

Site Visit Report: Non-Resident Fathers in the Child Welfare System (Colorado)

Award #: 90CO1025

Grantee: Center on Fathering, El Paso County Department of Human Services; Policy Studies Inc.; and Center for Policy Research

Contact: Ken Sanders, Program Director, KenSanders@elpasoco.com

SUMMARY

The National Quality Improvement Center for Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC NRF) awarded subgrants in 2008 to projects in four States for fatherhood classes for nonresident fathers whose children have been removed from their homes. One of the four subgrants was awarded to the Center on Fathering (COF) of the El Paso County (Colorado) Department of Human Services (DHS) to locate and recruit nonresident fathers of children in the child welfare system to participate in fatherhood classes. The goal is to increase fathers' involvement with their children and the child welfare system.

The fatherhood classes meet for 20 weeks and use a curriculum developed by the QIC NRF to support nonresident fathers in engaging their children. The curriculum covers topics such as navigating the child welfare system, supporting their children, and workforce issues. Between September 2008 and September 2010, 23 fathers participated in these classes.

COF also has developed a training for caseworkers about how to engage fathers. The training, which was conducted at five State academies throughout Colorado, included practical advice on topics such as bringing fathers back into the family dynamic, closing the revolving door on cases, and how father-child visits may be different—and should be evaluated differently—than mother-child visits.

The following are examples of successful strategies used by the project to recruit, engage, and work with the fathers:

- **Completing the relative resource letters for DHS.** After a child has been removed from the home, the child welfare agency, per Federal law, must send a letter to adult relatives notifying them of their options of becoming a placement resource for the child. COF sends these letters to the relatives on behalf of DHS for all removals. Sending these letters and receiving the responses helps the project get a head start on locating and contacting nonresident fathers.

- **Using social networking websites, such as Facebook and MySpace, to contact and engage the fathers.** One of the fathers helped develop the project's Facebook page, which includes articles and other resources for nonresident fathers.
- **Having guest speakers attend the classes.** This provides the fathers with face time with community leaders and experts who are intimately involved with the system. Guest speakers have included child welfare staff, local attorneys, nurses, and the child support enforcement staff.

Fathers interviewed during the site visit expressed how much the project has helped them with their children. The project helped them gain a better understanding of the child welfare and court systems and provided helpful information about child development and communication.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Non-Resident Fathers in the Child Welfare System" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The National Quality Improvement Center for Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC NRF) awarded one of its four subgrants to the Center on Fathering (COF) (<http://dhs.elpasoco.com/Pages/COF.aspx>) to conduct a project in El Paso County, which is the second most populous county in Colorado and includes the city of Colorado Springs. El Paso County has the State's highest concentration of children ages 0 to 5 and has a 73 percent divorce rate.

This model for this project, like that of the other three subgrants, consists of locating and recruiting nonresident fathers to participate in 20 weekly fatherhood classes designed to strengthen the fathers' engagement with their children who are involved with the child welfare system. Per QIC NRF requirements, the initial contact for the fathers must be a male.

COF is part of the El Paso County Department of Human Services (DHS) and is tasked with implementing responsible fatherhood activities. Other COF programs include InsideOut Dads for incarcerated fathers, Nurturing Fathers for fathers with current or past domestic violence issues, and Fathers as Providers for fathers needing employment assistance. Other project partners include the Center for Policy Research (www.centerforpolicyresearch.org), which is the evaluator, and Policy Studies Inc. (PSI). PSI (<https://www.policy-studies.com>) provides a staff person who serves as a class facilitator and father coach. PSI also is the child support enforcement contractor in El Paso County.

(Note: The term "father" in this report will be used interchangeably with "nonresident father" unless otherwise clarified.)

Locating and Contacting Nonresident Fathers

COF staff review lists of children in out-of-home care in El Paso County to determine if a child's father may be eligible to participate in the program, including whether the father lives in the home and meets other eligibility requirements (e.g., is not the suspected perpetrator of the maltreatment). The three primary methods for finding removals and father information are the records of the preliminary protective proceedings, reports from the diligent search unit, and TRAILS, which is Colorado's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System.

If a father is potentially eligible after the initial case review, COF staff inform the child welfare caseworker on that case that they would like to contact the father to discuss the project. If the caseworker approves and contact information is available, the Father Coach, who is the initial male contact, contacts the father to determine if he is interested in participating in the project. If the caseworker approves but no contact information is available, COF staff conduct a search to locate him. If the father's contact information is not available, COF staff use a variety of methods, such as utility records or the county attorney's Lexus Nexus database of local court records, to find the information.

The project also can obtain this information by sending and receiving the relative resource letters for all child welfare cases, including those for which the father may be ineligible for the program, on behalf of the El Paso County DHS. [The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351), which was enacted in 2008, mandates child welfare agencies to provide notice to adult relatives of a child removed from his or her home of their options to become a placement resource for the child.] COF staff provide any information they receive to the caseworkers and the kinship care unit, which, in turn, provide information to COF if they receive it by other means. By sending the letters and receiving any responses, COF gains a head start in the effort to track down fathers' contact information.

