



Fathers matter: involving and engaging fathers in the child welfare system process



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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that children with involved and engaged fathers tend to have more positive outcomes relative to physical, cognitive, and social emotional health. Of children who become involved in the child welfare system, involving multiple parents in the case (e.g. mother and father) often results in a greater chance of a child returning home, fewer placement episodes, and reduced trauma that may be caused by separation anxiety. With the rise of single parenting homes (which are mostly maternal) in the United States, child welfare agencies are examining the efficacy of engaging multiple caregivers (esp. fathers) in the child welfare process. Research suggests that in order to involve fathers in child welfare processes, practices and policies must be intentional in implementing systems and protocols that encourage involvement of all parents regardless of relationship status of the parents. However, few child welfare agencies are required to inquire about fathers or involve fathers in the child's case. The purpose of this paper is to highlight efforts of the Connecticut Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR) process and discuss challenges and lessons learned from interviews and listening forums/focus groups that included social workers and fathers who are involved in the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut. Recommendations and considerations on engaging and involving fathers are discussed.

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There has been a dramatic rise in the number of children living in households without fathers in the United States. Thirty percent of children live in homes where the biological father is absent (Kreider & Ellis, 2011); this is the most in the nation's history (Nock & Einolf, 2008). Research suggests that the greatest disparity of absent non-resident fathers is among minorities, specifically African American and Latino families (Coakley, 2013). Unfortunately, communities with high reports of absent fathers tend to also have high rates of poverty, crime, and young men in prison (Blankenhorn, 1995; Merrill, Schweizer, Schweizer, & Smith, 1996; Popenoe, 1996). There seems to be increased strain when a household is managed by a single parent. Research suggests that households with absent fathers are also 2–3 times more likely to use drugs, have increased educational needs, and exhibit more health, emotional and behavioral problems than children with present fathers (Horn & Sylvester, 2002). While there are circumstances where households without fathers do well, there is a need to further explore the social correlates associated with families who are at increased risk for experiencing these negative outcomes.

Conversely, research has found that children with present, healthy, and involved fathers are more likely to do well in school and have healthy self-esteem and self-concepts (Horn & Sylvester, 2002). Children with involved resident and non-resident fathers are also more likely to exhibit empathy and pro-social behaviors and avoid high-risk behaviors, which include drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers (Horn & Sylvester,

2002). Given greater risks (i.e., child abuse and neglect) are associated with single parent households, and these risk factors become predictors of poor social emotional development and future delinquency, there seems to be much to gain in households/families that have more than one involved caregiver (Horn & Sylvester, 2002).

According to Nock and Einolf (2008), the most common factors influencing father absence are divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and incarceration. Additional factors that contribute to uninvolved absent fathers include homelessness and living in another state or country (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan, & Furrer, 2012). While the reasons that fathers are not involved vary, data suggests that systems-level efforts that focus on reunification facilitates healthy child development and reduces the time a child spends in the welfare system (Burrus et al., 2012; Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). For example, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS), children with present fathers tend to have shorter lengths of stay in foster care system, fewer placement episodes, and greater stability in foster care (Velázquez, Edwards, Vincent & Reynolds, 2007). Furthermore, research suggests that when fathers were identified by social agencies to participate in the child welfare process, most fathers were willing and able to participate (Malm et al., 2006). In a more recent study, when fathers were identified during the child welfare process, their child spent less time in foster care and were significantly more likely to be reunified and/or receive permanent placement with a parent, than in cases

where the child's father was not identified (Burrus et al., 2012). Given the consensus that engaging fathers in the child welfare process results in positive benefits to the children, more efforts are needed that identify strategies to increase father participation with an eye towards promoting positive outcomes for their children (Velazquez, Edwards, Vincent, & Reynolds, 2009).

Research indicates that the unique ways that fathers interact with their children contribute to healthy development from infancy through early adulthood (Heinrich, 2014). This is equally true of fathers involved in the child welfare system (Burrus et al., 2012). In recent years, the critical link between promoting responsible fatherhood and positive outcomes for children has attracted attention across the political spectrum at both the national and local levels, one being the Connecticut Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR) (CCOR Final Report, 2011). This emerging paradigm shift concerning rethinking the role of fathers in the child welfare process has resulted in the development of pilot research, policy reform, the allocation of resources to promote fatherhood initiatives, and the expansion of organizational level activities to support fathers (e.g. raising awareness among social agencies) (e.g. Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamotom, & Rayford, 2012; Gordon, Watkins, Wilhelm, & Rayford, 2005; Velazquez et al., 2009). Organizations like the Administration for Children and Families and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and have participated in efforts across the United States to promote and support father engagement efforts for those involved in the child welfare system. Many of these national efforts have led to local and statewide social service agencies to evaluate the extent to which they include fathers. The goal of this paper is to document Connecticut's interests and efforts to help promote the healthy engagement and involvement of fathers with children involved in the child protection/welfare system. These efforts appear to be informed by the growing body of research and policies that focus on supporting healthy father involvement (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamotom & Rayford, 2012; Gordon et al., 2005).

