



### **W13. Know the FLOW: Fatherhood efforts Led by Outstanding Women**

Wednesday, June 5, 2019  
4:15 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.

#### **Moderator:**

- Geneva Ware-Rice, Senior Program Consultant, Office of Family Assistance, Washington, D.C.

#### **Panel Host:**

- Kimberly Dent, Executive Director, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services/Commission on Fatherhood, Columbus, Ohio

#### **Presenters:**

- Avis Files, Program Director, Pathways, Inc., Toledo, Ohio
- Dr. Alicia La Hoz, Founder and CEO, Family Bridges, Wheaton, Illinois
- Mary Weaver, Executive Director, Friends Outside in Los Angeles County, Pasadena, California

**Geneva Ware-Rice:** My name is Geneva Ware-Rice and I am your moderator for this afternoon's session. We have an amazing panel of women and our session is called, Know the FLOW, Fatherhood efforts Led by Outstanding Women. This subject matter has been a long time coming. We know it takes everyone to do the work that we do, and that there are many heroes, and we wanted to have one session that highlighted our female heroes. Be prepared to come into the world of a conversation of leaders. This is a no holds bar conversation from the heart, led by your panel host, Ms. Kimberly Dent.

**Kimberly Dent:** My name is Kim Dent and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood. It is a state agency written into law in 1999. We are incredibly proud that we are the only state in the United States that has a commission structured the way that it is. The Commission on Fatherhood has certain charges regarding bringing public awareness to the critical role that fathers play in their children's lives. I do a lot of public speaking and presentations. I've been to every state prison in Ohio presenting with the State Office of Child Support. I am charged by statute. So again, 5101.34 is where you will find the Commission on Fatherhood in Ohio revised code.

We have to prevent premature fatherhood. We work with schools. We want schools to be intentional about engaging fathers when they come through the door and not give them the raised



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eyebrow look as if to say, why are you here? We increase employment for low income fathers, and most of my budget goes to fund programs.

I just finished a request for grant application in Ohio. My review team finished scoring the programs that will be funded in the next biennial budget. We will be funding five regional fatherhood programs. Those of you who heard the panel talk about challenging your states to use TANF block grant monies to fund fatherhood, that's what we have done since 1999. My structure, my support. I am a state worker for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. Under that umbrella we have child support, child protective services, SNAP, TANF, childcare licensing, unemployment, and workforce development.

My support includes 20 commissioners, six of them are from the legislative branch. Two of my Republican legislators more than doubled my next biennial budget. I've always worked with \$1M a year; so, once the budget comes out of the Senate, I will have \$2.2M every state fiscal year to get this work done in Ohio. But, we had to show them the return on investment. We had to show them that if you put this money into fatherhood, this is what we're going to give you. Increased child support, lower foster care costs, so forth and so on. We're currently serving 1,200 low income fathers with my current grantees. I have seven, and five of them have to serve 200 fathers per year and two of them have to serve 100 fathers per year. Therefore, by the end of the fiscal year we will have served 1,200 plus.

One of my charges at the Commission on Fatherhood is to work with every state agency regarding policy. We recently changed the way we are calculating child support in Ohio. We have a self-sufficiency reserve for low income fathers. Before we even start to look at their income regarding how much child support they should pay, there's going to be a protective self-reserve set aside for the noncustodial parent, to take care of his or her basic needs. We worked with the Department of Health to change the home visiting rules.

We also have a county mobilization project. I have 88 counties in Ohio and we're giving each one \$10,000 to mobilize and bring fatherhood awareness locally in their county. I have 28 counties completed. My goal is to get through all 88. In addition, we have been charged with running fatherhood conferences every four years. The next conference will be May 2020. Please stay in touch, [www.fatherhood.ohio.gov](http://www.fatherhood.ohio.gov). That's where you can find the Commission on Fatherhood. Register your email address and you'll be able to receive the information.

The field of fatherhood dates back to the fifties and sixties. They talked about theory, method, evidence based versus evidence informed. What population should we serve? What services? What dosage? Parenting skills, co-parenting, healthy relationships, relationships skills, job readiness and what is it that we should be doing in the field of fatherhood.



