these programs. *What practices have been found to be successful in programs aimed at increasing self-sufficiency and employment among low-income fathers? What matters? What really works?* As a way to address these questions, Child Trends identified eight characteristics of "model" and "promising" self-sufficiency and employment programs for fathers, based on evidence-based research criteria. This brief reports our findings.

#### Criteria for Selecting Father Employment and Self-Sufficiency Programs

Only rigorous evaluations of programs can provide evidence of whether or not programs actually have a desired effect. Of the 17 fatherhood programs that we reviewed, we selected seven that met the following criteria as "model" or "promising" programs:

- The program/intervention was implemented in 1980 or later.
- The study on the program effects used a sample size of at least 15 in both the treatment and control or comparison groups.
- The intervention aimed to have an impact on father employment/self-sufficiency.
- The program was evaluated using an experimental or quasi-experimental design with baseline and follow-up data; and follow-up data from intervention and control or comparison groups were used to determine "effect" or "impact."
- Involvement of participants in the interventions was known by the researchers and not based on participant recall.
- The study follow-up time was at least one month after the intervention was initiated.
- Appropriate statistical analyses were used.
- At least one outcome was marginally significant at the .10 level.
- Program evaluation documentation was available.
- The evaluation was conducted by an external independent evaluator.
- The magnitude of change in at least one measured outcome was at least 5 percent

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*Programs included in the review did not:*

- Have to have findings published in a peer-reviewed journal;
- Have to be replicated;
- Have to be currently in operation or to be currently implemented in some location.

## **Eight Practices from “Model” and “Promising” Father Employment and Self-Sufficiency Programs**

As noted, in conducting our review, we identified seven father employment/self-sufficiency programs that were considered effective (i.e., fell into the “model” or “promising” category). These programs all had low attrition rates, underwent either experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations that were conducted by external evaluators, and the results of the evaluations were publicly available. Although the focus of these programs varied, they shared many of the promising practices outlined below. These practices reflect different aspects of teaching and assisting fathers and the particular context of programs. As yet, no evidence exists to suggest which combination of these characteristics contributed to the overall success of the programs. Nor is there evidence showing that each program had to incorporate all of these practices to have a measurable effect on participants.

“Model” and “promising” father employment and self-sufficiency programs:

1. Partner with job placement, and other state and community agencies to serve low-income fathers.
2. Enable vocational specialists to assist fathers on a one-on-one basis.
3. Offer a comprehensive array of employment services to help fathers overcome barriers to self-sufficiency.
4. Offer long-term services, including transitional employment and post-employment supports that last a sufficient amount of time to complete important core activities.
5. Utilize trained vocational specialists who are experienced and well-connected, and provide them with staff training.
6. Use incentives to recruit fathers, assign them to work crews, and encourage them to stay employed.
7. Take a holistic approach to service delivery, and address additional needs above and beyond employment-related concerns.
8. Incorporate teaching methods and materials that are appropriate for unemployed and underemployed fathers.

## Promising Practices

- **Promising Practice #1: Partner with job placement and other state and community agencies to serve low-income fathers.**

Nearly all of the “model” and “promising” programs partnered with a wide variety of community organizations (e.g., job placement agencies) and state agencies (e.g., child support enforcement offices) in an effort to recruit and serve low-income fathers. For example, the Center for Employment Opportunities (*CEO*) program works with the New York Division of Parole, the program’s primary source of participants. The program also works with public agencies in New York, including the Department of Transportation, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, and multiple units of the City University of New York, to provide work sites for *CEO* participants. Private employers also cooperate with the program to place participants into permanent jobs. Other “model” and “promising” programs partnered with community organizations (e.g., substance abuse services) or with local businesses in order to meet participants’ unique needs and to place them in available jobs. For example, staff at the Los Angeles Jobs-First Greater Avenues for Independence (*LA GAIN*) program cultivated relationships with local employers, compiled lists of available jobs, and tried to match participants with applicable employment opportunities.

