



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED OUTREACH TO NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS

A Report to the State of Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development
by
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On behalf of the State of Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD), the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy (the Center) conducted two focus groups of noncustodial parents and of practitioners who work with noncustodial parents. DWD staff were interested in gathering information related to the use of employment and training programs by noncustodial parents. Specifically, staff wanted to know: 1) what types of issues prevent noncustodial parents from utilizing programs that are available to them, 2) what noncustodial parents and practitioners think would be useful recruitment strategies, and 3) what program services are most needed. To facilitate the focus groups, DWD contracted with the Center, a national policy organization that provides policy advocacy, technical and legal assistance on behalf of low-income fathers and their families. The Center's Executive Director David Pate facilitated the focus group with noncustodial parents, and Senior Legal Analyst Jacquelyn Boggess facilitated the focus group with practitioners.

There were 13 participants in the noncustodial parent focus group. Each of the participants was a father, and each had children for whom they were nonresident, although many also lived in households with some of their own biological children or with the children of their partners. The discussion remarks made clear that most were struggling financially, although one participant had a very stable and long-term job.

The second focus group was conducted with 10 practitioners from agencies in the Milwaukee area that provide services to noncustodial parents. Agencies represented included Rosalie Manor, La Causa, United Migrant Opportunities Services, the Parenting Network, and the Next Door Foundation. Also present were representatives from the Department of Workforce Development and the State Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards. Both discussions were based on a protocol created by DWD and Center staff.

The current report summarizes focus group participants' recommendations for improving program recruitment strategies and identifies program services that noncustodial parents felt were most needed. A related report summarizes the barriers to outreach and recruitment of noncustodial parents.

Among the key recommendations derived from comments made by participants:

- **Paid Training.** One of the most important elements of a program aimed at noncustodial parents would be to provide paid training. This was viewed as critical because child support orders prohibit participation in unpaid training (without adding to child support debt), but at the same time necessitate improving one's employment prospects.
- **Job Placement Services.** Programs need to have the capacity to provide job placement services, and to find quality jobs.
- **Legal Services.** Legal services are particularly important for noncustodial parents who are contending with such issues as driver's license revocation, child support and visitation, and criminal justice issues.
- **Relief from Enforcement during Participation.** Lift government actions that

discourage program participation in exchange for meeting program requirements, such as suspending child support enforcement actions during participation as long as the client is complying with the program.

- **Referral Process.** Pay attention to the referral process. When clients are given phone numbers to call for a service, for example, the result of that call can be crucial to the ultimate success of the referral.
- **Disabilities.** Clients should be assessed for barriers, particularly for disabilities that could prevent them from participation in programs. These should be addressed early on in any recruitment effort.
- **Office Atmosphere.** Programs that provide services to custodial as well as noncustodial parents should ensure that the office atmosphere and staff attitudes make noncustodial parents feel welcome.
- **Staff Awareness.** Staff making referrals should be knowledgeable about the range of services that are available in a particular community for noncustodial parents.
- **Gender of Staff.** Hiring and training of male caseworkers with similar experiences to participants may help to retain noncustodial parents in programs.
- **Community Presence.** Programs that have a strong neighborhood presence and connection were thought to be in a better position to reach out to noncustodial parents.
- **Criminal Records.** Provision of assistance to parents with criminal records (such as how to address the record in applications and how to clear errors from a rap sheet) would enhance a program's ability to attract and retain clients.

Providing Essential Services

Both noncustodial parents and practitioners felt that the most successful means of recruiting participants for programs and of retaining them once they responded, was simply to provide necessary services. Most critical to participants were training, legal services, and job placement services as well as assistance with visitation.

One practitioner noted that many programs have been focused on parenting skills and 'nurturing programs'. While these were acknowledged as being helpful, it was felt that there are more urgent needs among this population for employment and legal assistance. Once these services are established and provided the participants felt that word-of-mouth can serve to recruit additional participants into programs.

The service most often mentioned as critical was that of paid training. If a program could provide that, the noncustodial parent could not only get the training necessary to obtain a job with potential for growth, but could afford to meet expenses during the training period. Most of the noncustodial parents stressed that their child support debt and other living costs prevented them from taking advantage of training programs unless they were paid. The severe financial stress that these fathers were under did not allow for a lag time before earning wages, in which they could complete training. As one father stated,

My bills got to be paid now – you know what I'm saying? My daughter got to have, as well as all of my kids, they got to have that now, and when I get up in the morning to walk out that door, I live on a now basis, because if I gotta wait to go to a eight-week training, that's eight weeks behind I'm in debt with my child support... come time to pay my rent, I can't tell my landlord, well, I'm in job training; I got eight more weeks to go, or go down to child support, go in and tell the judge, well, I'm in training; I got eight more weeks to go.