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In 2005 there was federal legislation that was passed and in 2006 the first round of HMRF grants were sent out for bid. However, as Ms. Geneva had stated earlier, there's always been this silence coming into the program of women. So, it's time to have this conversation about women being in fatherhood.

First, we're going to hear from Dr. Alicia La Hoz with Family Bridges in Wheaton, Illinois. She is a leader, creative, and passionate. Then we're going to hear from Ms. Avis Files, Brothers United, Toledo, Ohio. She's a leader, a trend setter and outcome driven. Lastly, we will hear from Ms. Mary Weaver, Friends Outside in Los Angeles. She's a leader, innovative, and fearless. These are women on fire who know their flow. I am going to turn it over to Dr. Alicia La Hoz.

**Dr. La Hoz:** Thank you so much Kimberly. As a clinical psychologist I've been doing this work for 20 years. I had the opportunity to do a lot of clinical work, forensic, domestic violence, foster care, DCFS consulting, couples counseling, 30-40 clients a week. I have witnessed what happens when there's pain spilling over in that context.

I remember clearly having a seven-year-old crying in my office because after he got through the tears, he basically confessed that he felt it was his fault that his dad walked away shortly after the birth of his one month old sibling. I heard that story too many times. I picked up the phone and asked the dad to come in. When I talked to him, the reason that he gave for quitting the relationship was not your usual evils. There was no pornography, unfaithfulness, or addiction. He just said he was fed up with issues and didn't have a way to talk about them and one day he had had it and let things slip; but he made the decision to stay at least through the birth of the baby.

The last memory the seven-year-old had was the last argument they had on the soccer field. In his head, he thought that was the reason he had walked out. That story, among many, really drove it home for me and I ended up deciding to crossover and focus on intervention. Why wait for all of these issues to spill over into the clinical setting, let's get behind it, let's teach educational principles because at the end of the day, that's what I was doing. A lot of coaching on communication skills and conflict resolution. How do we do that in a context of group? That coupled with working on my dissertation on marriage and family, as well as some opportunities overseas, and being helped with the existing organization, led to the birth of Family Bridges. A preventative approach looking at it from a different angle.

We got together with several different organizations and our focus has been building strong families for purpose driven children, so that children have a sense of purpose and direction, and in the end be leaders in their communities; and, not do that in silos but do that with a coalition of





organizations that could rally behind that. For 15 years we've been working with a diversity of organizations such as the Salvation Army, health clinics, different organizations to bring about family formation programs. We provide services; your traditional workshops, relationship education programs, job training, and character formation. We focus on training existing leaders and organizations to do the work. Not only do we do a relationship university in a city where we're able to go in and deliver workshops to 700 plus different organizations, but we also train what we call affiliates in leadership development; our core content in order to provide services.

We promote the message of hope and resilience and why marriage is important and why it matters. The way we go about doing that is an investment in people. Investing in the dads and the couples, and the children that we serve. Building them up, but also being able to equip champions in the community; volunteers, dads, and moms that are able to then carry that message in a servant leadership model.

We utilize a variety of products that include a podcast and a radio soap opera that airs in 26 markets worldwide. If you think of the Latino community; they love stories, we leverage that and bring out that message.

We have a process of being able to work with existing organizations in their communities to train them and build them up. That takes a lot of consultation, a lot of patience, a lot of labor of love, because it's aligning our organization with another organization. The idea is to have deep roots and long branches so that the training and programs are sustained over the long haul and not necessarily dependent on me or a few people. It's something that becomes a part of the community.

We think of our work through the lens of a leadership model that we call The Four Cs. Communication, clarity, creativity and culture. It is important to equip our leaders, parents, fathers, and couples with crucial communication skills. We also bring about a vision. What is the vision that we would like our children to have? What is the vision that our parents need to have? The same thing for our leaders. How do we think about the future and how do we have clarity around that? How can we tap into that natural creativity that our fathers and our couples have? A lot of you represent different modalities, different programs. What would it look like to be able to present some common platforms, some common research components and then unleash that and let what wants to happen, happen? How can we activate that natural creativity? We've seen some of it, for example, with the PSAs. What would it look like if we were to be able to break that down? That DNA of the components that make a healthy relationship and gift that to the community and let the community bring that and flourish it in a different way that could actually be expansive and make a significant impact in our culture. Then again, how do we have a healthy





culture, because we have to take care of ourselves as leaders in order to be able to then serve others as well.

