



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance

National
Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



Spotlight on Rural Fatherhood Programs

One of the goals of fatherhood programming is to improve the lives of children by enhancing fathers' emotional and financial support and encouraging healthy family dynamics.ⁱ Programs do this through a focus on child development and appropriate parenting skills, the value of fathers' positive engagement with their children, and the provision of connections to social support systems for fathers. However, rural fatherhood programs may need to address these topics in unique and creative ways due to some of the practical challenges of providing services in rural areas.

Although the word "rural" typically brings to mind farmland and open country, a rural community is technically defined as any area with fewer than 50,000 people.ⁱⁱ However, these areas, by definition, do not include urbanized centers, often do not have public transportation, can be geographically isolated, and frequently have natural barriers to getting around easily, like mountains, fields of farmland, or inlets and other bodies of water. Moreover, rural areas often have only one or two main employers (e.g., a construction company, a mine, or a factory), and if one of the employers downsizes there can be significant implications for employment opportunities for local residents. There are, therefore, population and geographic characteristics of rural areas that influence the need for, and access to, services. For example, in many rural areas, the main employment opportunities are agricultural. In general, agricultural employment is seasonal and based on periods of planting and harvesting, leading to earning patterns that can be difficult to manage. During harvest season, the work is often "sun up to sun down," which leaves little time for any other activities and can lead to problems delivering services to families who are too busy with work for entire seasons.

Fatherhood programs offer much needed services for communities, but just like any other service agency, these programs can be shaped by geographic and regional characteristics. Although the needs of fathers in rural and urban areas may not differ – they generally want to be employed, have good relationships with their children, and have healthy communication with their child's other parent – the way programs operate in each community may differ because of population and geographic characteristics. To further investigate this, the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) visited and spoke with representatives of several rural fatherhood programs that are using promising strategies to help overcome barriers to program operations in rural areas. This spotlight highlights three rural fatherhood programs and the strategies they use to deliver services effectively. More details about each specific program are also provided.

Program Spotlights

This section includes summaries of how three programs, operating in rural areas of California, Minnesota, and Ohio, have developed approaches to overcome common challenges of implementing fatherhood programming in rural areas and provide supportive services for fathers in their community.

The FATHER Project in Park Rapids, MN

Park Rapids, in northern Minnesota, has a population of 3,700 and is the largest city in Hubbard County. The population of the city and the surrounding area is predominantly Caucasian (about 94%). About 2% of the population is Native American. Hubbard County is situated among many of Minnesota's lakes, which makes it an ideal spot for summer tourism. Although tourism is a main source of income and employment for the community, residents often struggle with economic security and finding year-round employment given the inhospitable winters and brevity of summer.

Under the auspices of Hubbard County's Public Health Department, the FATHER Project has operated in Park Rapids since 2012, originally as an expansion site for the Goodwill-Easter Seals FATHER Project of Minneapolis. Prior to this, the Project Director had been working with groups of fathers through the health department. The funding from Goodwill-Easter Seals, who had a federal grant to provide fatherhood and employment services, enabled the Park Rapids project to provide job readiness activities and offer internships with local employers to build job skills. To qualify for an internship, fathers were required to meet various program criteria, including completing at least six group sessions. Due to limited job opportunities and the seasonal nature of work in Park Rapids, these employment services were a strong draw of The FATHER Project. Unfortunately, the federal grant that supported these transitional job opportunities ended in September, 2015, and the internship program is no longer operational.

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The project has been able to continue offering fatherhood services with funding and administrative support from the Public Health Department, which offers resources and services catered mostly toward women and children. Although the fatherhood program only has one full-time staff person, support is provided by the other staff in the department. Everyone contributes to spreading word about the program, taking time to speak with any fathers they meet, encouraging mothers to refer fathers, and generally creating a father friendly environment. The entrance and waiting area features posters promoting the fatherhood program, photos of fathers and children, reading materials targeted toward men, and brochures with suggestions for father-child activities. The department's home visiting program is also designed to include and engage fathers. Having The FATHER Project located in a space that has traditionally been focused on mothers allows for services to be more family centered and helps encourage fathers to be more involved.

"We don't have a lot of community resources, so I think that people within [high-need] populations have a lot more [resources] to choose from in a larger city. In an area with so little resources, [the FATHER Project was] like a bonus for dads because they have been neglected and underserved in our area."
– Employee at a local human service agency

To augment the one full-time staff member and ensure that program participants receive the support and mentorship they need, the program has a "Citizen Father" component. "Citizen Fathers" are program graduates selected by the program director to receive additional training and serve as volunteers who help facilitate groups, provide peer support, organize fund raisers, and co-present at local events to spread the word about the FATHER Project. They also organize a carpool system that helps address transportation barriers. Because they are hand-picked and trained by the program director, several of these fathers indicated a sense of pride and a feeling that they are connected to something bigger.