1. Father involvement in Connecticut

From 2004 to 2010 the number of children residing in single parent homes in Connecticut increased by 14%, which is higher than the national increase of 12% (from 21,361,000 to 24,297,000) (Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center, 2009; US Census Bureau Data, 2005). Connecticut has embarked on efforts to respond to the increasing rate of single parent households as it relates to the added risks/challenges faced by families involved in the child welfare system. This effort was based on statewide findings from The Connecticut Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR), a system-wide evaluation of child welfare services that was modeled after the federally funded Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) (CCOR Reviews, 2010).

Similar to the CFSR, the CCOR was developed to evaluate practices and services provided throughout the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut. This review was designed to identify strengths and weaknesses within the child welfare system by evaluating staff, families, and organizational policies and procedures as a strategy for improving service delivery. Further, this systems-wide review was designed to create a dialogue between families and service providers. This systems-wide review was also designed to give families the opportunity to understand how their feedback was being used to improve policies and practices within Connecticut's child welfare system.

Observations from the CCOR increased Connecticut's desire to examine its practices as it relates to the healthy involvement of fathers for children who are involved in the child welfare system. A greater understanding of father involvement in child welfare services is important because of its potential to expand theories concerning the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory provides a framework for understanding children involved in the child welfare system through its focus on both proximal (e.g. family and peers) and distal (e.g. neighborhood, schools and social service; including the

child welfare system) factors that promote and/inhibit the way in which children live, learn and grow. This theory provides a contextual lens to understanding the multiple conditions that allows for the safe return of children to their families and fathers' role in supporting and facilitating this return. It also draws attention to the varying levels of interventions that are impacted when a child is referred into the child welfare/protection system (Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). In the ecological framework, the micro-system, which involves the family unit, is one of the most essential components to promoting the healthy development in children, especially young children (Belsky, 1980, 1993). However, in practice, this unit of analysis is often biased because many systems and social agencies neglect the importance of paternity and instead focus solely on maternity (Gordo, Hunter, et al., 2012). Given child welfare systems' overwhelming focus on maternal caretakers and their needs, many policies and procedures neglect the overlapping and unique ways that fathers could contribute to the care of their children. Further, more research is needed to further understand how service providers' reintegration plans and practices may better assess and acknowledge both maternal and paternal roles.

Research on why the child welfare/protection system focuses on mothers highlights the unique threats and challenges that some fathers pose to the child welfare case (Malm et al., 2006). Among one of the most common explanations for the exclusion of fathers is based on an unhealthy dissolution of the romantic relationship. This is especially true in cases where the mother has moved on to a new relationship (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Further, in a systematic review, researchers (Maxwell, Scourfield, Fetherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012) observed that social workers were more likely to adopt an all-good or all-bad view of fathers. Once fathers were labeled as bad fathers, the level of father involvement was limited or absent. One common explanation of negative labeling was the result of reported histories of domestic violence (Maxwell et al., 2012). Due to the possibility of violence, careful attention to circumstances of safety should be factored into our understanding of father involvement with special consideration of additional social factors that impact his inclusion in the child welfare process.

O'Donnell et al. (2005) found that mothers were more likely to conceal the identity of the fathers from child welfare service providers in not only cases of domestic violence but also when there was a potential threat to the mother's financial assistance. Finally, service providers within the child welfare systems often trust and treat mothers as gatekeepers of their children and therefore are assumed to be the sole protector (O'Donnell et al., 2005). While this view has important implications for the safety and protection of mothers and their children, it neglects the complex structures and arrangements that may be in place that negatively and positively impact the healthy involvement of fathers as their children enter the child welfare system (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, et al., 2012). Given the diverse threats and challenges to engaging fathers, it is important that these issues are explored to address father inclusion.

There have been a number of measures and procedures developed to document and support the healthy development of children involved in the child welfare system (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). However, little or no considerations have been made to examine how these sources of information are impacted when applied to fathers. Given the limited and preliminary information known about how the child welfare system interacts with fathers and serves them in support of the child's safe and timely return to their family, organizations like the National Family Preservation Network has led many efforts aimed at increasing the training and resources that address father involvement (National Family Network, 2012). This paper will provide a glimpse into the experiences of fathers involved in the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut. To accomplish this task, we relied on information from "listening forums," that were structured like focus groups. The goal of these listening forums was to identify ways to facilitate and improve the healthy and active involvement of men and fathers.

