

Center for Family Policy and Practice

2005 Annual Report



Center for Family Policy and Practice *Fiscal Year 2005 Annual Report*

Mission

The mission of the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP) is to help create a society in which low-income parents - mothers as well as fathers - are in a position to support their children emotionally, financially, and physically. CFFPP seeks to address the unique barriers affecting low-income fathers, including negative public perceptions. Through the provision of technical assistance, policy research, and public education, CFFPP will work to support low-income fathers and their families and develop public awareness of their needs. Fundamental to this mission are the following principles:

- In order to preserve the well being of children, public policy must preserve the well being of children's parents and caretakers. However, when the needs of a child and the needs of parents conflict, those of the child must prevail.
- Public policy must actively and effectively promote the economic viability of families.
- Public policy must support individuals' efforts to create families of their own choosing.
- Low-income parents need accurate and comprehensive legal information and support to successfully negotiate the social service system.
- Public policy must be created and executed in a manner that ensures that individual family members feel secure and are safe from physical harm.

In summary, CFFPP seeks to foster public policies at every level that promote and contribute to the well being of children, parents, and families.

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Introduction

Since 1995 the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP), has been working to change the way policy makers nationwide think about vulnerable families. Conventional wisdom has it that the interests of noncustodial fathers are inherently at odds with the interests of women and children. Too often, this mindset has resulted in public policy and program management that fails the entire family. Fragile, low-income families find themselves at the mercy of welfare, child support, child custody and health care systems that are often punitive rather than supportive. These systems, for example, frequently incarcerate men with limited education and dim job prospects rather than help them improve their employment options enough to support their kids financially. They require mothers of infants to “earn” their welfare checks through make-work activities rather than help them care for their own babies at home. They prioritize the government’s desire to recover program expenses over the well-being of the very children these programs are supposed to benefit. CFFPP recognizes that these kinds of policies are misguided and counterproductive, and works to prevent and change them through research, public education and technical assistance. We seek to change laws and rules that penalize parents for being poor. We promote policies that support parents’ efforts to stay involved in the lives of their kids. And we protect the rights of parents treated unfairly by agencies ill-equipped to fully address low-income families’ strengths and challenges. Families today come in a variety of configurations, but all members—women, men and children alike—share the same basic needs: economic security, a network of caring friends and relatives, and access to responsive institutions and services. CFFPP advocates for policies and practices that address those needs.

POLICY ADVOCACY

National

On the national level, the Center has continued to be involved in policy advocacy related to the reauthorization of TANF and the development of marriage and fatherhood initiatives and policies. While Congress has delayed reauthorization of TANF, advocacy efforts have continued, since many of the proposals (e.g., marriage initiatives, fatherhood policies) are being developed and implemented at local levels. The center's national policy briefing reaches over 1550 individuals through subscription each month. The policy briefing, which receives consistent high praise by policy makers from around the country, provides information on current policy, legislation, publications, research, and other matters of relevance to low-income families and those advocating with them. On average, 4278 additional requests are made monthly to access the policy briefing on the Center's web site.

State

On the state level, the Center continued to advocate for family-supportive policies through the Wisconsin Coalition for Low-Income Families (WisCLIF), which was founded by the Center and partnering agencies in 2000. During the past year, the Center addressed a variety of family support issues:

The Center successfully worked with ABC for Health (a Wisconsin-based public interest law firm that assists low-income families in accessing medical care) on a project to clarify and advocate for changes to Wisconsin's policy on recovering costs from unmarried families associated with the births of their children if these were supported by Medicaid. As a direct result of the advocacy of CFFPP and ABC for Health, in the past year the state reduced some of the repayment requirements of families, making it easier for low-income families to support their children. Specifically, the state exempted parents from having to repay costs for the birth of a

second child if the family is living together and operates as an economic household unit. This policy change will significantly reduce the financial burden on families who are already struggling financially, as the typical reimbursement cost for a single birth can be \$2000 (and can reach many times that amount depending on the specific county in which the child is born, the number of children born, and whether there are complications associated with the birth.)

Over the past year, the Center has been directly involved in the Wisconsin Division of Children and Families' Performance Enhancement Plan (PEP). The state has undertaken this process in response to the 2004 federal evaluation of state child welfare practices. One area in which Wisconsin – and all other states – was found to be deficient was the incorporation of noncustodial fathers and their families in the permanency planning for children involved in the child welfare system. The Center is generating information that will assist the PEP process in this area and ultimately enable child welfare workers to more easily broaden the support system for children in the child welfare system by incorporating their fathers and their extended families (e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles) in permanency planning efforts.