"Being a 'citizen father' allows me to learn more as a father. And with what I've gone through and experienced I can help another dad with his situation [by] letting him know what my experiences were and how I handled it." – Citizen Father

The project offers multiple classes and services, including a weekly parenting group (open to anyone in the community to come and go as they are able), a weekly men's group (open only to enrolled participants and intended to be a series of classes), employment services, home visits, and a group in the local county jail. The FATHER Project also offers family engagement activities that provide an opportunity for fathers to interact with their children and each other's families. The program is also developing plans and consulting with Native American tribal leaders to bring culturally sensitive fatherhood programming to the local reservation so that all fathers in the community have access to program services.

All Dads Matter in Merced County, CA

Merced County, California is located in the middle of one of the country's largest agricultural regions. The county population is just over 260,000, comprised of one large city (population 78,000), five smaller cities (of less than 50,000 residents), and eighteen, mostly agricultural, small towns. The population is predominately Hispanic and Caucasian, with a small number (approximately 9,000) of Hmong and Mien residents.

All Dads Matter is a county-wide fatherhood program with funding from the state funneled through local government agencies. Five full time and one part time staff run the program. It is operated by the Merced County Human Service Agency (HSA) and has the use of county resources, facilities, and vehicles. This helps facilitate program implementation and overcome transportation and other barriers common in rural areas (e.g., capacity building, finding appropriate space to hold programming, and identifying qualified staff). The program was established in 2005 and offers fatherhood support for all fathers in the community, with specific services for new fathers and those returning to the community from prison. "Boot Camp for New Dads" classes are offered in 14 different locations to ensure access for new fathers throughout the area.

"I'll say this about All Dads Matter, it helped this community go from a totally 'mothercentric' service provision to 'parentcentric.'" – Community member

All Dads Matter has established effective and sustained community partnerships with the family court system, Merced County Child Support Services, Head Start, and other community agencies. These partnerships enable a holistic support system that addresses fathers' multiple needs and provides connections to additional services, such as health care, child care, food stamps, and employment services. Representatives of the family court and child support occasionally attend an All Dads Matter class to

present tips on how to navigate these systems. Fathers have benefitted in several ways, including assistance with child support modifications and establishing visitation or parenting time orders.

Through the partnership with Head Start of Merced County, the program is able to provide at least one male engagement activity a year in each of 16 Head Start locations. Each center chooses from several activities, such as ‘Man Plays with Food’ and ‘Silly Science,’ that will appeal to their fathers. The school district provides bus transportation for these events so fathers do not have to coordinate their own transportation.

“By partnering with All Dads Matter we’re able to have them help us [child support agency] educate our participants and use them [All Dads Matter] as that entry point and then once they [fathers] bridge that they realize the child support agency in not as bad as they thought.” – Child support agency staff member

All Dads Matter staff have a strong understanding of delivering culturally competent and sensitive services for Hispanic fathers, including offering all programs and materials in Spanish and integrating Latino cultural norms to connect better with immigrant and less acculturated participants. The program is actively working to develop services for Hmong fathers.



Picture of All Dads Matter participants and their children

Coshocton County Fatherhood Initiative in Coshocton County, OH

Coshocton County is two hours south of Cleveland, Ohio. The county has a population of 36,760, and is predominantly (97%) Caucasian. The economy is driven by manufacturing and coal mining. The Coshocton County Fatherhood Initiative (the Initiative) was established in 2004. The board and staff of the Initiative are comprised of volunteers. The volunteer board meets once a month and other members of the board include a representative from the local justice department, family court, public health department, and the school district.

The mission of the Initiative is to support and encourage rural fathers to become actively engaged in their children’s lives. Many fathers involved in the fatherhood program are court ordered, but some join voluntarily through word of mouth and recruitment outreach at local events. Every year there is a father-child “All-Pro Dads Breakfast” at each of six county schools, where fathers are invited to have breakfast with their children. The Initiative provides fatherhood classes (offered weekly) and workshops (offered less frequently) to help fathers improve their parenting, co-parenting, and relationship skills. Classes are also offered for

mothers (four times per year, four weeks at a time) with a focus on co-parenting skills and their relationship with their child's father.

The Initiative has been able to gain buy-in from the community as a whole to help provide services without a lot of funding. Given the reliance on volunteer board and staff members, community partnerships play a key role in obtaining referrals and spaces to hold program services. Faith based organizations provide space free of charge for programming and a local pizza establishment provides food for classes on a regular basis. The local child welfare and child support agencies provide referrals for fathers who are court-mandated to attend fatherhood programming with the Initiative. Without such partnerships, the Initiative would not have enough participants to continue programming. The partner agencies also rely on the services provided through the Initiative. If the Initiative was not available to provide programming to fathers with court mandates, the fathers would be required to attend qualified programming outside of Coshocton County.