Once a father is contacted, the Father Coach explains the project and invites the father to participate. The Father Coach then lets the caseworker know if the father wishes to participate, and maintains contact with the father until his cohort begins.

Fatherhood Classes

The first 12 of the 20 fatherhood classes are based on a curriculum developed by the QIC NRF. Titles include:

- Introduction
- Dad as Part of the Solution: Overview of the Child Welfare System
- Dad as Planner: Service Planning in the Child Welfare System
- Dad as a Healthy Parent: Taking Care of You
- Dad as Community Member: Identifying and Accessing Resources
- Dad as Cultural Guide: The Role of Culture in Parenting
- Dad as Parent: Understanding Your Children
- Dad as Part of Children's Placement: Visiting With Your Children
- Dad as Part of the Juvenile Court Process: Legal Advocacy and Court Etiquette
- Dad as Provider: Supporting Your Children
- Dad as Team Player: Shared Parenting
- Dad as Worker: Workforce Readiness

The first three classes are conducted in the order listed; the remaining nine can be conducted in any order that meets the cohort's needs. Classes are led by a facilitator from PSI, and the Father Coach often assists with the sessions. Additionally, guest speakers attended most sessions, including:

- The director of the Family Visitation Center to discuss what to expect during visits, what constitutes good parenting time, and how visits are rated
- A court appointed special advocate (CASA) representative to explore co-parenting issues
- Local attorneys to talk about the court system
- Caseworkers to give an overview of the child welfare system
- Public health nurses to discuss safety and health issues
- The deputy director of the child support enforcement office to discuss child support issues
- The manager of an employment agency to talk about career planning
- A psychologist to give an overview of attachment and reunification issues

The content of the remaining eight classes is determined toward the end of the first 12 weeks. The facilitator presents options to the fathers about what they could cover and allows them to decide. The issues often selected by the fathers include child safety, child care providers, employment issues, and the differences between discipline and punishment.

Trainings and Awareness

COF developed training for caseworkers on father engagement. The training included practical advice on topics such as bringing fathers back into the family dynamic, closing the revolving door on cases, and how father-child visits may be different—and should be evaluated differently—than mother-child visits. COF conducted these training sessions at five State academies throughout Colorado, and the content has been incorporated into the regular training for all new caseworkers in El Paso County. Veteran caseworkers are able to attend, too.

COF also conducted training for caseworkers on how to use diligent search to locate fathers and paternal relatives. The training included how to maximize the available search engines and provided a cheat sheet on how to use them.

To expand knowledge of family finding project staff invited Kevin Campbell of the Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness discuss Family Finders program. Attendees included staff from COF, other DHS child welfare staff, the Colorado Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Program of the Colorado Department of Human Services, CASA, child support, TESSA (a local organization that serves victims of domestic violence and sexual assault), and Goodwill Industries of Colorado Springs. Participants learned about Family Finders and discussed their mutual interests and how they could work together. Mr. Campbell was scheduled to return in February 2011 train caseworkers on locating and connecting with family members.

Future Plans

COF has begun planning how to continue the fatherhood classes after the current subgrant funding ends. It likely will use the QIC NRF curriculum but make some changes to the content and duration. COF has met with its Fathers Advisory Council, another component of the project that largely consists of fathers who have completed the program, to work on how to consolidate the sessions.

COF also is producing a toolkit for caseworkers that will include the engaging fathers curriculum for caseworkers, a trainer's manual, and handouts and interviews with fathers and caseworkers. By completing the curriculum, caseworkers earn 10 percent of the annual Colorado continuing education unit requirement.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred on December 15, 2010, in Colorado Springs, CO. The meetings occurred at the Center on Fathering (COF) office, and attendees included:

- Ken Sanders, Project Director, Susan Burt, Social Caseworker III, and Janet Durkin, Administrative Assistant, from COF
- Gary Grambort of Policy Studies, Inc.
- Keith and Randy, fathers who had participated in the groups, shared the following:
 - Keith found COF after his attorney suggested that attending a fathering group may help him gain custody of his son. Other than what his attorney had told him, he did not know much about the child welfare or court systems. He stated that the sessions helped him understand what to expect in both systems and how to prepare. Keith continues to stay involved with the program by promoting it among local figures, fathers, and others and serving on the Fathers Advisory Council.
 - Randy was referred to COF by another service provider. The group helped him better understand the child welfare system and also taught him a lot about child development, expectations of the child, being a role model, and communication. Randy also continues to stay involved with the program by serving on the Fathers Advisory Council and finding additional resources for fathers in the community.

