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Office of Family Assistance

National
Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



Forging Effective Responsible Fatherhood Partnerships: A Research-to-Practice Brief

Developed by Mathematica Policy Research on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Summary

Many programs for low-income fathers involve partnerships with multiple agencies to help recruit and serve more fathers, offer a broader array of services, and even gain access to new funding streams. In this brief, we summarize findings from the Strengthening Families Evidence Review (SFER) on forming and maintaining such partnerships. The SFER, a systematic review of family-strengthening programs serving low-income fathers or couples, was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research under contract to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families. This brief focuses on the 90 studies of 70 responsible fatherhood programs included in the SFER. From these, we identify promising practices for forming and maintaining partnerships and highlight the pros and cons of two common partnerships, one with the child-support enforcement system and the other with employment organizations.

Partnering For Success

Partnerships offer an array of benefits to fatherhood programs, helping them extend their reach, expand the number of services offered, and increase funding. For example, partnerships can open the door to a larger pool of eligible fathers, possibly increasing the number of clients served. Partners can also help recruit populations that another agency cannot reach on its own, such as immigrants, re-entering clients, or expectant parents. Further, a single organization may be limited in the range of services it can provide but through partnerships can expand the available services. Partnerships may therefore be particularly useful for programs serving fathers who have numerous challenges and can benefit from a variety of supports and services. Partnerships also can increase available funding, for example, through joint funding.

In this brief, we summarize the findings on forming and maintaining such partnerships from the Strengthening Families Evidence Review (SFER), a systematic review of research on responsible fatherhood and other family-strengthening programs. SFER was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research under contract to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families. Mathematica reviewed 90 studies of 70 programs for low-income fathers (the full results of the review are available at <http://familyreview.acf.hhs.gov>).

From these reviews, we derived a set of promising practices for forming and sustaining partnerships. Although these findings are informed by the research, please note that they do not have strong evidence of effectiveness. We therefore cannot be certain that these strategies, and not other factors, were the key to the partnerships' success.

The remainder of this brief presents the main types of partnerships formed by fatherhood programs, as described in the research, and the promising practices we identified. We also highlight the pros and cons of

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collaborating with two common types of partners: child support enforcement agencies and employment-services providers.

Types of Partnerships

The research examined a range of partnerships, including some that require very little communication among partners as well as highly integrated partnerships that require close collaboration. The following types of arrangements were most common in the research literature:

- **Contractual partnerships.** In some fatherhood programs, a lead agency works or contracts with another organization to fill a specific role. For example, one program that offered curriculum-based group sessions in a prison hired group facilitators from a local nonprofit. Typically, the role of the partner is limited to the contracted service.
- **Supplemental partnerships.** In another common arrangement, a lead agency operates the fatherhood program and provides core services while partners help to recruit participants or provide supplemental services. For example, partners may serve as referral sources to the lead agency, telling their clients about the agency or sending fathers' contact information to the agency. The lead agency also may refer fathers to partner agencies for supplemental services. This differs from simply providing referrals to other organizations because the lead agency and its partners have an established agreement about the arrangement. For example, the partner may agree to prioritize fathers referred by the lead agency.
- **Integrated partnerships.** In this arrangement, multiple partners take an active and integral role in providing core program services. Each partner may be responsible for recruiting fathers or for providing specific services; for example, one may provide employment assistance while another provides parenting education. This type of partnership usually requires the most interaction between partners.

The difference between these types of partnerships is often a matter of degree. For example, in both supplemental and integrated partnerships, services are offered by multiple organizations. But in the former, core services are offered by the lead agency, while partners generally provide ancillary services. In the latter, a program is conceptualized as a package of core services that are offered by several organizations.

Promising Practices

In the programs included in the SFER, partnerships were common and involved a range of organizations, such as CSE agencies, prisons, and courts. The strategies and challenges varied across programs, but the following promising practices emerged for forming and maintaining these partnerships.

Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each partner at the beginning of the partnership.

All partners should understand and agree on the purpose of the partnership. Goals may include expanding the types of services offered to fathers, increasing the number of fathers receiving services, or reaching a new population of fathers. The key is that the goals are clear, to prevent later misunderstandings, and that all parties agree with them.

Expectations about the role each partner will play should also be clearly articulated to avoid misconceptions. For example, rather than simply agreeing that both partners will recruit fathers, recruitment targets should be specified—one partner could recruit 50 fathers per quarter while the other recruits 25 fathers per quarter, or one partner could focus on recruiting Hispanic fathers while the other recruits African American fathers. Setting explicit goals allows partners to devise their own strategies and to work independently, if needed, while still meeting the goals of the partnership.