Promising Strategies Used by Rural Fatherhood Programs

The programs featured in this Spotlight have utilized a number of creative ways to provide services to fathers in rural communities. We drew on the approaches used by the programs to develop the following recommendations and strategies:

Utilize personal connections to strengthen community partnerships

Although there may be fewer resources than in urban areas, and hence fewer options for partnership development, many of the rural program representatives we spoke with mentioned the importance of interpersonal connections. In rural communities, it often seems that "everyone knows each other," especially within the same field of work. There are benefits to these types of relationships as it can be easier to establish professional partnerships, but there are also drawbacks. If a partnership does not work, it is very difficult to find another agency that provides similar services or resources in a rural area. Therefore, rural programs may need to spend significant time and effort in keeping their community partnerships strong and maintaining a positive reputation in the community.

Use multiple recruitment strategies

As with urban programs, recruiting fathers can be a struggle for rural fatherhood programs. Although word of mouth is often cited as an effective recruitment strategy, it is particularly important in small communities where "word travels fast." As a result, fathers tend to trust the recommendations of friends who endorse the program and are, perhaps, more aware of an organization's reputation in the community. Providing quality services that meet the needs of participating fathers is an important part of gaining these endorsements. Referrals from other individuals and agencies are also critical for recruitment in rural areas, which underscores the need for spreading the word and maintaining a strong community reputation.

All Dads Matter receives a lot of referrals from their partner agencies. Their partnership with the local child support agency is particularly effective as child support workers help to spread the word about the fatherhood classes and encourage dads to attend. The two organizations also co-facilitate a fatherhood class for reentering fathers. (See the NRFC companion piece "[Highlighting a Rural Community Partnership: All Dads Matter Fatherhood Program and Child Support Services of Merced County](#)" for more information.)

The Fatherhood Initiative in Coshocton also relies heavily on referrals, word of mouth via program graduates, and the hard work of its many volunteers and partner organizations to enhance recruitment.

Another strategy to increase program participation is opening services to fathers from surrounding counties and offering services in convenient county-wide locations instead of just one location. This is particularly appealing for fathers who would otherwise have to travel long distances to a "central" program office to access services.

Provide transportation

A lack of reliable transportation can be a common barrier in rural areas. Rural fatherhood programs have implemented various strategies to address this, including organizing carpools or providing transportation using agency vehicles.



Picture of All Dads Matter carpool vehicle

Know your community

Although most rural communities are rather homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity, there are often pockets of racial, ethnic, or other minority groups. Serving all fathers and families can be difficult, especially if there are no staff familiar with the culture and customs of a particular group. Making an effort to be culturally sensitive and adapt curricula to specific populations can help overcome these barriers.

One of the “citizen fathers” at the FATHER Project has a personal connection to the nearby Native American reservation, which he is using to help build a partnership between tribal elders and the fatherhood program.

All Dads Matter offers classes in English and Spanish because of the large proportion of Hispanic fathers in Merced County. They also hire facilitators who are deeply immersed in Latino culture to help adapt programming and ensure all services are culturally sensitive.

Additionally, it can be challenging to offer referral services for fathers with more specialized needs. For example, in some areas of the Midwest, residents have to travel hundreds of miles to reach the nearest clinic that offers assistance for parents of children with developmental delays or specializes in certain psychiatric disorders. If many fathers in your community have unmet psychiatric needs, consider reallocating resources to hire a mental health professional who is trained to do screenings, deliver counseling and other mental health services, and help fathers get medication.

In Park Rapids, MN, the options for fathers to further their education while remaining in the area are limited. To combat this, several fathers enrolled in The FATHER Project were completing courses and certifications through online programs.

Another important thing to know about a community relates to fluctuating employment opportunities. In northern and agricultural areas especially, weather patterns and harvest periods may dictate fathers' work schedules. If fathers are unable to attend regularly scheduled classes because of work schedules, programs can offer one-on-one services to provide more flexible meeting times.

Both The FATHER Project and All Dads Matter plan programming around harvest schedules so that fathers are able to attend. In Park Rapids, MN, a community partner for The FATHER Project also allows a grace period in completing court mandated services during the harvest season.

Identify opportunities for leadership and growth

A common element of rural fatherhood programs is to operate out of a single facility under the leadership of a single staff member. When a staff member changes jobs or moves to another location, that program may not continue operating or operate effectively. To prevent problems associated with having a single staff member leave the organization, it is important to prepare others for leadership roles so the program does not rely on any one person's singular efforts or personality. However, starting with one staff member is a great place to begin! Remember, many organizations begin small – or even with a completely volunteer staff – and grow from there, so this strategy can unfold over time if it is not a possibility for your organization right now.

The FATHER Project involves fathers by training graduates to be peer facilitators. Some become "citizen fathers" and are volunteers that provide peer support and represent the FATHER Project in the community. The use of "citizen fathers" provides the fathers with a sense of program ownership that is essential to the capacity building given the parameters of limited financial resources.

Resources

All Dads Matter [Website](#)

Press release with [contact information](#) for The FATHER Project

Coshocton County Fatherhood Initiative [Website](#)

References

ⁱ Responsible Fatherhood. Retrieved September 9, 2016 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/responsible-fatherhood>.

ⁱⁱ Census Bureau. Retrieved June 10, 2016 from <https://ask.census.gov/faq.php?id=5000&faqlid=5971>.