

Working with Non-Custodial Parents

The Welfare-to-Work (WtW) grant program represents one aspect of new federal efforts to help non-custodial parents. This issue of Ideas that Work will examine strategies for targeting employment and training opportunities to meet the needs of these individuals.

THE POLICY CHALLENGE: WHY SERVE NON-CUSTODIAL PARENTS?

Non-payment of child support contributes significantly to poverty among families headed by single mothers. In 1996, only 30% of poor children living in these families received child support. The link between child support non-payment and welfare receipt has led to numerous adjustments in welfare policies in the past 20 years, which have increased collections somewhat. However, enforcement alone is not effective for poor non-custodial parents who face many of the same employment barriers as mothers on welfare. The 1990 Census found that 23% of fathers owing support met the food stamp income standard and did not pay support. Labor market trends show declining earnings among low-income, never-married minority males with limited education and work experience. To meet their child support obligations, these men need employment-related services.

NEW APPROACH POSSIBLE WITH TANF AND WELFARE-TO-WORK GRANT PROGRAM. Federal efforts to assist non-custodial parents were expanded by including them in the target audience for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding and Welfare to Work (WtW) employment assistance. Some of the service strategies utilized by WtW grantees to reach this hard-to-serve population are highlighted below.

SERVICE STRATEGIES EXTENDING PARENTS' FAIR SHARE (PFS).

California continued to fund PFS after the demonstration formally ended. The program now operates with state TANF funds and a WtW grant. Partners include the Los Angeles Department of Community and Senior Services, the District Attorney, the Private Industry Council, and other community agencies. The DA recruits participants by summoning non-custodial parents with children receiving TANF to appear in court. DCSS social workers receive the parents at the courthouse. When they arrive, most are angry and afraid of being arrested. The social workers explain the services offered job training and education, legal counsel, peer support group, and mediation with the custodial parent. Virtually all parents agree to participate. Contact: Geraldo Rodriguez, L.A. DCSS, (323) 260-3866, grodrigu@co.la.ca.us.

USING A DEEPLY PERSONAL APPROACH. The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization is funded to work in six sites (Cleveland, Nashville, San Diego, Washington, DC, Yonkers, and Milwaukee) to "recapture the responsible father figure and bring him back into the family structure to provide leadership; economic and social support; love; and nurturing." Charles Ballard, founder and chief executive officer,

believes "Change a man's heart, change his attitude, and the rest will take care of itself."5 Contact: Charles Ballard, (202)293-4420, ch@responsiblefatherhood.org.

OFFERING POST-EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT TO REWARD SUSTAINED EMPLOYMENT. The Full Employment Council, Inc., which serves Kansas City, MO and the five surrounding counties, offers vouchers of \$1,800 to customers, including eligible non-custodial parents, who have remained with a single employer for nine months. The program pays the voucher directly to service providers or vendors chosen by the customer for expenses to facilitate achieving self-sufficiency. Allowable expenses include housing, car repairs, counseling, and further education and training. Contact: Clyde McQueen, President/CEO, (816)471-2330.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: WHO'S WHO

There has been a recent proliferation of organizations that work with and/or study noncustodial parents. Here's a guide to their goals, activities, and contacts.

*The Ford Foundation's Fragile Families Initiative seeks to change welfare and family support systems to recognize lowskilled, unwed parents and their children as a unit, where appropriate, so that children born out of wedlock become less dependent on government and more reliant on their parents to meet the full range of their needs. Under this initiative, the Ford Foundation is supporting many of the groups listed below. Contact: Ronald B. Mincy, Program Officer, (212) 573-5000.

* National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families is a membership group for professionals working in fatherhood support programs. Contact: Jeffrey M. Johnson, President, National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership. (800) 34-NPNFF.

* Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth is a network of 114 community foundations focused on children and family issues. The Coalition encourages grantmakers and policy makers to support fathers as contributors to child-well being and community life. Contact: Cindy Sesler Ballard, Executive Director, (800) 292-6149, cindy@ccfy.org.