Partners that did not clarify their expectations or share other key information up front later faced a host of challenges. In one program, each partner agency had different eligibility requirements. One partner tried to refer fathers receiving parenting education to an agency offering employment services but quickly discovered that many of the fathers it referred were not eligible for those services. Setting clear expectations before program operations began would have helped both parties identify and possibly avoid this problem, for example, by designating a certain number of enrollment spots in the employment program for referred fathers who did not meet the usual eligibility requirements.

Ensure that staff members are “on board.”

For a partnership to succeed, staff must support its goals. The research revealed that front-line staff did not always endorse the goals of a partnership, even if the agency leaders did. Staff were particularly resistant when a partnership changed their standard procedures for service delivery or service content. Programs can avoid this problem by obtaining staff buy-in before the partnership begins.

Designate a lead agency to oversee all partners.

Designating a lead agency allows one partner to serve as the central point of contact and to oversee the “big picture.” The lead agency can help other partners monitor progress toward overall program goals and quickly identify and respond to issues as they arise. The lead agency also can provide fiscal oversight and general management of the program. Both contractual and supplemental partnerships typically operated with a lead agency, but in integrated partnerships, this arrangement may need to be negotiated.

One program highlighted in the research had several partners with different operating structures. The program had designated a lead agency that did not offer direct services, which the researchers found to be more efficient than having a lead agency that was also delivering services. In this case, the lead agency coordinated daily operations, such as recruiting, training, and monitoring program operations. The researchers concluded that the lead agency was able to operate more objectively because it did not provide direct services and thus was not tied to the interests of any one organization.

If services are offered in several locations, plan additional supports to maintain high participation.

Organizations often form partnerships to provide a broader array of services, but if services are delivered in several locations, programs may find it difficult to maintain high levels of participation. From the fathers’ perspective, services provided in different locations may feel disjointed. In addition, fathers may have formed relationships with staff in certain agencies and may not want to work with other staff. Requiring fathers to travel to multiple locales for services also may pose logistical and transportation challenges. Faced with these kinds of issues, some programs stopped referring fathers to partners for certain services and instead moved them “in house.”

To maintain high participation, programs should make the flow of services as seamless as possible, even if they are provided by multiple partners. For example, fathers could be assigned a case manager who tracks and supports their participation in all services, regardless of the provider. The case manager also could act as a liaison for fathers who are hesitant to work with staff from another agency, even accompanying the father on his first visit to the partner agency. Another strategy is to have staff from the partner agency work out of the host agency at regular intervals, say, one day a week. In one program, this prevented transportation problems for fathers and allowed them to work with partner staff in a familiar location.

Establish clear communication across and within partner organizations.

Communication is critical to a working partnership, especially when services are coordinated across multiple agencies. To ensure smooth communication, programs may want to identify staff to serve as primary points of contact for communicating with partner organizations and within their own agency. Establishing these points of contact helps ensure that information is accurately conveyed to the appropriate staff. It also helps prevent distortions that can occur if staff hear information second- or third-hand. For example, one program found that requirements were not clearly communicated to different agencies; as a result, some agencies had conflicting and sometimes mistaken ideas about the requirements and their discretion for making decisions.

Partners should also set clear expectations about the frequency and modes of communication. The frequency may vary over time, for example, with greater frequency during the initial stages and less frequency later on. Partners also may want to discuss the best ways to communicate. For example, it may be efficient to conduct most meetings over the phone, but in-person contact may also be helpful for discussing complicated issues or for monitoring program operations.

Plan ahead for data sharing if required by the partnership.

Some partnerships described in the literature involved substantial data sharing. For example, some partners exchanged lists of contact information for potentially eligible fathers. Such lists may be shared by simply emailing spreadsheets or sending hard-copy forms, but other types of data sharing are more complicated. For example, one program involved a partnership between the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), the Texas Workforce Commission, and IV-D courts, which handles child-support cases. The workforce staff had to send monthly compliance reports to the OAG and courts to ensure that noncustodial parents were fulfilling their obligations. The partners initially had trouble compiling and transmitting these data within the specified timeframe. To address the problem, they developed a web-based tracking system to facilitate the flow of information. Although the system worked well, these types of systems or strategies may require substantial planning and time for development, setup, and maintenance. Programs also may need to consider infrastructure requirements, data confidentiality rules, and staff knowledge and time needed to enter data.

Provide staff with sufficient time and training.

Another common staffing issue, according to the research, is underestimating the time required to form and sustain partnerships, especially if it led to substantial changes in staff responsibilities. Providing referrals to partners in a supplemental partnership, for example, will likely not require much staff time. A more integrated partnership, however, may involve changes to how services are provided and thus may require substantial staff time. Some programs found they had to hire more staff or re-allocate the time of existing staff to make partnerships run smoothly.

