



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

National
Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



Highlighting a Rural Community Partnership: All Dads Matter Fatherhood Program and Child Support Services of Merced County

Overview of the Partnership

Community partnerships can help fatherhood programs in many ways. They can increase the range of available services, enhance recruitment and retention efforts, and help fathers gain access to employment and training opportunities. Forming an effective partnership with the local child support agency can be particularly helpful for programs working with noncustodial fathers who are struggling to maintain regular child support payments. This case study describes the development of such a partnership in a rural area of central California (Merced County) and provides an overview of lessons learned.

Merced County is a two-hour drive from Sacramento and an hour from Fresno. Agriculture is a large part of the county's economy. There are also manufacturing employers and a University of California satellite campus. While predominately Hispanic and Caucasian, there is also a substantial Hmong and Mien population. The county is a diverse area that exemplifies typical challenges of rural program implementation, such as no public transportation, seasonal work patterns, unpredictable employment, and few potential organizations for referrals and partnerships.

All Dads Matter

In response to community requests, the Merced County Human Service Agency (HSA) began the community's first fatherhood program in 2004 to offer support for new fathers. The initial *Boot Camp for New Dads* classes quickly grew in popularity and by 2005, in response to additional requests for fatherhood resources, HSA established the *All Dads Matter* program to ensure that services were available for all dads in the community. *All Dads Matter* offers services for noncustodial and custodial fathers of all ages to help them engage with their children; enhance their parenting and co-parenting skills; and navigate policies and procedures of other human service organizations, such as child support or child welfare. Employment and training assistance is also available and all services are offered in English and Spanish, making them more accessible to immigrant fathers and those who primarily speak Spanish. *All Dads Matter* also offers a Men's Support Group, which provides fathers with a peer support system, and *Leadership for Life*, which is now a key aspect of the partnership with Merced County Child Support Services.

Merced County Child Support Services

As discussed in the NRFC's August 2016 webinar [Child Support Awareness Month: A Look at How Child Support is Evolving](#), the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement has been encouraging state and local child support agencies to move away from a focus on welfare cost recovery to more family centered approaches. The Merced County Department of Child Support Services certainly exemplifies this new approach. For several decades they have been working to transition from being "quasi-law enforcement" (e.g., penalizing men for failure to pay child support) to a service-oriented office that is interested in promoting all areas of noncustodial parental involvement, not just financial support. Merced County and other areas of California have been working to address barriers parents face to paying child support, and this shift in culture to a service-oriented office is one method of addressing those barriers. For example, there is a clear understanding that parents have basic needs to meet (like having a place to live) and that there are differences between noncustodial parents who are *unable* and those who are *unwilling* to pay child support.

How the partnership started

In 2012, California passed a law that released thousands of inmates from jails and prisons to reduce overcrowding, among other problems. *All Dads Matter* saw a need to help reentering men and fathers adjust back into the local community so they approached Child Support Services with a request to partner for delivery of fatherhood and other wrap around services. This proved to be a perfect fit and the two agencies together began to deliver a modified version of the *Leadership for Life* program, which is now designed to meet the unique needs of fathers reentering society from jail or prison. The main focus of the official partnership entails co-facilitating *Leadership for Life*, but their partnership has had other indirect benefits. For example, fathers

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involved with *All Dads Matter* who are interacting with the child support system for the first time receive support and encouragement to ease their introduction to the child support system.

Lessons Learned for a Successful Partnership

Have clear and consistent messaging across organizations

A key to the successful partnership between *All Dads Matter* and the Merced County child support agency is that they each deliver messages of support and provide the same information about child support procedures and policies to fathers. Because there are a lot of cross-referrals between *All Dads Matter* and Child Support Services (i.e., clients or participants in one organization are often referred to the other), delivering the same message provides consistency and helps to reduce confusion about each organization's rules and policies.

One reason the partnership is marked by clear and consistent messaging is because the leadership from both organizations are open and committed to the goals of the partnership. While the organizations may not always agree about what messages or programming to prioritize, they are clear that they both want the best for their community's families and children. By acknowledging that they expect to experience "bumps in the road," they have found it easier to manage any misunderstandings or issues as they arise. For example, *All Dads Matter* leadership understands that the child support agency has different, although complementary, goals for their clients, which can lead to occasional differences in opinion about how best to serve clients. *All Dads Matter* has found that allowing staff from one organization to speak about their services and goals for partnership at the other (for example, during professional development or staff training meetings) is helpful to build buy-in and reduce tensions.