This paper summarizes information collected from Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) Connecticut's Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR) and key aspects of the DCF's Program Improvement Plan with input from listening forums/focus group discussion, stakeholder interviews, and quantitative and qualitative case review findings. This data begins to lay a foundation for the importance and need for formal Child Protective Services (CPS) reviews with the goal of supporting the healthy involvement of fathers in the services being offered to families who are involved with the child welfare system in the state of Connecticut.

2. Method

2.1. Setting

The Children's Bureau coordinates a review process, known as the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR). The CFSR process focuses on states' capacity to create positive outcomes for children and families and on the results achieved by the provision of appropriate services. Federal findings following each CFSR report (2001–2008) highlighted challenges surrounding fatherhood engagement in every child welfare jurisdiction nationally. The ability for staff to engage fathers in the service delivery process was often identified as an area in need of improvements (Gordon et al., 2005). In response to this report, Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) embarked on being one of the first child welfare systems, nationally, to fully integrate the CFSR methodology into its continuous quality improvement system. Connecticut's DCF CFSR review process is called Connecticut's Comprehensive Outcome Review (CCOR). Building on the CFSR methodology, CCOR includes reviews of case records and interviews with stakeholders (i.e. fathers involved in the system and case workers) identified as being critical to understanding fathers' experiences with Connecticut's DCF.

Connecticut's DCF CCOR methodology was used to examine its agency's practices, with special attention to the inclusion of fathers in the child welfare process. This internal review was achieved by gathering information from stakeholders and conducting observations to understand the engagement of fathers in the system from the perspective of the case worker and the father. The CCOR process symbolizes the initial phase of Connecticut DCF's efforts to systemically govern its own practice by applying federally defined standards of performance to practice. The goal of conducting CCOR was to identify strengths as well as areas needing improvement in case practice and to create an opportunity for ongoing quality improvement. In addition, the qualitative observations collected through the CCOR process offered critical insights regarding the underlying factors influencing practice.

During initial phase of the CCOR process, the review team and team leaders were comprised of staff from Connecticut DCF's Central Office and volunteer reviewers from several of its area offices. Consistent with the CFSR methodology, Foster Care and Treatment Cases were randomly selected for review.

2.2. Participants

Six hundred cases were randomly selected from the agency's data system for potential inclusion in the study. Of the 600 identified cases, the following criteria was used to select participants: 1) active with DCF for the past 60 days and 2) at least one child attached to this case was committed to the care of DCF for at least 24 hours. From the 600 cases who met the criteria, 48 were randomly selected for review. These 48 cases represented the 4 regions that DCF operates in Connecticut and were equally distributed (12 from each region). The 48 cases were further divided into two groups: cases being investigated and foster care cases. On being selected, the CCOR planning team member reached out to the family to ascertain their willingness to be a part of the listening forum/focus group. All participants contacted agreed to participate, resulting in a 100% participation rate. This demonstrates

that these men did want their voices added to the discussion and having these efforts accessible helped to facilitate their involvement.

The listening forums/focus groups were completed across the 4 regional offices with 3 staff members from each region taking part. The role of the staff/case workers who facilitated the listening forum was to document the views expressed by the families. Given issues related to confidentiality, this approach allowed some validation that the themes derived from these listening forums/focus groups were verified and consistently observed across the three independent observers. Local area office staff also participated in the listening forums. They too were called on to give their perspectives on father engagement at the local level.

No formal demographic information or surveys were collected from listening forums/focus group participants. However, through observation fathers who participated seemed to represent men from diverse racial backgrounds (e.g. Black, White, and Hispanic). Participation in the study was voluntary. All fathers voluntarily reported involvement in various social systems. Each of the fathers disclosed current or recent involvement in two or more of social systems (e.g. Department of Children and Families and Family Court) and expressed feeling overwhelmed with managing involvement in multiple systems. This was important because we believed that identifying fathers involved in various systems captured the unique challenges and complexities faced by fathers experiencing frequent contact with state systems.

2.3. Procedures

Listening forums/focus groups were the guiding qualitative methodology used. Listening forums/focus groups provide a place for in-depth group discussions that provides an opportunity to explore complex behaviors and motivations relating to a particular phenomenon (Morgan, 1996, 1997). This methodology was chosen due to our interests in learning more about the key concerns and issues that fathers had concerning their experience with the child welfare system. The listening forums/focus groups conducted were called "Fatherhood Listening Forums". These listening forums were created to investigate challenges and experiences of fathers involved in DCF and occurred across all area offices. Listening forums/focus groups were held after hours, at off-site locations, local to the regional office. Refreshments were provided to all participants. Listening forums/focus groups were based on semi-structured discussion questions and were designed to capture the fathers' voices concerning their unique experiences and needs regarding DCF. Additional questions were asked to highlight what worked well during their experiences with DCF and improvements and suggestions for making DCF father friendly. Results presented are summaries of the field notes collected during these listening forums. Recordings and transcriptions were specifically rejected because of the sensitive nature of the discussions. We hoped that this approach would help to facilitate comfort in the groups being interviewed and increase disclosure.