Programs also tended to misjudge the need for staff training when operating partnerships. For supplemental partnerships, staff may need reminders about providing referrals for recruitment, or refreshers about services offered by partners. Periodic trainings also are useful if organizations have high staff turnover. The more integrated a partnership is, the more likely extensive training will be beneficial. For example, a statewide effort to help incarcerated noncustodial parents find jobs and pay child support included an expedited process for modifying child-support orders. The partners were required to change their standard processes, and many staff found the new process complicated and did not feel adequately prepared. If staff are not properly trained or prepared, implementation likely will suffer.

Key Partnerships

The remainder of this brief focuses on two common partnerships that are particularly germane to fatherhood programs. We first highlight partnerships with the CSE system, which may be of interest to programs that focus on helping fathers pay child support. We then highlight partnerships involving employment services, as the research suggests that many fathers are interested in and need help finding and keeping jobs.

Partnering with the CSE System

The research revealed a range of benefits to partnering with the CSE system. CSE could, for example, assist with recruitment by providing local programs with the contact information of fathers with current child-support orders or debt. Some programs worked with CSE to offer incentives that otherwise would not have been available, such as expedited child-support orders, debt forgiveness, or suspended child-support orders during program participation. These often were coupled with additional services to help fathers find employment or improve their parenting skills. Because many low-income fathers struggle to pay child support, programs that work with CSE to modify orders would likely be of widespread interest. A few programs that involved CSE were mandatory; for example, one program for noncustodial parents with child-support debt required them to pay child support, participate in the program, or go to jail. The program developers reasoned that making the program mandatory would increase participation, but the research is mixed on the success of this strategy.

Partnering with CSE agencies may also pose challenges, as fathers often are suspicious of these agencies and thus may be reluctant to participate in the program if CSE is involved. The research included one partnership between a community-based fatherhood program and CSE in which fathers were invited to learn about the program and potential debt forgiveness. Some fathers, however, thought the invitation was for a “sting” operation and that they would be arrested if they appeared for services. To address this, programs have sometimes downplayed CSE involvement, though this also obscures the help CSE is providing to fathers and will do little to change attitudes. Programs may consider proactively addressing this concern, by downplaying CSE involvement, training staff to address these concerns, or being explicit with fathers during recruitment about the intent and limits of CSE’s involvement.

Another challenge described in the research is that CSE staff may be reluctant to provide additional services to fathers for fear that it will undermine the payment of child support. In one partnership that involved addressing child-support and access and visitation issues, staff were afraid that fathers would use lack of access to their children as an excuse to withhold child support. As a result, CSE staff were sometimes reluctant to provide expected services. Before entering a partnership, agencies should be certain that all staff are willing to take the program in the proposed new direction.

Partnering with Employment-Services Agencies

Most fatherhood programs include employment services to improve fathers' economic self-sufficiency, which in turn may help them pay child support. In the research, programs that provided employment services tended to offer group sessions for soft skills (such as developing a resume and appropriate work behavior), access to job banks or fairs, limited training and educational opportunities, and job placement assistance. Fewer programs offered case management, career counselors, or supports for employment, such as transportation assistance or funds to purchase uniforms or tools.

Among programs that offered employment services, most partnered with established workforce providers—such as one-stop centers or welfare-to-work agencies—that had experience working with low-income clients. These partnerships were typically formed by agencies that had previously focused on parenting education and were seeking experienced employment-service organizations. Some programs attempted to offer employment services without these partnerships, but with no experience in this area, they were unable to quickly or sufficiently develop their capabilities. For example, they were unable to establish the necessary contacts to link fathers to employers.

Even established organizations sometimes had trouble providing services to fathers with many barriers to employment. Participating fathers did not, for example, always meet the eligibility requirements for employment services. In other cases, staff were overwhelmed by trying to meet all the fathers' needs. Others found that employers were reluctant to hire fathers with extensive criminal records. Thus, a challenge of developing a partnership with an established organization is that staff may underestimate, based on their previous experience, the effort needed to help fathers obtain employment.

Looking Ahead

Partnerships have the potential to expand an organization's capacity to assist fathers in need. The research suggests that one of the most common reasons for developing partnerships is to expand available services. Given the numerous challenges many fathers face, programs may need to provide more services than is possible for any one agency to offer, such as parenting education, child-support assistance, and education and training.

But the research also showed common pitfalls of partnerships. Generally, the more closely partners work together, the more challenges arise because each partner brings its own goals, resources, staff, processes, and traditions to the relationship. Programs also tended to underestimate the resources needed to develop and maintain partnerships and did not foresee staff resistance to changes. By anticipating these issues, programs can develop more productive partnerships that will enable them to better serve fathers and their families.