A couple of weeks ago, I sat in on a couples' workshop. It was the last session of a parenting workshop. There was a couple and the wife stood up and said, "I want to share a testimony. I've seen my husband step up. He's actually been more present with my adolescent 11-year-old. He's taking her out, talking, and creating moments that matter." You could see this couple flourishing and being really encouraged and wanting to be a participant. Not only a participant in their own marriage and in their own relationship, but after the session, they were asking, how could they be involved? How can they bring this to their community and to their network? That is really what this is about. It's being catalytic and spreading a message.

**Avis Files:** My name is Avis Files, Program Director of Pathways, Inc., in Toledo, Ohio. Toledo sits about 45 minutes from Detroit. I like to refer to Toledo as being a small city which is urban and rural at the same time. It has a little different flavor. Smaller than Cleveland, smaller than Cincinnati, smaller than Columbus, but with big city issues and concerns. That's just some of the data that tells you that we're dealing with some very big issues in Toledo and especially around young fathers.

Our program is Brothers United. We branded our program by using T-shirts. We have a mission at our agency. I work for Pathway Incorporated, which is a community action agency. We developed a one-minute message that we believe in that we speak for our fathers. Pathway Incorporated Brothers United Program believes that children are important. Every day we support and advocate for fathers because when children have involved fathers, the whole community thrives.

All of my staff knows that one-minute message. We live it, we breathe it, and that's how we flow. I had a dream and it came to me, Brothers United Nation. What is Brothers United Nation? It is a nation of fathers who will rise up and advocate for themselves long after government stops funding. And when I'm long gone and dead, all of their children will still be talking about the fact that their lives had been impacted by working with fathers.

We brand our program by giving everybody a T-shirt; and, these T-shirts are hot off the press. People actually come to our program wanting them because we cross gang lines. We make a statement that says the only hood that we claim is fatherhood. When we have our groups, that's the statement that we make, that's what we live by. Sometimes we have crips, bloods, or the local street gang. We also started to brand with our children so that the children have a T-shirt because they belong to the nation as well. And they basically say, my dad claims fatherhood.





Since the implementation period in July 2016, we have served 1,421 fathers who have 4,130 children. We work with young fathers in the community. We offer 24 days of programming. Although it's six weeks, we say 24 days because to our fathers six weeks is way too long. They can't even see that. We serve in a way that is relevant to our fathers, and in a way that is relational, relevant, and reliable in the things we do.

**Mary Weaver:** I'm Mary Weaver from Friends Outside in Los Angeles County. I'm really glad to see all the females in the room and glad to see some men in the room too. Friends Outside in Los Angeles County was founded in 1972. We are the only organization in the county that is specifically dedicated to persons affected by incarceration and the criminal justice system. That can be directly or indirectly. It can be children, families, inmates, and ex inmates.

We do a lot of our programming through co-located services. What that means is that we go where the fathers are. We want to make it easier on them. We don't want them to have to go from one place to another.

We hosted a fatherhood summit in LA county about a month ago. One of the stories that a reentry father talked about was going across the county to get to the DCFS office, the child support office and to his parole agent. LA county is already a four-hour commute to get to a meeting that's 20 minutes, and they're going by bus. It is not only a hardship for them, but it's also very hard for them to spend time with their children. We try to rectify that by being co-located in work source centers. We're at an elementary school and we work in the jail. It also keeps our overhead down.

We think of ourselves as addressing the unintended consequences of incarceration. There are a lot of things that happen beyond the things we think we're doing by incarcerating. Family bonds are often broken. Research shows that over time, the longer someone's incarcerated, the fewer times their families visit, if at all. There is also a financial hardship. Many times, it's a wage earner who has been incarcerated. Often the children think, my daddy's gone, it must be because I did something bad. There's a lot of ramifications that we don't always think about when we're building the next prison.

Our fatherhood program is called the Dad's Back Academy. I had a lady who is an actress come to me who received funding for creative arts and wanted to bring her program to our fatherhood program. It's very powerful and gives the men a chance to share their experiences through theater. If you have any way to partner up in that way, it really is very touching, and it serves a purpose.