In addition to listening forums/focus groups, the initial intake process of families involved in and coming in contact with DCF were observed. Protocols and staff meetings were attended with an eye towards examining how fathers were included in the child welfare process. This was done in addition to speaking to staff about current practices and experiences around father engagement and the child welfare system.

The information reported here is exploratory in nature and is a composite of field notes collected by three note takers. A summative content analysis was used as our approach to evaluate the observations. A summative content analysis involves counting keywords or contents, followed by identifying underlying themes/constructs that describe the phenomenon being examined (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All content that overlapped across all three note takers were used in analysis. The strategy to focus on overlapping content served as a mechanism of investigator triangulation and helped validate the information gathered across the note takers (Denzin, 1978). This approach was most

appropriate given our desire to discover the most salient underlying themes relative to barriers, experiences, and challenges of fathers involved in the child welfare system. Further, the second author constructed and refined major themes. Information concerning the content and themes established was further validated by participants, a strategy recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Given the exploratory nature of the study and desire to focus broadly on current efforts and experiences, demographic information was not formally collected. This decision was also made because of the expressed discomfort of the child welfare system administrators and parents with the disclosure of this information; the interviewers needed to ensure full participation of the participants, the expressed confidence in the anonymity of the respondents in reaction to the questions posed, and sensitivity to the experience of some of the respondents continuing to have an ongoing child welfare investigation.

3. Results

For organizational purposes we presented findings in two sections. The first section represents findings from staff (i.e. service providers) and the second section represents findings from fathers (community, incarcerated, young).

3.1. Findings from staff

3.1.1. Staff influenced by past (professional and personal) experiences

Staff perspectives were collected as part of the CCOR and fatherhood forums. Findings revealed that fathers are less likely to be engaged by the child welfare worker when a staff member reports having past negative professional and personal interactions with these fathers. Staff members' prior experiences often influenced their likelihood of engaging fathers when new cases were assigned. Negative or unfavorable experiences commonly reported by staff included fathers expressing unwillingness to participate for unknown reasons and fathers being unable to participate due to a lack of resources (i.e. employment and stable housing). Further, if there were any reports that the mother felt threatened or the safety of the family (i.e. domestic violence) would be compromised. Staff often raised similar concerns when new fathers contacted their office.

Conversely, when staff had favorable and positive experiences with fathers, the staff reported being more likely to engage fathers throughout the experience and saw value in including fathers when new cases opened. Staff members who described their interactions as successful or positive often reported spending extra time investigating and asking questions concerning the status of the biological father and/or the paternal family. Things that staff commonly learned that positively impacted their cases (thus increasing the likelihood of subsequent exploration for other cases) included learning that the father had resources such as housing and employment, the father had previous frequent and ongoing contact with the children prior to the opened case, he was easily accessible to staff, and was perceived by staff as understanding and positive.

3.1.2. Staff documentation and protocols do not identify fathers as a potential resource

In relation to documentation and protocols, staff highlighted that data systems and procedures affected their engagement with fathers. With respect to data systems, a common issue was the design of DCF's SACWIS system, also known as *Link*. *Link* is primarily designed to capture family data by household and offers the option of selectively choosing current family members who are labeled as active or a current household member. Family members who are designated as no longer actively involved with the family are often deactivated, effectively removing them from the main family screen. This rendered them inaccessible as the case planning progresses. An ongoing discussion that emerged was whether or not the non-resident father should be

designated as an active participant in the family's *Link* file. While categorically deactivation practices appear to vary across units, service types, and offices, many staff disclosed deactivating biological fathers when he resided outside of the home. This often occurred regardless of the relationship between the father and child(ren).

Some staff also reported that removing the biological father from the *Link* system as a main case participant could relieve them of the bi-weekly visitation and case planning expectations. These demands were seen as being burdensome when staff members had large case-loads. Removing biological, non-resident fathers was one strategy for dealing with the job demands and the limited time constraints. Staff also reported that there were no clear policies or protocols outlining the expectations that social workers would seek and or obtain information from non-resident fathers. As a result, most staff reported that they were most likely to involve the fathers when the father stayed in the same home as the child. The experience of father residence also impacted his consideration by case-workers/social workers depending on the feedback received from the mother.

3.1.3. Staff influenced by mothers' perceptions of non-resident father

Staff expressed that not involving non-resident fathers could be partially attributed to staff wanting to honor mothers' wishes not to contact father and/or upset the current household family dynamic. Staff reported that efforts to identify, locate, and engage fathers often ended in the early stages in the child welfare process and this was sometimes due to the mother's unwillingness to provide information about him. When information about the non-resident father was known, staff reported that mothers sometimes requested that staff not contact him. Some of the reasons for this request by the mother included a poor/unhealthy relationship with the father, unresolved custody dispute, visitation issues, concerns surrounding substance abuse and/or mental health, a history of violence, father's criminal history, and/or a long history of absenteeism. Criminal justice issues impacted staffs' assessment of the father's appropriateness for involvement in the case.