- **Promising Practice #2: Enable vocational specialists to assist fathers on a one-on-one basis.**

Effective programs incorporated individualized services, such as case management, that enabled them to identify the specific needs of each father and to provide services accordingly. This one-on-one approach often allowed programs to create individualized service plans to meet the needs of low-income fathers. For example, each participant in the *Young Dads* program worked closely with a case worker who helped the father to identify his service needs, recognize his strengths and talents, and find work. Fathers participating in the *CEO* program worked one-on-one with a vocational specialist who assisted them in preparing for and finding an appropriate permanent placement. Working one-on-one with participants gave job coaches the opportunity to get to know participants, assess the type of job that interested them, deem when they were ready, and find them an appropriate placement. Such relationships also acted as sources of emotional support for fathers and increased the overall effectiveness of the programs. For example, mentors and case managers in the *STEP-UP* program were able to overcome young fathers’ initial mistrust of authority figures through the development of personal relationships.

- **Promising Practice #3: Offer a comprehensive array of employment services to help fathers overcome barriers to self-sufficiency.**

The fathers served by employment/self-sufficiency programs face multiple barriers to self-sufficiency, including low levels of education, lack of job skills, and limited work histories. To help these fathers to obtain employment and become self-sufficient, these needs must be addressed simultaneously. The “model” and “promising” programs reviewed here all offered a range of services to participants. Most programs offered both pre- and post-employment services to help fathers both to initially obtain jobs and to subsequently keep them. Pre-employment services typically included educational/training opportunities, job-search and résumé preparation assistance, and skills-building workshops. Post-employment services included follow-ups and ongoing services offered to fathers after they obtained work. For example, the *CEO* program offers pre-employment classes, job coaching and placement, and up to 12 months of post-placement support. Similarly, the *LA GAIN* program sponsored job clubs that assisted fathers with pre-employment services, such as preparing résumés, building interview skills, and finding job openings. Participants were also eligible for case management, counseling, and ongoing educational services for up to one year. In addition, many programs offered transitional employment services that enabled unemployed men to gain job experience prior to obtaining

permanent work. For example, the *CEO* program offers fathers opportunities to participate in a paid transitional employment program, in which fathers are assigned to work groups for four days a week and receive job preparation assistance on the fifth day. Fathers continue in this transitional program until they are able to find permanent jobs.

- **Promising Practice #4: Offer long-term services, including transitional employment and post-employment supports that last a sufficient amount of time to complete important core activities.**

It takes a considerable amount of time to recruit fathers and engage them in a program that will eventually lead to changes in their behaviors. Most of the fathers served by “model” and “promising” self-sufficiency programs faced barriers to employment (e.g., lack of education/training) that could not be addressed with short-term programs. Effective self-sufficiency programs delivered services over a length of time that typically spanned several months. For example, job preparation and transitional employment services in the *CEO* program are delivered daily over the course of several months. In addition, some of the programs provided ongoing post-employment supports that fathers could use after completing the program. Both the *CEO* and *LA GAIN* programs offered participants up to 12 months of post-placement support.

- **Promising Practice #5: Use trained vocational specialists who are experienced and well-connected, and provide them with staff training.**

“Model” and “promising” programs usually employ people who are experienced professionals. For example, trained vocational specialists worked with fathers in the *CEO* program, and counselors in the *STEP-UP* program had acquired expertise in assessing clients’ current needs and problems, helping clients develop action plans for growth, making referrals to educational and job training/vocational programs, and providing advice about the job-search process and managing financial affairs. *Young Dads* employed trained educational-vocational counselors and social workers who served as case managers. Staff at the *Moving to Opportunities (MTO)* programs all underwent two weeks of training, and staff at the *STEP-UP* program received six months of training and preparation time. In fatherhood programs with an employment component, it is important for at least one staff member to be well-connected in the community in order to help participants find jobs. One example of this value could be seen in the *Young Dads* program. One of the social workers involved in program was able to network successfully with local politicians and business owners to help participants find work.