We started in 1995 trying to address issues that came up for incarcerated fathers. Friends Outside now has a federal grant but started off slowly, just trying to build capacity. I think sometimes people want to do too much because they see a need; but for us, going through a slower process worked really well.

**Kimberly Dent:** Fabulous women running programs. Thank you. I have questions for them because I want to know how they're doing this. Ladies, you gave us high level information about your programs that you oversee, but can I ask each one of you, since we didn't really do bios, to tell us about what your specific role is in your respective programs? We'll start with Mary.

**Mary Weaver:** I'm the executive director responsible for keeping the mission of the organization intact. When we start a new activity or a service, I go back to what the board directors created years ago and ensure it's in line with the mission that we established. I feel like I'm responsible for the reputation, culture, and ethics of the organization. I also want to make sure that the client needs are met. I feel a responsibility. I go out and talk to the clients and ask them how their experience was at Friends Outside, what can we do better, and what did they like?

**Avis Files:** We are a responsible fatherhood grantee, and I have direct oversight over Brothers United with 14 staff members from a transportation coordinator to coaches (case managers). I'm responsible for all reporting and data. There is an evaluation on this project (Randomized Controlled Trial). From the evaluation we heard that everything was going well but that the fathers were still having problems with their co-parents. And we do say co-parents. We do not use the term baby mama or baby daddy because it's disrespectful. We teach it at orientation, and we teach it at day one. The men are very creative in how they handle that. Sometimes if you do say baby mama, you owe 25 pushups. It's a group rule.

I am responsible for Brothers United, but out of that came, what are we going to do for the women? The men named it Sisters United. We recently won a small pilot grant from our Toledo community foundation so we will be starting to work with women around co-parenting issues.

We also look at infant mortality. I have a community health worker on staff who teaches "breasts for success." He teaches men the importance of breastfeeding so that they can go back and talk to the co-parent about skin-to-skin contact, changing diapers, and safe sleep.

Recently we won a five year Healthy Start grant. My job continues to expand based on the data that we're getting in and on what the participants are saying. We're trying to meet the needs of our community.





**Dr. La Hoz:** I'm responsible for setting the tone of the organization and catalyzing growth and talent. I keep an eye out for good people and build people, providing them the resources they need in order to activate different programs. My job is to bring resources and trainings to our groups and our affiliates, and to create the right conditions to activate others, and champion the effort to grow that. I also set a lot of the organization's priorities, which requires some pruning and cutting. Unfortunately, one of the things that we've learned is that we can't do all things. Our staff gets burned out and then we're not as effective. So as difficult as it is, I end up having to make some program cuts that are either ineffective, or just in order to innovate.

I am responsible for managing up, managing down, fundraising, and, writing grants.

**Kimberly Dent:** Thank you for telling us more about yourselves. As you reflect, what are some key factors that have led you to overseeing such successful fatherhood programs? Take us on your journey from where you were to where you are today. Ms. Avis.

**Avis Files:** In 2006, I was a healthy marriage grantee tasked with working with African American couples in the community. I fell into this work through my church. My pastor called and said there's a grant. And I said okay. I love data, so I started looking at couples, singles and youth. I met a group of men at a conference in Baltimore that ended up taking us on a tour of the Center for Urban Families. I didn't know that I was falling in love with fatherhood, but I really was. In our data's singles category, I noticed fathers kept showing up and couldn't figure out why. At one point I had more men than I did women in the group for healthy marriage. So, I started asking if they have children. They're were all saying yes. Then they were telling us about their child support issues, and I said you have to do something about this.

I left that organization and started my own business. I was on the board of an organization and went to the CEO and said, the responsible fatherhood grants are coming out again, I'd like to apply. Can I get off the board and apply through your organization? She said yes. I took maybe eight millennials and for six months prior to the project coming out, we took our Sundays and just studied. We did community needs assessments, surveyed 400 fathers to shape the program to see what we were going to do, and then we wrote, and then we won. So here I sit.

I like to say the work called me; I didn't call the work. I'm so passionate about working with fathers and working in our community to make a difference.

**Kimberly Dent:** Excellent. We call it heart work, it's not hard work. It takes special people to actually do this work. Ms. Mary, tell us about your journey.







