



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



## Spotlight on Anthem Strong Families

An NRFC team visited the TYRO Champion Dads program of Anthem Strong Families (ASF) in Dallas, Texas on June 28 and 29, 2017 and had the opportunity to talk with program staff, participants, graduates, and community partners. This NRFC Spotlight highlights aspects of the organization's fatherhood program that may be of interest to other fatherhood practitioners.

**Background:** Anthem Strong Families (ASF), originally named Alliance for North Texas Healthy Effective Families (ANTHEM) was founded in 2006 by Cosette Bowles and other community leaders concerned about the impact of broken families on education, crime, unwed births, poverty, health, and other social issues. Since then, Ms. Bowles has served as the organization's Chief Executive Officer, building a successful healthy marriage program that provided a variety of innovative relationship strengthening programs and served over 40,000 families through September 2015. The focus was on providing healthy relationship classes for couples, supported by services designed to build employment and parenting skills for parents, but there was clear recognition throughout the project of the need to engage fathers and provide specific male and fatherhood services. With the award of a Responsible Fatherhood grant in 2015, the organization has now, to quote Ms. Bowles, turned their Healthy Marriage project "on its head" with the provision of fatherhood services through the TYRO Champion Dads program, which has a primary emphasis on employment and parenting skills for fathers, along with a continued focus on relationship skills.

**Financial Support:** The organization received two Healthy Marriage grants (2006-2011 and 2011-2015) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and was awarded a Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood grant from OFA for the period 2015-2020. Additional support comes from local partners and individual donors.

**Service Area:** ASF's TYRO Champion Dads program provides services for fathers and families in the Dallas County metropolitan area.

**Demographics:** Services are available for all fathers. In some cases, their partners or co-parents also receive services. Many of the fathers who participate in the program are minority, low-income, ex-offenders. As Ms. Bowles explained, "Our participants face many internal barriers, not just external barriers. I often say that people are in prison; some of them are behind bars, some are not. We serve both those living behind bars and those struggling with a lifetime of barriers that keep them stuck."

**Staff:** Ms. Bowles brings 20 years of therapeutic experience to the fatherhood and relationship work and her second in command, Charles Dillon, Director of Fatherhood and Workforce Readiness Programs, has a wealth of fatherhood experience combined with extensive community connections. Between them, they oversee more than 20 full-time staff, including fatherhood advocates, case managers, group facilitators, community outreach specialists, intake specialists, and administrative support staff. About half of the fatherhood advocates/case managers are former program participants, which helps them relate to participants through shared experiences. As Mr. Dillon pointed out, "Our staff are not professional therapists, but their belief in the program and ability to make one-on-one connections with fathers certainly contributes to the effectiveness of our program."

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**Program Philosophy:** During the program visit, the NRFC team heard several phrases or themes repeated by staff and program graduates, which sum up the general ASF program philosophy. These include:

- “You can’t help a family without being a family.”
- “You have to live it not fake it. We [program staff] have to drink the water for ourselves” (i.e., staff members have to experience the program themselves, either as program participants or by attending curriculum sessions as part of staff training, and serve as role models by living the program principles every day).
- “You [program participants] never see us in front of you if we’re not ‘drinking the water.’”
- “Societies can’t function if people don’t follow certain rules and regulations, so DTIP” (Don’t Take It Personal); “You get paid for what you do, personal choice is what got you here” (i.e., if you break the rules, you have to pay or serve time).

As Matt Shepherd, program evaluator, described it: “A common factor in this and other successful programs is that the staff are credible and non-judgmental. It’s not about teaching a curriculum, rather it’s about living the pledge.”

**Recruitment and the role of partner agencies:** The ASF recruitment strategy has built on the successful model that the organization followed with their 2006-2015 healthy marriage project, which incorporated a wide network of partners who helped recruit couples. Some classes were provided at the ANTHEM offices, but many were provided at partner locations. This approach proved highly successful for work with couples. ANTHEM is now working to transition some of these partners to the new fatherhood model while simultaneously building new partnerships.

Partner agencies include Head Start, Healthy Start, child welfare, two substance abuse treatment programs, several small community/neighborhood improvement initiatives, a local hospital, the city parole office, and Volunteers of America. The program is working to develop and strengthen partnerships that can help fathers with housing and transportation, which are critical issues for fathers returning to the community after a period of incarceration.

One strategy that has helped bring more attention to the program has been the organization of community forums to discuss the needs of fathers and ways in which community agencies can help address these needs. These [Safe Place: Real Men/Real Talk](#) events have included viewing and discussion of issues raised by Kenneth Braswell’s movie [Spit’in Anger](#), which addresses underlying issues of anger and the need for healing among young black males who did not have a nurturing relationship with their fathers.