- **Promising Practice #6: Use incentives to recruit fathers, assign them to work crews, and encourage them to stay employed.**

Most of the programs that were found to be “model” or “promising” used incentives to motivate fathers to participate. For example, incentives were an integral part of the *CEO* program, which served ex-offenders. Fathers were motivated to participate because they were assigned to a work crew at minimum wage after only four days of training. Additionally, after being permanently placed in a job, participants received incentives to remain employed at 30-day milestones. *MTO* also used incentives even though participants showed high interest in and enthusiasm for the program. Upon enrollment, adults received \$50 and children received gifts to ensure high survey participation rates. The *STEP-UP* program offered participants money for child care and transportation, and the *Parents’ Fair Share (PFS)* program provided clients with transportation and clothing assistance, as well as a \$20 incentive for completing a six-month interview. Some of the programs evaluated served fathers who were mandated to participate, in which case sanctions for nonparticipation were used as incentives. For example, enrollment in the *Parents’ Fair Share* program was mandatory, and fathers who failed to participate faced possible incarceration. Likewise, participants in the *LA GAIN* program faced financial sanctions (reductions in welfare benefits) for noncompliance.

- **Promising Practice #7: Take a holistic approach to service delivery, and address additional needs above and beyond employment-related concerns.**  
Fathers involved in employment/self-sufficiency programs tend to have a number of additional problems that are not necessarily employment related, but that can make it difficult for them to find work or be good fathers. Effective programs recognize the need to address these problems in addition to providing services that are related directly to employment (e.g., training, job-search assistance). For example, *Young Dads* provided participants with medical care and referrals, housing and legal advocacy, cultural and recreational activities, and training in parenting skills. Fathers in the *Step-Up* program participated in peer support groups, parenting classes, and life-skills and relationship training. When appropriate, participants also received substance abuse treatment and/or domestic abuse counseling. Holistic approaches to service delivery enable programs to address fathers' physical, emotional, and behavioral barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, thus increasing program effectiveness.
- **Promising Practice #8: Incorporate teaching methods and materials that are appropriate for unemployed and underemployed fathers.**  
Our review suggests that effective fatherhood programs tailored their materials to serve the populations of unemployed and underemployed fathers and were culturally sensitive in the provision of the program's various services and components. For example, the *Young Dads* program targeted African-American adolescent fathers and used male social workers who were thought to be better equipped to provide services to young fathers. Other effective programs found that staff members who shared cultural affinity with the clients they served or came from similar living environments could relate better to program participants.

### Early Conclusions

Few studies of "model" or "promising" father self-sufficiency/employment programs have been replicated. Consequently, one should be cautious about making general statements about the effectiveness of some types of programs based on the results of nonreplicated studies. Despite the real limitations of the research in this field, we should be encouraged by the progress currently being made in numerous programs that are targeting unemployed and underemployed fathers and their families for intervention efforts, as well as by the use of stronger research and evaluation strategies in connection with these programs. The need for effective programs in this area has accelerated during the current economic downturn. Men in low-income communities—often "last hired, first fired" even in the best of times—have been especially hard hit during the recession, making it more difficult than ever for them to be "responsible fathers."

## Descriptions of “Model” Self-Sufficiency and Employment Programs for Fathers

1) The **Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)** is an employment program for ex-offenders in New York City. The program offers ex-offenders job-readiness training and counseling, then places them in paid temporary employment while they are assisted in looking for permanent employment.

Sources:

Bloom, D., Redcross, C., Zweig, J., & Azurdia, G. (2007). *Transitional jobs for ex-prisoners: Early impacts from a random assignment evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities prisoner reentry program.* (Working paper) MDRC.

CEO & MDRC. (2006). *The power of work: Center for Employment Opportunities comprehensive prisoner reentry program.* Retrieved June 26, 2009, from: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/426/summary.html>

2) The **Los Angeles Jobs-First GAIN (Greater Avenues for Independence)** program was an employment-focused mandatory welfare-to-work program operated by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services from January 1995 through March 1998.

Source:

Freedman, S., Knab, J.T., Gennetian L.A., & Navarro, D. (2000). *The Los Angeles Jobs-First GAIN evaluation: Final report on a Work First program in a major urban center.* New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.

3) The **Self-Sufficiency Project for Long-Term Welfare Recipients (SSP)** program was launched in 1992. The 10-year program involved more than 6,000 single-parent families in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and New Brunswick. It was conceived and funded by Human Resources Development Canada, managed by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), and evaluated by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and SRDC.