**Mary Weaver:** In the words of my loving sister, only you could get arrested and get a career out of it. In 1987 I was arrested. You know what they say, if you're having a lot of fun spending a lot of money, it's probably illegal. But it turned out great. Not that I'm suggesting this as a career path for anybody. Luckily, I was assigned to community service and I chose Friends Outside solely because it was near my house and I could walk or ride my bicycle. I was so nervous the first day because I felt very ashamed. I felt I was going to be looked at as a cancer. When I walked in I was treated just like anyone else. That was the most important thing to me because I already was punishing myself enough. I didn't have to go to jail any longer to feel bad about anything.

I sat there listening to the stories, mostly of men, one after another, coming in completely voluntarily to our office saying, I have to go to work, I have to find my children. And if I had given any thought to people in prisons and jails, I probably would have thought they don't care about anyone, they're just looking to commit the next crime, whatever is the stereotype. That touched my heart deeply when I heard those efforts being made, completely voluntarily, no one forcing them to be there. I started listening to their stories. I was middle class, middle American. My problems were quite small by comparison, and it really made me think differently about those in the criminal justice system.

I feel very fortunate. I've been doing this work for 32 years, and it's a social justice issue for me. I am more passionate now than I was 32 years ago. It's such a privilege to do the work and it keeps me going through all of the ups and downs. If it weren't for that, I couldn't do the work. I like them better than most of the people I meet because I see the sincerity and the real strive to change. I respect that.

**Dr. La Hoz:** I was in middle school sitting in a gym class at round tables doing some work. There was this boy hovering right behind me. I felt the air prickle in my neck, and I told him to leave me alone that he was invading my space. He did not. I remember taking my elbow and jabbing him and he still stood there. I did that the third time and then I looked up and he punched me in the eye. I ended up with a black eye for a whole month. My sisters were laughing hysterically, but I was shaking. I ended up in the principal's office and here comes my dad. I'm shivering and crying because I just didn't expect that. He came to me and soothed me, gave me a hug, and told me he loved me. My hero at that moment. What made that moment special was that across from me is the boy. My dad turned around and he didn't scream at him, he didn't yell at him, and he didn't shame him. He talked to him and explained that you don't punish someone else and he forgave him. On our way home I asked my dad what that was about and he's like, you never know another person's story and what they're going through. That was particularly poignant because my father was raised in a home where he was abused by his stepmother. Years later, not only did he forgive her, but he financially supported her until she passed.





Seeing that script, the vision my dad had and how that shaped me, in contrast to the scripts of shame that I witnessed in the clinical setting, just spurred that spark of “How can we raise up fathers and couples in our work we're doing with marriage? How can we bring that up in a way that's more poignant?”

One of the biggest complaints that I see clinically with couples is, the dad is not supportive. And yet when you see the dad step up the merits, people are pretty happy and feel pretty satisfied. So, how can we bring that up? How can we raise that up and make that a part of the conversations? The image, the script that the children have is something that stays with them and it's a legacy that shapes their world in the future.

**Kimberly Dent:** Absolutely. Because a lot of times we don't know what the children are going through at home when they come to school and they're misbehaving. A child's hungry, they're frustrated. Maybe they didn't sleep well, maybe too much is going on in the neighborhood or at home.

We all know that sometimes serving fragile families, people that have a lot of barriers, and I think Ms. Mary you had mentioned something about what you were going through was nothing compared to what some of the other people were going through. Sometimes when I come into work I know what it is that is expected of me, but sometimes I have to pause a moment and say, okay, the decisions that I'm going to make today are going to impact one of my programs or policy and therefore it's going to trickle down and possibly positively or negatively impact a family. As you all think about your motivation, sometimes your challenges motivate you, sometimes a really heartwarming success story motivates you. I would like to ask that you either choose a success story or a challenge that motivates you to continue in this work. Dr. Alicia.

**Dr. La Hoz:** I'll start with the challenge. We have to raise funds in order to do this work. When you think of that, it's a mental shift you have to do. At the beginning when I remember starting this work I didn't want to ask anybody for money. It's weird and then you have to push through that.