3.1.4. Staff views stigma associated with incarceration unfavorably

Staff reported being less likely to investigate and/or engage non-resident fathers when they learned that he had a history of incarceration and/or was currently involved in the criminal justice system. Staff reported that their role in investigating and engaging non-resident fathers who were incarcerated was unclear. Staff reported being unaware of protocol and standardized procedures that focused on the inclusion of fathers. Some staff suggested that corrections environments were not child friendly and that exposing a child to these and potentially other inmates could be traumatic or threatening. This they viewed as being dependent on the age and developmental level of the child(ren). Some staff believed that engaging a child with his/her incarcerated father and facilitating visits was important to maintain the father-child bond regardless of setting. These staff members reported that extensive and/or costly travel and complex corrections protocols were barriers to facilitating this visitation. These observations also reflected some of the barriers reported by the father.

3.2. Findings from fathers

3.2.1. Fathers desired respect and trust

Fathers reported being treated unfairly or with little respect based on their gender, economic status, and current role in their child(ren)'s life. Some fathers shared that being male put them at a disadvantage and that case workers often took the side of the mother before initial contact with the father was made. Fathers also believed that there are behaviors that would demonstrate respect by caseworker. Included were returning calls, meeting fathers where they are emotionally and/or geographically, and being concrete and straight-forward whenever possible about the current status of their case. Fathers noted that inclusion was a key component to building trust, respect, and rapport.

Additionally, fathers believed that respect could also be demonstrated through inclusion in the visitation protocol. Fathers reported sporadic visitation by their caseworker, particularly once they resided outside of the child's primary home. Fathers reported inconsistent visitation schedules throughout the life of the case. These variances ranged from bi-weekly, to monthly, to not at all. This variation was described as being dependent on individual caseworker practices and the case disposition. Fathers believed that visitation practices were mostly influenced by the caseworker's level of trust and respect for the father. Although visitation was inconsistent, many fathers expressed that they preferred frequent face-to-face contact with the caseworker and desired to be involved. Fathers also noted that face-to-face contact was a great strategy to not only build trust with the caseworker/social worker. It also creates an opportunity for the caseworker/social worker to get to know them, assess their living environment, determine the extent to which they could be a resource, and better identify services that best match their needs and the case needs.

Overall, fathers who felt respected and that the caseworker validated their thoughts and feelings had an increased desire to be involved in their case and be included in the visitation protocol. Fathers who felt disrespected believed that caseworkers should give them a chance and not make false assumptions about their willingness, readiness, and/or ability to participate in their case. The idea of being judged was a significant factor in the lives of these fathers.

3.2.2. *Fathers desire to be heard and not judged*

Many fathers did not feel their DCF worker adequately listened to them. Specifically, fathers felt that their concerns related to the safety and risks of their child(ren) – who were often in mother's care -- went unaddressed. Most of the fathers expressed that every father has his own individual way of processing experiences and situations but it was important that caseworkers allowed a space and opportunity for fathers to vent. Further, when there is an opportunity to share and vent, it was important that they not be misunderstood and viewed as angry and or violent. Fathers expressed the importance of being able to work through their disagreements, fears, and frustrations without being misunderstood or inappropriately labelled. Fathers also believed the opportunity to communicate and be heard would minimize the potential for misunderstandings about the case and the process.

Actively listening, temporarily putting the agency agenda aside, and navigating a father through his feelings were seen as critical to effectively hearing the non-resident father's side of the story. Caseworkers were singled out as effective listeners during transports (pick-ups and drop-offs), when visitation and face-to-face contact was happening. However, the vast majority of fathers felt that their character was judged negatively by DCF staff, usually associated with past child protective services involvement, criminal history, and other behaviors and/or situations. These impacted the extent to which they felt heard by the caseworkers. In general, fathers believed that, regardless of family history, a holistic assessment of the family's situation was important to consider before making major case decisions. While fathers desired to be heard, they also wanted to be reassured that there would be no penalties or repercussions concerning sharing their perspectives. Some fathers expressed their concern that the cost of sharing their perspectives outweighed the benefits. These fathers feared the power and authority of DCF staff and lamented that their sharing may result in DCF removing the children as retaliation for lending their honest opinion.