Practitioners felt that the most important goal of a program should be job placement. Without this goal, any of the other strategies (recruitment, outreach, staffing or support services, e.g.) would

not benefit participants long term or produce positive word-of-mouth. The participants who stayed with programs were described as being the “guys we’ve gotten good jobs for...they stick around. You help them with equipment. You help them with the bus. You get them transportation. That’s what kept them around.”

The location of the job and the ability of the participant to get to it were felt to be essential as well. Transportation is a common barrier, and poor families have more at stake with job location; owning a vehicle, driving or affording the cost or time to travel long distances are all challenging and can make the ability to retain a job tenuous. As one participant stated:

The problem is where you get a job at...Understand, these are people who want to be next to their families. They have to go pick up their kids at 3:30 or whatever time they get off. They have to go take them to school. So they need a job that doesn't take them an hour, two hours to get to.

Legal services were felt to be particularly important for this group of clientele, who are often dealing with issues of child support enforcement, arrest records and other criminal justice issues, as well as custody and visitation. In fact, practitioners were frustrated by the substantial need for assistance in securing orders for child visitation and their inability to assist with this due to a lack of legal resources.

One practitioner reported a successful recruitment effort that was built from the provision of legal services, and assistance in contending with a driver’s license suspension. These services were said to have drawn many participants into the door and subsequently engaged them in other program components.

Connecting with Programs Provides Critical Support

Fathers who had become involved in programs felt that the program services and staff were critical to their being able to cope. Those who had not yet connected were anxious to get information from the others on how the programs worked and how one could become involved. Participants reported receiving essential legal services, advice on clearing one’s criminal record and contending with this when seeking employment, and support from peers and staff in the program on a number of issues. Also cited was the help that programs provide in attempting to be with one’s children and in contending with the child support system.

Another recommendation pertained to the attitudes of staff. It was felt that in order to have good word-of-mouth and encourage participation in programs, staff need to be perceived as supportive and compassionate toward fathers. One participant stated,

If I come in with my child, they're do you have custody? Do you have proof that you have custody? Things of that nature. So just educating the staff itself as an example to how to treat everybody....

And, from a practitioner,

You have to ask yourself, okay, the person's coming in here. If he doesn't have a job, if he's coming to me for training, he lacks education... he probably doesn't feel good about himself at all. So what am I going to do as a professional to make him feel comfortable? And if they're sitting there at a desk saying, do you have a social security card, do you have an I.D., okay, I can't help you. That guy is not gonna see you again.

On the other hand, practitioners reported that when staff do have supportive positive attitudes,

word-of-mouth works well as a recruitment strategy:

I just want to talk about something the Job Corps does actually do here that makes it comfortable for them to come in, is how they treat each client, and the word of mouth gets around – how they personally get involved with these guys and actually just greeting them personally....just the rapport that we build with them and the word passes on to the next person. Oh, I heard about you; I heard about you... a lot of it has to do with does he trust you, because a lot of men nowadays do not trust nobody.

Related to this, practitioners stressed that an important factor in a client's continuing participation in a program is whether or not they feel that the program is supportive of them. As one practitioner stated, "As long as they're feeling comfortable that we got their back, they're going to be back."

Practitioners stressed several times, and in the context of this discussion repeated, that it would be extremely helpful if programs could also have the support of their government funders, e.g., enforcement barriers that could be lifted on the condition of a client's participation. One practitioner suggested that the state create a system that would allow programs to offer clients a chance to get their driver's license back if they participate:

Now, that would work great if I were to approach a client and say, look, I can make it so you can get your driver's license if you become a part of this training program and agree to pay child support upon completion of the program. That is power I would love to have.

Practitioners described many noncustodial parents as being so fearful of warrants for their arrest, whether there actually were any warrants or not, and of child support, that they were afraid to approach a program or service. These parents live under such relentless levels of stress and fear that unless a program had the capacity to convince them that help could be provided without "turning them in", they would not be likely to participate. A participant noted that:

If there's a warrant for his arrest, that's number one. So I would like there to be a program – it would be nice if there was a program – set up where a dad can call and say, look, I owe money. But I know there's a warrant for my arrest. And they're scared to even come out the house, away from the house. If you can make an appointment to meet with the person, the warrant can be lifted during that time – maybe a three-week period or a four-week period or whatever. Then he can start taking care of his business.

If there were a system by which a program could ensure that the warrant or child support enforcement action would not be applied as long as the parent participated, this would help to bring in the noncustodial parents most in need of help, but least likely to access it.

The systems that affect noncustodial parents play a significant and often harmful role in the successful engagement of clients to programs. Child support debt, felony records, poverty and disabilities that go unaddressed can only serve to deter a noncustodial parent from taking advantage of opportunities afforded by the state. Any relief given to parents who participate in programs would strengthen their ability to recruit, retain and most importantly to help noncustodial parents.