Source:

Michalopoulos, C., Tattre, D., Miller, C., Robins, P., Morris, P., Gyarmati, D., Redcross, C., Foley, K., & Ford, R. (2002). *Making work pay: Final report on the Self-Sufficiency Project for Long-Term Welfare Recipients.* Retrieved June 26, 2009, from: <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/sdc/pkrf/publications/research/2002-002340/mwpssp.pdf>

4) The **Young Dads** program targeted African American adolescent fathers to help them become more confident and responsible fathers.

Source:

Mazza, C. (2002). Young Dads: The effects of a parenting program on urban African American adolescent fathers. *Adolescence*, 37(148), 681-693.

## Descriptions of “Promising” Self-Sufficiency and Employment Programs for Fathers:

1) **Moving to Opportunity (MTO)** was a demonstration program funded by Congress that sought to determine what would happen when very poor families were given the opportunity to move out of subsidized housing in very poor neighborhoods of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City into more affluent neighborhoods.

Source:

Orr, L., Feins, J. D., Jacob, R., & Beecroft, E. (2003). *Moving to Opportunity interim impacts evaluation*. (1-178). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.

2) **Parents’ Fair Share (PFS)** was a national demonstration project implemented from 1994 to 1996 that was authorized by the Family Support Act of 1998, which was enacted to enforce the collection of child support from noncustodial parents.

Sources:

Doolittle, F., & Lynn, S. (1998, May). *Working with low-income cases. Lessons for the child support enforcement system from Parents’ Fair Share*. Retrieved June 26, 2009, from:  
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/144/overview.html>.

Doolittle, F., Knox, V., Miller, C., & Rowser, S. (1998, December). *Building opportunities, enforcing obligations: Implementation and interim impacts of Parents’ Fair Share*. Retrieved June 26, 2009, from:  
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/146/execsum.html>

Knox, V., & Redcross, C. (2000). Parenting and providing. The impact of Parents’ Fair Share on paternal involvement. Retrieved June 26, 2009, from:  
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/38/abstract.html>

Martinez, J.M., & Miller, C. (2000). Working and earning. The impact of Parents’ Fair Share on low-income fathers’ employment. Retrieved June 26, 2009, from: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/39/abstract.html>

Miller, C., & Knox, V. (2001). The challenge of helping low-income fathers support their children. Final lessons from Parents’ Fair Share. Retrieved June 26, 2009, from:  
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/144/overview.html>

3) The **STEP-UP: Mentoring for Young Fathers** program was launched in 1990 to address the challenges faced by young fathers in Phoenix, Arizona. Initially, STEP-UP offered counseling and case management services.

Source:

STEP-UP with Mentoring for Young Fathers. Retrieved June 26, 2009, from:  
[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/rpt/fth/fth\\_b.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/rpt/fth/fth_b.htm)

## References

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  - <sup>2</sup> The Future of Children. (2002). Children and welfare reform. *The Future of Children*, 12(1).
  - <sup>3</sup> Sorensen, E., & Lerman, R. (1998). Welfare reform and low income noncustodial fathers. *Challenge*, 41(4), 101-116.
  - <sup>4</sup> National Women's Law Center and Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy. (2002). *Dollars and sense: Improving the determination of child support obligations for low-income mothers, fathers and children*. Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center and the Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy.
  - <sup>5</sup> Edin, K., & Nelson, T. J. (2001). Working steady: Race, low-wage work, and family involvement among non-custodial fathers in Philadelphia. In D. Massey and E. Anderson (Eds.), *Problem of the century: Racial stratification in the United States* (pp. 375-404). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
  - <sup>6</sup> Bronte-Tinkew, J., Bowie, L., & Moore, K. (2007). Fathers and public policy. *Applied Developmental Science*, 11(4), 254-259; Johnson, E. S., Levine, A., & Doolittle, F. C. (1999). *Fathers' fair share: Helping poor men manage child support and fatherhood*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kasarda, J. D. (1989). Urban industrial transition and the underclass. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 501, 26-47.
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