3.2.3. *Services and processes focus on the mother*

Fathers reported that the relationship with their child's mother was one of the greatest indicators of their level of access to the child and involvement in the child welfare case. When the relationship was healthy and/or the father had a history of being involved, the father was more likely to be included. Once a father had a history of involvement with DCF, they then had to jump through hoops or try to figure out next steps on their own because of a lack of clear directions on how to

support their children currently involved in the child welfare system. Non-custodial fathers with children in foster care often reported that DCF focused its efforts on reunification with mother and/or the maternal family despite his ability and willingness to care for their children during this acute period. Fathers also revealed that they were less likely to have their needs met, specifically as it related to involvement in case planning. For instance, non-custodial fathers reported being less likely to receive visits and phone calls from the assigned social worker.

3.2.4. *Inconsistencies and unclear expectations serve as a challenge for fathers who desire to be involved in their case*

Many fathers disclosed that they were unclear about the caseworkers' goals and expectations. This dynamic was more prevalent when they lived outside the home. In some cases fathers disclosed their first contact with DCF occurred after their child had already been removed and placed in foster care. In addition to inconsistency around visitation, fathers reported that when services were provided they were often unnecessary and/or they were unclear about why the services were recommended (e.g. domestic violence, substance abuse, and anger management). When asked about their services plan, none of the participant fathers indicated receiving a draft plan for discussion or feeling like they had input in the planning process. In some cases, fathers reported their workers telling them to participate in services so they would not be ruled out or as being labeled a risk to their children.

Fathers went on to report that they were advised to complete specific trainings and programs with the understanding that this would be the only way they would be able to get their child welfare case closed. Fathers reported that the push to complete specific services even when there was no need was a common practice among service providers. Once the fathers completed the services, they reported being told that their completion of these services was not good enough and or that additional services were now needed/required. As a result, some fathers remained unclear on the purpose of specific service recommendations, the criteria for successful completion of these services, and how completing certain services would result in custody of their child(ren). When asked about what services they would be most interested in as they worked towards establishing custody and visitation, employment, transportation and housing were the most frequently endorsed needs. Fathers interviewed who were involved in the family court system identified custodial rights information and advocacy, community-based support services, and co-parenting and mediation resources as being their greatest need, which often went unaddressed.

Fathers who reflected positively on their experiences with DCF shared that their needs being met was the result of their social worker or aide assigned to the case taking special steps to assist them. Fathers were more likely to report positive experiences when the social worker was personable, made frequent contact with them, and described expectations and potential outcomes of their participation in the case planning process. In these instances fathers reported that their worker went above and beyond, listened, took the time to explain what was happening and why and responded to phone calls. Fathers defined effective communication as involving case workers/social workers clearly explaining next steps in concrete terms. Embedded in these concrete terms were the steps he needed to take in order to be reunified with his child(ren).

3.2.5. *Limited programs and opportunities for diverse fathers*

Finally, in addition to general observations of fathers, themes from subgroups (e.g. incarcerated fathers/fathers with incarceration history and adolescent fathers) emerged. For instance, fathers who had a history of incarceration shared unique challenges. Formerly incarcerated fathers believed that their involvement in the criminal justice system significantly impacted their level of engagement in their child's case. They repeatedly reported feeling like they were more likely to be looked at negatively than fathers with no criminal justice history and because of their incarceration experience the case workers were less likely to

facilitate visitations between them and their children. Adolescent fathers also presented unique experiences when engaging with DCF. The primary theme that emerged among adolescent fathers was their view that there were efforts and services that encouraged and supported adolescent mothers-to-be with their children (e.g. specialized maternity home placement) but not adolescent fathers. For example, DCF reportedly has a focus on gender-specific services geared towards pregnant and parenting mothers, which assisted with caretaking, high school completion, and post-secondary education. However, there were few to no like services available for adolescent fathers. They encouraged consideration of parallel supports for young mothers and fathers filtered through a gendered perspective.

4. Discussion

The CCOR and father listening forums were conducted to gain insight on the experiences of fathers that were involved in DCF. Given the importance of fathers, Connecticut has made unique strides in recognizing the need for practice and systemic improvements. Some of the progress made over the years has included collecting and analyzing information of father-specific needs during the CCOR process and through the Fatherhood Matters Initiative, which engages fathers who have children involved in the child welfare process. The current work discussed demonstrates Connecticut's increasing efforts to shape and revise policies concerning fathers involved in various state and social systems. This work also represents Connecticut's efforts to take a critical look at ways in which the system may improve services for fathers.

We explored the experiences of fathers in Connecticut's child welfare system through the perspective of staff/service providers and fathers. The timeliness of these efforts was supported by the overwhelming response of the men/fathers selected for inclusion. This strong participation also underscores how bringing these efforts to where the men are adds to their responsiveness to the requests and interest in helping to seed change. Results revealed that staff and service providers commonly designated the mother as the primary caregiver and sometimes only caregiver. Mothers were viewed as more responsible, reliable, and safe. Consistent with literature, staff and service providers adopted beliefs consistent with the gatekeeper's phenomenon, which assumes the mother to be the protector of the child (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Further, staff reported negative perceptions and beliefs about fathers if they had knowledge of his history of violence. This is consistent with research, which found that issues of domestic violence were common and helped to influence caseworker practices to insure safety for both the child and other family members (Maxwell et al., 2012). Given that domestic violence is a concern of service providers, more research is needed to explore interventions and service planning options for families and their children.