I had a chance to meet with a major funder that was going to support one of our works. He knew that was the case. He is a millionaire and knew we were going to go for an ask. I have children, a family, we're busy. I take time to fly and meet with this person. I get there and have someone with me. The conversation went great but when it was time for the ask, he said no to everything, including, do you know anybody that we should talk to next. It felt a little bit paternalistic, a different generation in terms of SES differences. I remember feeling so infuriated because I was like, well, he knew we were going to go for an ask, this wasn't a surprise visit, so why put us





through that? I was feeling discouraged and went through all of the internal dialogue and all of the flustering feelings. At that moment you just start having a negative scope. I pushed through it and used the skillsets that we teach. I started saying, well he does have to have autonomy over his money. Then I started reading and learning that you want to get to a no quicker because that's when you start negotiating. I started learning these things and embracing and understanding it, and then I persevered and stuck with the relationship. You know what? The next meeting that we had, he funded us. We're actually able to scholarship 25 at-risk girls. We have been working with them for three years, starting at age 16; and, their scholarshiped all through college. We meet with them every year and make sure there's milestones.

I share that because in this role it's not all rosy and wonderful. Sometimes you do get rejected, but you need to be able to persevere and push through. Here are these girls that we're working with, that we have a long-term relationship with, and they're receiving mentoring. We do have a family engagement program as a part of it. We're working with their relationships with their dads.

I wanted to share that because I feel like one of the things that activates me is sometimes getting rejected. It's almost like a rebellious thing comes from inside of me that goes, well, I'll just work harder.

**Avis Files:** I'm going to share a challenge as well because it's fresh in my mind. talked about working with young fathers who are usually gang members or drug dealers or have some affiliation. Last week we did orientation and had three young fathers come in. We are big into pictures and big into going to where our fathers are, because one of my staff said that young fathers have more moves than Michael Jordan. Today they're ready and tomorrow they're not, so we have to be very creative in how we do our work. We have a 15-passenger van and we'll do an intake in that van if we have to. One of my staff took a picture of these young men. We take selfies with them because we like to get our logo on there. They were like, what are you doing? We said we have to have evidence that you were here. After they signed a media release of course. The way it works with young fathers is if one comes, we'll always say call your friends and bring them to the table, so, he did that. Those same three men, which we saw a week ago, are now dead. The word on the street is they robbed the dope man for \$20,000. Last week we went to one of the young man's wake. My staff said, we should give his mom a T-shirt. Someone went and got the T-shirt and brought it back and said, here, Ms. Avis, you're up. And I was like, oh, wait, I'm giving a mom this T-shirt? It was your guys' idea. They're like, yes, and you're the leader. I went to that mother and said, "I'm so sorry, but one thing I do want you to know is that although your son is gone, we have a picture of him smiling, and he was trying to make some changes and make a difference. I'm sorry that he's gone." She laid on me for quite a while and I just held her. What's my motivation today is that, literally, there's a young father right there. Not





only do I have his life, but I have his children's lives in my hand. It's a challenge every day when I hear the news. I look up making sure it's not one of our fathers. But that's just the reality of the work that you do when you choose to work with young fathers in the urban core.

That is my motivation, because although those fathers are gone, my husband looked up at me and I said they're gone, and he said, well babe, I'll tell you what, yeah they are and I'm sorry for that Avis, but there are about 4,000 more out there. Let's get it. And I said, okay.

**Mary Weaver:** I referenced earlier the culture at Friends Outside and how important that was for me when I got there. When I go out and talk to those who've gone through our program, and I ask them how their experience at Friends Outside was; I can't remember the last time I got a bad answer. I had nothing to really offer them, but it always feels genuine. I ask why it was so positive and they say the way they were treated. I thought, is nice treatment so rare that it is so notable? It makes me sad at some level. But it makes me very proud of the staff. Forty percent of the staff, and this is not by design, has a criminal record. I'm very proud of that too, because I think, not only do we need to practice what we preach, but there is also some power in this work of having someone talk to them who can really speak the language of having been in prison. I've had wonderful people working who don't have a criminal record, but I think it's an important voice. I've had fewer problems with people with criminal records on my staff than I've had with persons that didn't have a record. A master's degree from USC was my all-time nightmare. There was a study done by Johns Hopkins University. They decided they really wanted to be a part of their community in Baltimore, so they intentionally hired 5% that had a criminal record. They were very smart about it because they tracked the number of problems they had with their staff, with and without a criminal record, how many people had left with good leaves and not so good leaves. They found out that those with criminal records had caused them fewer problems.