Learn about fathering and child support together

Fathers may be most open to learning about and engaging with the child support system when the topic is introduced to them by trusted facilitators. *All Dads Matter* staff have a rapport and trust with their clients that puts them in a unique position to explain child support office cultural shifts (from law-enforcement to support agency) in a neutral way. For example, until they hear it from *All Dads Matter* staff, fathers may not know or believe that child support agency staff are willing and able to modify child support orders when life circumstances change. Fathers attending programming facilitated by *All Dads Matter* are learning how to navigate the child support system and what to expect during their interactions with child support workers, while also learning about other ways to care for their child emotionally as well as financially. They learn about their rights and responsibilities related to custody, paternity, and child support; effective communication and advocacy skills; and legal terms and acronyms commonly used in human services and other governmental agencies. *All Dads Matter* staff recommend starting out by focusing on one specific topic, like creating awareness about child support modifications among clients already involved with both agencies, and weaving it into other programming, like healthy child development topics. For example, as fathers learn about the benefits of reading and playing with their children, they might also talk about the importance of financial support for healthy child development and how modifying orders could help them make regular payments. This way, they are not overwhelmed by too much child support information that takes away time from other responsible fatherhood programming.

Staff putting in a good word for fathers can go a long way

Merced County child support agency staff have the ability to make decisions on a case-by-case basis, including whether or not fathers will be subjected to punitive consequences related to not paying child support (e.g., suspending a driver's license). When fathers attend *All Dads Matter* programming and have trusted fatherhood program staff members to vouch for their circumstances and effort, child support staff are more likely to work with the father to find a non-punitive solution to any problems that arise related to child support arrears. For example, they can review child support orders to modify order amounts if a father's income or other circumstances have changed and, if a father has received a job offer but will need to drive to the job site, the child support agency staff member can authorize a license suspension to be removed immediately. Having *All Dads Matter* staff help communicate and coordinate these situations and solutions leads to better cross-agency collaboration and better outcomes for fathers.

Accompany fathers when making a referral

One factor that contributes to the successful partnership between *All Dads Matter* and the Merced County child support agency is the close physical proximity of the offices (they are located in adjacent buildings), which allows fatherhood staff to physically accompany fathers to the child support offices and vice versa when making a referral. This helps the referral feel non-confrontational and non-punitive. When organizations are physically far apart, try to accompany fathers that you are referring to another agency whenever possible. Alternatively, have a staff member from each organization spend one day a month with the

other organization so they become familiar to the clients there and meet new fathers being referred in person and in a space they are already familiar with.

Don't reinvent the wheel

There are program and partnership models that can be replicated and modified to fit the needs of your community. It can be time consuming to start from scratch on a program model, so learn what other counties or states are doing to build partnerships and be prepared to explain the possibilities to a potential partner. For example, review NRFC resources and webinar presentations on partnership development or attend conferences where you can speak with other fatherhood programs and child support agencies about their partnerships. Learn from your peers! It will reduce your burden and ensure your work builds on lessons learned by others.

Resources

- Office of Child Support Enforcement- Child Support Fact Sheets Series Number 10: [“Partner with the Child Support Program to Raise Awareness about Responsibilities of Parenthood”](#)
- [The National Child Support Strategic Plan for 2015-2019](#)
- The National Conference of State Legislatures: [“How the Child Support System Affects Low-Income Fathers”](#)
- National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System Quarterly Newsletter: [Making the Child Support-Child Welfare Connection Work for Kids](#)
- Maximus Blog: [“Using Culturally Competent Outreach to Enhance the Success of Child Support Programs”](#)
- National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse: Webinars (<https://www.fatherhood.gov/webinars>) - Child Support Awareness Month: A Look at How Child Support is Evolving, August 17, 2016; and Working with Child Support - Continuing the Conversation, April 15, 2015
- NRFC Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field – [Successful Partnerships with Child Support](#)
- NRFC [Forging Effective Responsible Fatherhood Partnerships: A Research-to-Practice Brief \(2012\)](#)