Negative assumptions made by staff were a major concern and commonly reported barrier by fathers. These assumptions appeared to be influenced by the mother and based on caseworker/social worker past negative professional and personal experiences. For instance, fathers were more likely to be viewed negatively overall when the staff member experienced cases where fathers had lower levels of engagement and/or were unable to participate in the case.

Given staff are guided by past personal and professional experiences, it is necessary to further explore how such experiences promote or hinder father engagement. According to Drury-Hudson (1999), different forms of knowledge drive decision-making even within the context of child protective and family services. Theoretical knowledge based on schema (i.e. knowledge based on cognitive framework that helps an individual organize and interpret information), empirical knowledge (i.e. knowledge based on information gained from research evidence), personal knowledge (i.e. knowledge based on cultural beliefs, intuition, and one's common sense), practice wisdom (i.e. knowledge based on personal and professional experiences), and procedural knowledge (i.e. knowledge based on legislation and organizational policies) are

relied on for decision-making. In this summary, most staff reported relying on theoretical knowledge, personal knowledge and practice wisdom. While relying on different forms of knowledge and schema can be helpful for some staff to guide future decisions, it is also important to better understand the extent to which their knowledge exacerbates biases. These biases may reduce the possibility for healthy fathers to be involved in their child(ren)'s child welfare case. Our findings suggest the need for training that better equips staff with the knowledge and skills to evaluate and manage internal bias and utilize differential approaches to gaining information from mothers that prove critical to effectively engaging fathers and their extended family networks. Given the potential benefits of non-resident fathers to be active participants, it is essential that child welfare services make informed decisions that would maximize the ability for children to be returned to a safe environment (Drury-Hudson, 1999; Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2005).

Overall findings also suggest that there is a need for more standard protocols and procedures to assist staff with investigating and obtaining information about non-resident fathers. Most procedures and protocols are not maternal in focus, but are specific to parents who live in home with their children. The challenge of obtaining information from mothers regarding fathers and the lack of guiding principles regarding what the process should look like perpetuates the disconnect between engaging non-resident fathers and their child welfare case. Practical solutions which may improve this issue may involve developing protocols that evaluate a mother's concern with sharing information about non-resident fathers and staff concerns as it relates to how the process impacts overall work load demands.

Further, DCF staff must be cognizant of the power they wield as an agent of the child welfare agency. Empowering fathers through unconventional means may be indicated as this work moves forward. Fathers reported struggles with custody and visitation issues in addition to their involvement with DCF. Staff's ability to engage in discussion with fathers regardless of their location and background were strategies described as promising by fathers. Fathers believed that if staff visited them and/or made face-to-face contact throughout the life of the case, they would not only develop a trusted and respected relationship but also have an opportunity to directly express their concerns and ask questions. Phone calls and letters seemed to represent minimal efforts to engage fathers and fathers preferred the opportunity to meet with staff and ask questions and get a clear understanding of expectations and responsibilities.

Fathers stressed the importance of the caseworker getting to know them personally in order to make informed decisions and to better match the father with any supports and services. Early face-to-face contact was seen as a sign of respect and trust. Conversely, if a staff member initially had difficulty reaching or engaging in face-to-face communication with a father this negatively impacted their subsequent engagement with him as the case progressed. Overall, the need to feel trusted and respected is a challenge. It appears that there are times when contact between the child welfare system and the maternal guardian could exacerbate this conflict. This practice may set the tone and predict involvement for fathers (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). Given both mother and fathers can potentially play a critical role in the safe and speedy return of their children, it is important to design practices that incorporate strengths and resources from the maternal and paternal family.

While recent successes have been observed, data around fatherhood involved in child welfare cases is still under developed and underutilized. There is a need to link data to service delivery strategies and plans that insure safe and sustainable practices (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). A key component to supporting the DCF's work with fathers, families and communities has been sustaining the momentum and fidelity of initiatives like the Fatherhood Matters Initiative. However, there is still a growing need to

explore and coordinate resources that identify and nourish promising practices that successfully work for fathers, children, and families.

Fathers reported little discussion of strengths/needs during their involvement with DCF. These observations suggest that men and fathers potentially learn and seek help differently than their female counterparts. There are societal and gender role implications when facilitating a strength/needs discussion with men and fathers. One way the DCF could promote holistic assessments of father's strengths/needs is to conduct a structured decision making, family-based strengths and needs assessment on behalf of non-resident and/or incarcerated father. This may help aid staff and fathers with identifying the most appropriate service needs of the family.