For me that's a message that has to get out, because there's such a stigma attached to it. I think that's what I feel really great about. I try to really continue that culture, and I think it's important because that's what people respond to.

**Kimberly Dent:** The name of the conference is Fanning the Fatherhood FIRE, where the fire icon is interconnected. Can you briefly give us one of your interconnected strategies that you use in your community? Ms. Mary.

**Mary Weaver:** The connectedness to the criminal justice system is very important. Our sister agency up north has worked in the state prison since 1972. We in LA county have worked inside the county jail since 1978. Unfortunately, because there's such a revolving door, people know of us because we're inside and out. We run the visitors' centers at the state prisons. When I have on my Friends Outside T-shirt, it's very often that someone will come up to me, oh, Friends Outside,





I love you. Then they proceed to say it's for a very simple but important reason, which is, Friends Outside provides clothing exchanges at the state prisons. If you get to the state prison and aren't dressed appropriately, you could have crossed the entire state in a Greyhound bus with your two children and you can't get in. Friends Outside provides a clothing exchange so you can get in. Working with the criminal justice system is vitally important in order to have access to the clients, to be able to talk to the parole agent. We worked on a Department of Labor grant helping persons in work release programs get jobs, and all of a sudden you find out, well he's got a curfew of 6:00 and we just helped him get a job and he has to be at work until 10:00. So, you call the parole agency and see if you can work out a deal with them so they can stay later. We let them know he's working in the program; he's doing a great job. If you're interested in reentry, I would strongly recommend that you establish that connectedness if you haven't already.

**Avis Files:** I'd like to say when you work with the young fathers you work with the whole family. You're working with mom, co-parent's mom, grandma. We work with a lot of grandmas. It's this whole village. Then outside are the community partners. We have what's called a Circle of Support, because our goal is that although these people are in your life, we need to make them a support system for you. We are heavy on serving the street gangs. I actually end up knowing all these people in the community because again, our community is small that they see us a lot. I might see someone I don't even know that completed the program, but they have their shirt on. We have really tried to saturate our community so people know who we are. We are interconnected with everyone.

**Dr. La Hoz:** One of the things we do is partner with the business community. We have a micro enterprise program with a lot of fathers as well as spouses that participate. At the beginning of the program we get a good assessment of what these individuals want to pursue. We go out and canvass the relationships we have with the business community and actually have presenters come in and speak as part of the program that are already a few steps ahead and have gotten their license, are working, and are successful. I remember how exciting it was for these brothers because they were confused with how to get their contracting licensing and here was someone that was able to mentor them, and now have a successful business and are able to contribute and support our work.

Being able to involve the business community in our different programs, takes a lot of conversations. It's not easy and takes work, but it's building relationships. It is pretty amazing to be able to reach out in that sector in the marketplace.

**Kimberly Dent:** Earlier, Ms. Geneva said that these ladies are subject matter experts, and they absolutely are. Starting with Ms. Avis, if you could go back to when you first started in the field and give yourself one piece of advice, what would it be?





**Avis Files:** That you don't need a man to do this work. You can do it. You are capable and you are bright enough. If you work hard enough, and you have the tenacity enough you'll get it done.

**Mary Weaver:** I think feed the fire. Just keep that passion going. Remember what you're doing the work for and connect to that. It takes you through a lot of the dark areas.

**Dr. La Hoz:** Figure out quickly what you do well and focus your energy and attention on that and delegate everything else. Train others to do what they're good at. The quicker you do that, the quicker you can build your team. The quicker you have a team that's able to grow, the more people you're able to serve, and the more you're able to expand your program services.

**Kimberly Dent:** Thank you. We're going to take some questions from the audience. Ms. Geneva actually brought me a few of them.

**Participant:** As a woman leading a fatherhood program, do you face adversity? If so, how do you address it?

**Avis Files:** Yes. Many times, and I have male and female staff, I may go into a place and introduce myself as being the director of Brothers United and men are like, what? I'm like what is the problem? There have been times that I've had to share with people that I'm capable of doing this work. I am the director. I was doing a presentation one time and a man asked how I was able to lead a fatherhood program being a woman. I said, "Very well, thank you."