*The National Center on Fathers and Families is an interdisciplinary policy research center at the University of Pennsylvania that hosts the Fathers and Families Roundtable, a series of meetings designed to connect researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. The Center conducts, collects and disseminates research in the field. Contact: Vivian I. Gadsden, Director, (215) 573-5500, gadsden@literacy.upenn.edu, <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>.

* The Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy highlights public policies at the state and federal levels that impede low-income, non-custodial fathers in their attempt to be responsible and effective parents. Contact: Daniel Ash, Director of Communications, (608) 257- 3148, cffppdoa@aol.com.

* The National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership works with the staff and volunteers of small and medium-sized nonprofit organizations to strengthen community leadership through family and neighborhood empowerment. NCPL is providing technical assistance to the Ford Foundation on the capacity building and coordination of its Fragile Families Initiative and serves as host organization for the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (see above). NCPL is conducting a series of workshops for practitioners working with young fathers and families and runs the Peer Learning Colleges for child support enforcement professionals who are addressing the special problems of fathers in fragile families. Contact: Jeff Johnson, President, (202) 822-NPCL, jjohnson@npcl.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

* *Fathers' Fair Share: Helping Poor Fathers Manage Child Support*. This book by Earl S. Johnson, Ann Levine, and Fred C. Doolittle of MDRC (Russell Sage Foundation, April 1999) provides an in-depth look at the lives of low-income fathers and how they think about their experiences in the workplace and their responsibilities toward their families. See www.russellsage.org/publications/titles/fathers_fair_share.htm or call 1-800-524-6401.

* The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' web site links to reports from a variety of sources, including Urban Institute, Westat, and universities. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/fathers>.

* Several associations have published summaries of research findings and promising practices. See "Promoting Responsible Fatherhood: An Update" (8/98) by the National Governor's Association (202/624-5300) at www.nga.org/Pubs/IssueBriefs; the Welfare Information Network's (202/628-5790) links to organizations and publications on fatherhood and family formation at www.welfareinfo.org/fatherho.htm; and the National Association of Counties' list of model fatherhood initiatives at www.naco.org/research/modprograms.

Parents' Fair Share (PFS), organized by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, piloted in 1992 and became a seven-site demonstration project with over 5,500 participants. The demonstration's three goals were to: (1) increase the employment and earnings of low-income non-custodial parents of children receiving welfare; (2) increase child support payments; and (3) support and improve parenting behavior. The intake process was an important part of the demonstration. In most cases, non-custodial parents were referred during court hearings scheduled in response to the parents' failure to make court-ordered support payments. Parents who cited unemployment as the reason for their nonsupport were ordered to attend PFS activities until they found a job and began paying support. In some sites, parents just establishing paternity were also referred to PFS when they had no means to meet child support obligations.

Program services were built around four core components:

Peer Support. Trained facilitators delivered MDRC's Responsible Fatherhood curriculum to inform participants about their rights and obligations as non-custodial parents, to encourage positive parental behavior and sexual responsibility, to strengthen their commitment to work, and to enhance life skills.

Employment and Training. The goal of these activities was to help participants secure long-term, stable employment at a wage level that would enable them to support themselves and their children. Services included job search assistance and encouraged the combination of income-producing activities such as on-the-job training, paid work experience and part-time employment with any education or skill training needed.

Enhanced Child Support Enforcement. PFS sites modified the existing legal and administrative structures to allow child support orders to be reduced while non-custodial parents participated in PFS and special monitoring of the status of PFS cases.

Mediation. Often disagreements about visitation, household expenses, lifestyles, child care, and the roles and actions of other adults in their childrens' lives influence child support payment patterns. Demonstration sites helped mediate these differences. This demonstration utilized a random assignment research design capable of producing reliable estimates of program impacts. Early results show an increase in child support payments with no corresponding increase in fathers' employment and earnings during the 18 months of follow-up.