4.1. Implications for practice

Fatherhood engagement is a critical and historically overlooked component to an effective family centered practice model in child welfare (Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). Thus, supporting and involving fathers in the child welfare process is complementary to both families and systemic reform efforts currently underway. However, one critical challenge around this work is obtaining information about the fathers from mothers, identifying who the father is, and finding out where the father is located. Across providers these procedures varied greatly (Drury-Hudson, 1999; Gordon et al., 2005). Given the lack of clear policies and protocols around this issue, there is a need for agencies to build a system that allows service workers to systematically collect data on fathers and to properly assess fathers' interests in engagement and ability to support the return of their children home. By standardizing such processes, this in turn will reduce the inconsistency of father inclusion and open up the opportunity or possibility of providing additional supports and services for fathers who have children involved in the child welfare system.

There is a need to develop practical and educational tools for fathers and service providers. For instance, there are opportunities for trained staff to raise regional awareness around the participation of fathers (e.g. non-resident, adolescent, and incarcerated fathers) in the child welfare system. Staff members would also be able to educate fathers concerning the importance of their engagement, strategies on navigating the child welfare system, and opportunities to be involved in the safety and welfare of their children. Properly educating fathers on their rights and roles using more standardized practices, even among incarcerated populations, is critical to ensuring that they are able to be involved in their child's case. Fathers often reported being unclear about what was required and expected; this raises issues concerning the system-wide practices that hinder their engagement.

Research suggest that more American children are growing up without their biological father in the home than at any point in our nation's history and rate of father absence continues to grow (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Fieldwork, literature, and legislative initiatives across the country are trending toward placing greater emphasis on the role fathers play in the lives of their children and families, and communities, including families involved in child welfare (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012). However, this work is dependent on our ability to understand the unique needs and experiences of fathers involved with various social systems. Our aim was to capture the narratives of fathers. It gave insight on system wide efforts that need to be improved. Based on the positive experiences of those who participated, some of the fathers reported being willing to partner in future planning and training activities designed to promote and increase the positive attitudes and perceptions of fathers involved in the child welfare system. In addition, they expressed interest in providing feedback about organizational policies that impact them. Ultimately, we believe these collaborative efforts reflect a paradigm shift and may help to improve outcomes for children as they relate to increased home placements, academic success, and improved socio-emotional outcomes (Gordon, Hunter, et al., 2012; Gordon, Oliveros, et al., 2012).

4.2. Limitations

This study relied on field notes and lacks detailed demographic information on the respondents beyond observations that were made by the interviewers and note takers. Future work will focus on collecting additional demographic information as a means to distinguish the uniqueness of sub-groups of fathers who participated. Although we did not collect demographic surveys, some characteristics (e.g. criminal history) were noted because they were volunteered during the listening forums/focus groups. Collecting more detailed data in the future will provide an opportunity to make stronger inferences concerning the experiences of fathers and the demographic characteristics that impact experiences with the child welfare system. Given the limitations of this study it is important to note the limited generalizability and applicability to other fathers and caseworkers involved in the child welfare system or child welfare processes. Further, listening forums/focus groups were not recorded and involved both fathers and staff members as an effort to connect staff with fathers involved with the system. As a result, the observations gleaned were limited by the field notes of the facilitators and the accuracy of their inter-rater observations. Future research would utilize audio recordings of focus group meetings and also conduct separate groups with fathers and staff. This may increase the depth of the information shared and reduce any potential discomfort.

It is possible that specific practices concerning father engagement were unique to how long the staff member worked for the child welfare system, their age, race and personal fathering and or fatherlessness experiences. Based on the rich information received from this pilot work, future replication is necessary.

4.3. Future research

Given our goal to engage fathers, future research that uses a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to engage and learn more about fathers and their experiences with the child welfare system are indicated. This method is most suitable for this population given the feedback from fatherhood reports which conclude that fathers are interested in being involved with organizational and policy reform regarding fatherhood involvement. Conversely, attention towards the impact of practices and policies on the safety and well-being of the mothers and children should also move forward. More research is needed that examines the impact of fatherhood engagement among incarcerated fathers. While some staff reported facilitating visits as an experience that may pose a threat to the child, others believed that these experiences would be the foundation of an ongoing relationship upon the father's release. More research is needed to examine the impact of such engagement with children. Similarly, more attention must be given to adolescent fathers as it relates to providing resources and supports that will result in educational attainment, vocational training, and paternal skills development. Given the important role fathers have on supporting their children, there seems to be great value in assuring both adolescent mothers and fathers have access to supports that increase their capacity to be effective parents. Furthermore, we hope to use this preliminary information to help future evaluation work and protocols that address father involvement.

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