**Dr. La Hoz:** I think coming in I tend to look young and on top of it, and triple minority. One of the things I'm not good at is necessarily selling myself. I have to be a bit more assertive than what is maybe my natural state in order to push through the agenda and get things done.

**Kimberly Dent:** Thank you for that because when I stepped into the role of leading fatherhood in Ohio, I had that same pushback. But you have to show them. When I stepped into the role of executive director some of my worst critics are now my best allies. Sometimes it's just pushing forward and showing that you can get the job done. And so now we walk this journey together in Ohio.

**Avis Files:** I think the other dynamic is that I have a split staff. The majority of my females are coaches and they do home visits. So that's always a question. These women are going into these men's home, how are they able to do this? I will share with you that I have the best female staff. They are able to handle things properly. People had implied things about us wearing T-shirts and jeans to work. That's how we get it. We just don't have time to get dressed up. You don't have





time to put on heels. I think just getting past that myth of where women belong in fatherhood. Our previous FPS looked at our service contacts and she's like, you have a lot of service contacts and information. I told her those are my coaches connecting to the clients and making their referrals. I think early on it bothered me. As a matter of fact, I hired a man to lead and I was going to be in the background. He didn't lead and I stepped up and never looked back.

**Mary Weaver:** I think it's a training issue. You need to train people. You name it when they walk in and get the elephant out of the room.

**Kimberly Dent:** Absolutely. One of the next questions I have is based on the actual population that we serve, the fathers. How do you get fathers to get over their bias of having women facilitate their classes?

**Dr. La Hoz:** I think it goes back to the longing that we have for relationships and the vision that we have. I see my children and they're thriving with their dad with the moments that he invests in them and I had that as a grand part of my DNA. I yearn for that for the children we serve. That's what I want. People get that at that level and then they're able to move forward. I think tapping into the common ground and that common vision that we all have gets through all the murkiness of biases.

**Avis Files:** I think we get the elephant out of the room quickly. I just say, hey, I'm beautiful. All of my female staff is beautiful. Don't bother telling us. We already know. It just lets them know. And then I just say, there's some boundaries here. We're going to do the work. When you're working with a young father what we find is that there's a lot of trauma. A lot of our young fathers have not had the proper care with mothers. Sometimes the mothers are absent. We see more and more that they lean on us and then we are able to get a lot of information.

**Kimberly Dent:** Absolutely. Thank you for saying that because it's about trust building where they're building trust with us and vice versa.

**Geneva:** The next question is for you. I am a state employee, but county run. What strategies or advice can you give me to get buy in from the upper state management? We talked about that this morning. Those state programs but county administered are very challenging.

**Kimberly Dent:** Yes. In Ohio we are also state supervised, county administered. Eighty-eight counties doing their thing and we're hoping they're following the rule; and when they're not, we make sure they get it right. What you have to do as a state worker, at the state level is ensure that your support is also at the state.





My biggest support is my legislative branch. My commission is bipartisan, so I am supported by Republicans and Democrats. The way that you get to that level, whether you're a state worker or even a nonprofit is to talk to leadership about the well-being of children in your state. The fathers who are in child support, ensuring that the financial needs of the child will be met because that's exactly what it is the IV-D [child support] program is looking for; to talk to them about the social ills going on in your state. In Ohio, we have high infant mortality. African American babies are dying at three times the rate of Caucasian babies. Toledo's one of our hotspots. So, we're working with the Department of Health.

You have to figure out in your state, the opioid epidemic. We have a lot of children going into foster care because we have women going to prison in Ohio at a higher rate than men. That means children are being removed from mom's home. What does our legislative branch, governor or even our foster care system want to see? They want to see dads stepping up and taking custody of their children because there's no more room in foster care. We're just maxed out. There's just nowhere else. We're sending children across the state and out of state because there's just no more room.

Speaking as a state worker, you have to know what's going on in your state and how to talk to your leadership on how to make that situation better by engaging dad, and being intentional, and ensuring that all of your programs and your policies are father inclusive, and father friendly. It's because we're trying to, through the eyes of the child, bring the family back for the best interest and well-being of the children.

Remember FLOW is Fatherhood efforts Led by Outstanding Women. Thank you and have a good evening.



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