The Center continued to be involved with the Community Shares of Wisconsin, a program that supports progressive community agencies in Wisconsin and brings them together regularly to address a variety of community issues.

The Center worked closely with several local and state fatherhood programs and coalitions, including the Urban League of Greater Madison's fatherhood program, the Madison Fatherhood Alliance, and the Milwaukee Fatherhood Collaborative, to develop initiatives to assist low-income noncustodial parents within the state. During the past year we have focused particularly on policy and practices pertaining to arrears debt reduction and asset development and on addressing family and gender violence.

Center staff serve on the boards of several local and state agencies that address matters affecting low-income families in Wisconsin, including the YWCA, the Wisconsin Council on Children and

Families, and Asha House, a Madison- and Milwaukee-based program serving victims of violence and their families.

Technical Assistance to Community Organizations

During the past year, the Center's technical assistance efforts have been quite broad, driven by the needs of individual community and advocacy organizations. In our work with other agencies we have addressed such issues as identifying the policy and social service needs of low-income men and noncustodial parents; helping a small foundation develop a policy and funding orientation directed at the needs of African American men and boys; examining the intersection of fatherhood and domestic violence issues for men re-entering their communities after a period of incarceration; and examining different kinds and forms of visitation program funding under the federal Safe Haven and Access and Visitation grants.

The Center worked with the Philadelphia Fatherhood Practitioners Network to develop policy and social service agendas and recommendations to better serve low-income men and noncustodial fathers in Pennsylvania. Specifically, the Center created policy recommendations pertaining to child support and marriage policy; provided background on the policy statements and clarified existing policies and proposals; provided a strategy plan for advocacy organizations to encourage policy change on behalf of low-income noncustodial fathers; provided an overview of fatherhood and marriage promotion proposals and their likely impact on community fatherhood organizations and their clients; and provided an overview of Pennsylvania child support policy and suggestions of specific policies for which organizations could advocate. Center staff helped the Practitioners Network generate strategies for furthering policy advocacy with low-income families in Pennsylvania.

The Center has been sought out by the 21st Century Foundation, an African-American based foundation concerned with African American policy and social services needs, to help develop a

framework for supporting African American men and boys. The foundation is seeking to develop a directed funding program to support organizations that serve African American males and develop an overarching policy framework through which such support programs can lead to meaningful and enduring change and better outcomes for African American males in the US. The Center has provided the foundation with on-going support in the framing of the policy agenda and in developing specific policy initiatives and actions. The Center has also received support from the foundation to raise awareness about issues affecting African American males and will use this experience to help inform the foundation's broader policy objectives.

The Center has worked closely with the Vera Institute of Justice on a project aimed at raising awareness about the issue of domestic violence for men and fathers who have recently been released from prison. Center staff worked with the documentary filmmakers Hudson River Film and Video, who have produced an earlier film ("Manhood and Violence: Fatal Peril," 2004) about a prison-based batterer intervention and violence prevention program. The current film, for which CFFPP served as consultant and policy analyst, concerns men with a history of domestic abuse who are re-entering their community after being incarcerated. The film's initial broadcast will be at the Center's institute on domestic violence and fatherhood in San Antonio, TX in October 2005.

Center staff assisted researchers from the University of Minnesota School of Social Work on a project that examines the federally funded Safe Haven visitation program, which is designed to provide supervised visitation between children and fathers who have been violent. The study (and CFFPP's contribution) is intended to help illuminate whether and how visitation programs serve families and how they can develop practices that enable them to be accessible and safe for all family members.

In addition to national technical assistance, the Center provides on-going technical assistance to fatherhood and other community organizations at the local and state level (e.g., to the Urban

League of Greater Madison's fatherhood program and to the Milwaukee Fatherhood Collaborative). The Center provides legal information on such areas as child support policy and practice, domestic violence policy, Medicaid reimbursement requirements, and the negotiation of the paternity establishment and child support systems, with a particular focus on assisting individuals and families who are contending with multiple barriers. Such assistance is provided by Center staff upon request.

Fatherhood and Domestic Violence

In the past year the Center began a two-year project to create dialogue and develop collaborations among fatherhood programs and advocates against domestic violence. The Center received funding from the Us Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) to create a targeted technical assistance project to develop this dialogue and provide cross-training to domestic violence advocates and fatherhood program staff at the national level. Support from the Public Welfare Foundation and the Ms. Foundation has allowed us to broaden the project and include additional programs.