Charles Dillon explained that a general approach to partnership development that works for ASF is “looking for small doors that can give us access to build the thought processes of organizations and key individuals in those organizations.” For example, he and other staff members have joined city-wide committees that have goals in line with strengthening families. This has provided opportunities to help other organizations be more inclusive of dads and begin potential partnership conversations. Program staff are also working with the [Dallas County DIVERT Court program](#), a local judge, and other community leaders to further spread the word, encourage program referrals, and develop new partnerships for recruitment and support services.

To reinforce the focus of the new fatherhood program, staff members wear the program's "I'm a Champion Dad" t-shirt (female staff wear similar t-shirts with the word "Mom" instead of "Dad") on a day-to day basis and hand out "I'm a Champion Dad" stickers when they meet fathers in the community.

Jerome Kirklin, Community Outreach Specialist: *"You have to come at people from a place of strength, not labels. Just something as small as giving a father an 'I'm a Champion Dad' sticker can open up a conversation."*



ASF also provides [mini clinics](#) of 2, 3, or 6 hours with information and skill building on topics such as Peer Pressure and Bullying; Champion Parenting; Communication; Navigating the Child Support System; Parenting with Your Ex; and Understanding the Faces of Depression. These short workshops are offered by both ASF and their partners and are designed to whet the appetite of attendees and encourage them to join the full program or recommend it to friends or family members.

**Curriculum Groups:** The core program service is the provision of TYRO Dads classes, which focus on parenting, relationships, and self-growth. The program uses the [TYRO Dads curriculum](#), developed by Ron and Cathy Tijerina of the RIDGE Project for work with incarcerated and reentry fathers. ASF provides the curriculum in 12-week cycles beginning with an Orientation session, followed by ten TYRO curriculum sessions and a closing session in week 12 that recognizes program graduates and gives them the opportunity to invite their families to attend. During the curriculum cycle, participants are encouraged to keep a journal, which they can review for lessons learned and to highlight ways in which the program has helped them (staff indicated this is particularly useful when fathers are talking with judges or parole officers).

There are typically 3-4 program staff present to support the group facilitator during group sessions. This includes two case managers who meet with participants on a regular basis and others who are there to provide individual assistance as needed and emphasize the importance of being a "Champion Dad."

Group sessions are offered at ASF's main office and partner locations around the metro area. Partner locations include:

- Gateway Substance Treatment Center, where individuals serve a six-month "Alternative to Prison" sentence (87 fathers were on the wait list for the next class when the NRFC team visited).
- A residential Community Substance Abuse Treatment Program operated by ARM Ministries.
- Parkland Hospital, where 3-hour Boot Camp for New Dads workshops are offered as a recruitment tool for the full program.
- Volunteers for America, which operates a Halfway House and Felony Substance Abuse treatment center.

Program staff also provide training workshops for staff of these and other partner agencies to help them better engage fathers and encourage program referrals.



The NRFC team observed a curriculum session provided for residents of the community-based substance treatment center operated by ARM Ministries. The facilitator was covering the 4<sup>th</sup> TYRO session, which focuses on Identity and Values. The session is designed to help participants look at how people may have labeled them; identify and reflect on wounds they have suffered and carried with them; and discuss three things that keep people from healing – Fear, Anxiety, and Pretense. The session closes with a focus on the importance of telling your story and a homework assignment for participants to write their autobiography. As we heard from several staff members during our visit: *“You can’t get your glory until you tell your story.”*

**Employment Services:** Because so many program participants have criminal records and limited work experience, program staff have to be realistic with fathers about available job opportunities. The focus is on setting realistic, achievable goals and building social-emotional skills to increase fathers’ employability and job retention prospects. Although a lot of available jobs only pay \$8.50 an hour, the program is aiming higher and emphasizes that these are only “first steps on the ladder.”

Charles Dillon: *“Many [participants] think that once they get a job they will progress rapidly and be self-sufficient quickly. We have to help them understand the long-term commitment required.”*

Vocational training is available through partnerships with local community colleges and Workforce Solutions of Greater Dallas. Program staff work with these partners to identify job opportunities, but also work directly with employers to match program graduates with jobs.

**Other Support Services:** Case managers and fatherhood advocates work with fathers on an individual basis to help them move toward their goals. Support services include assistance with child support, co-parenting, and legal issues. Referrals are provided to community partners as needed.

#### **In the words of the fathers:**

- *“They didn’t treat me like a convict ... they left their purses around, gave me their car keys.”*
- *“They were sincere, didn’t treat me like a charity case; gave me hope and inspiration.”*
- *“It’s a lifestyle change, not a program ... it works, if you work.”*
- *“Just when you think it’s a program, you realize it’s a family.”*

A staff member shared the story of one participant who hadn’t worked before beyond selling drugs. His first paycheck of \$200 proved to be a major step. His grandmother was so impressed that she invited him to their family Thanksgiving dinner for the first time in many years and expressed her gratitude to the case manager.