The project is a two-year project: the first year is directed at developing dialogue among organizations, providing cross-training between domestic violence and fatherhood programs, and developing a national institute on these areas. The Institute, entitled "Collaboration Between Fatherhood and Domestic Violence Programs in Communities of Color: A Focus on Prevention" will be held in San Antonio, TX on October 11-13, 2005.

The ultimate objective of the project is to provide domestic violence and fatherhood advocates with resource materials to assist them in developing local collaborations. This effort will be accomplished during the second year of the project, following the Institute and alongside the provision of technical assistance to specific programs throughout the country.

Child Welfare and Permanency Planning

Over the past several years the Center has been available through the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (formerly, the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning) to provide technical assistance to state child welfare agencies interested in developing better means to work with fathers. As a result of this work and our statewide work on issues affecting low-income fathers, the Center was invited by the state of Wisconsin to enhance the ability of the Division of Children and Family Services to work with fathers in this area.

As is true for all other states, Wisconsin's child welfare system received low federal evaluations of their current capacity to work with the noncustodial fathers of children in the child welfare and foster care systems. Frequently, these fathers – particularly if they are not married to the mothers of the children and/or are not living in the same household – remain uninvolved in the permanency planning for children. Given that states are by law required to resolve permanent placement within a shortened time frame, the inability to incorporate fathers and their natal families in this process limits the possibilities for children to remain with family members and complicates the overall effort to resolve permanency plans. While county child welfare agencies express interest in working with noncustodial fathers, many barriers prevent these efforts. These barriers are not necessarily matters of child welfare policy and practice, but reflect other issues as well (e.g., child support policies, employment and housing situations, etc.). Frequently, child welfare workers are unable to respond effectively when confronted with these issues.

The Center is conducting focus groups with fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system in Wisconsin, to assess the kinds of issues they are confronting and to gain insight into their relationships with the child welfare (and other) system(s). In addition, the Center is conducting focus groups with child welfare agency staff. The Center has been asked by the DCFS to host a meeting with state child welfare agency representatives to assess, and

develop improvements on, current state policies and practices based on findings from the focus groups. This project has been closely tied to our work on the implementation of the DCFS's Performance Enhancement Plan (PEP).

Financial Literacy and Debt Reduction for Noncustodial Parents

The Center initiated the financial literacy project because we believe that existing financial literacy models are not able to accommodate the specific needs of low-income noncustodial parents who are struggling with child support debt. These individuals are frequently unable to take advantage of federal assistance programs, are subject to liens that do not permit them to develop assets, contend with mounting debt due to high interest rates on child support arrears, and can face incarceration for failure to meet existing child support debts and payment obligations. While programs can effectively teach financial management skills to individuals, it can still be close to impossible for these individuals to manage their debts and avoid incarceration. Our project is a two-year project whose overarching objectives have been to (1) develop a model for financial literacy training and asset development specific to low-income parents struggling with child support debt and provide these services to parents at select sites, (2) create a manual that details means that states and localities can use to create child support debt reduction programs, and (3) initiate discussions with localities and states on developing such programs. Over the past year, the Center has forged new collaborations between the financial literacy/asset development field and the fatherhood/child support field and has helped advocates from both areas recognize the significance of such collaborations. In developing these collaborations we have created a project advisory group that includes representatives from the financial education field, the banking industry, and the fatherhood field. We are in the process of developing a curriculum that incorporates sections relevant to low-income noncustodial parents, such as identifying barriers in the banking system and the alternative

financial sector, providing information on the Earned Income Tax Credit and other assistance programs or resources for noncustodial parents, explaining the child support system and aspects of managing child support debt (e.g., seeking modifications, managing arrears). The initial draft curriculum will be presented to several fatherhood programs in the Madison area and, based on feedback, will be revised during the second year of the project to better serve program clients.

In addition to the development of a tailored curriculum, the project incorporates a policy element that aims to address child support policy and inform local and state agencies about measures they can put in place to address child support arrears reduction. Over the course of the project, and in part based on our earlier work with the criminal justice system and its intersection with child support, it has become clear that the criminal justice system can become an important ally in this effort. Many noncustodial parents accrue child support arrears due to periods of incarceration if they are not able to modify their orders or cannot make other arrangements to meet their child support obligations during that time. Subsequent arrearage debt and interest on these arrears can become formidable barriers to successful re-entry, particularly in the face of continuing instability in maintaining long-term employment. The Center has consequently further developed our relationship with several organizations that were involved in our earlier criminal justice project in order to address these issues.

FY 2005 Funders

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