LESSONS LEARNED

Location, Recruitment, and Engagement

- Having a good relationship with the county attorney was very helpful in bolstering the program's efforts to locate the fathers. The county attorney's office had location resources that would have otherwise been unavailable.

- Projects need to keep the fathers engaged between the time they consent to participate and the start of the cohort, especially when there are several weeks or more between those two points.
- No single recruitment or engagement method works best for all fathers. The approach needs to be tailored on a case-by-case basis.
- Some fathers who initially refuse participation may later agree to participate after several months if their cases are not proceeding as desired.
- Peer referrals can be very helpful. For example, one father who had recently been released from prison enrolled because another prisoner had told him about the program.
- New caseworkers are some of the best proponents of the fatherhood classes because they often are not acculturated to the more conventional casework approach, which does not consistently include nonresident fathers. Veteran caseworkers generally are less inclined to see the fathers or the program as a potential resource or as a priority for the case.

Nonresident Fathers

- Many of the fathers in the program did not know their fathers well or had poor relationships with them.
- The fathers in the program often have had some level of contact with their children prior to their participation, which has made it easier for project staff to engage them. Project staff said they have a difficult time engaging the approximately 5 percent of participating fathers who have had no contact with their children.
- Some fathers just need encouragement that they are not alone, that they can get help from the system, and that they have a support system through the program.
- A father may feel like he failed his child as a "protector" because the child was involved in a child welfare case.
- The fathers often do not understand concurrent planning, permanency planning, or other aspects of the child welfare and court processes.
- The fathers who participated in these groups usually do not participate in other Center on Fathering (COF) services.
- The fathers often feel unfairly judged by their caseworkers, most of whom are women. To help caseworkers see how the fathers may feel, project staff ask the caseworkers during trainings to image a room of 10 men judging their mothering skills.

Classes

- The fathers with serious issues (e.g., mental health problems, substance abuse) require more handholding and attention than the other fathers. They tend to drain much of the energy from the group and get most of the focus in the sessions. COF is determining whether it would be possible or beneficial to have separate cohorts for these fathers.
- The fathers' motivation to participate often started to wane after 12 weeks. A 10- to 12- week curriculum might be better suited to their needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Location/Engagement

- When contacting fathers, programs should not hide that they are part of or partnering with the child welfare agency, but do not make it a central component.

Nonresident Fathers

- Programs should recognize and acknowledge any previous experience the fathers have had with the child welfare system and the courts, either as an adult or as a child.
- Courts or child welfare agencies should not order the fathers to take a specific fatherhood class. Giving the father a choice improves his buy-in and reduces defensiveness.
- Programs should try to find ways to include fathers that live out of the program's immediate jurisdiction (e.g., lives out-of-State, deployed) or otherwise cannot participate (e.g., imprisoned). The program should help those fathers learn more about the child welfare system in which their children are involved. Some courts allow the fathers to participate in the hearings by phone, so it also may be helpful to train the fathers about how to participate effectively that way.
- Training should provide caseworkers with practical tips for engaging fathers rather than just telling them why engaging them is important.
- Some fathers do not want to visit their children because they are unemployed and are unsure of their family role if they are not providing money. The program should help fathers see that they can still be providers by giving nonmonetary support, such as love, time, and attention, to their children and families.
- The following are recommendations from the fathers:
 - Both the programs and the participating fathers should keep an open mind and keep moving forward. They can learn from each other.
 - Programs could use fathers who have completed the curriculum to recruit future participants because some fathers may feel more comfortable speaking to a peer than someone connected to the child welfare system.
 - Programs also should focus on the relationship between the father and mother in order to help them communicate better and focus on the well-being of their child.

CHALLENGES

Participation, Engagement, and Attendance

- Children placed in out-of-home care in El Paso County tend to return home quickly. This hindered recruitment efforts because the short turnaround creates less of an incentive for the caseworker to seek information on the father or for the father to participate. The program is considering how it could add something to the curriculum that would make the class more valuable for these fathers.
- The following are common barriers to contacting the fathers:
 - Changing phone numbers
 - Phone plans running out of useable minutes

- Frequent changes in residence
- The fathers having an email address, but not having a computer to check their accounts
- Caseworkers often do not list the father as a client in the case file if he does not live in the child's home. The project is trying to train the caseworkers about how to list the fathers properly in the case management system.
- Some of the county's search engines, such as the one used by the child support office, cannot be used by the caseworkers or COF staff because of licensing issues.
- It was difficult to determine when to start each cohort. The project had to balance getting enough fathers to participate in each cohort with not having consenting fathers wait too long to begin participating.
- Similarly, the project struggled at times with engaging fathers while they waited for their cohort to begin. To engage the fathers during the waiting period, the project tried to make weekly contact with them to:
 - Offer support with other needs (e.g., career assistance, housing)
 - Help with court hearings or provide information about the court system
 - Provide them with articles and other resources about pertinent issues
 - See how they are doing in general
 - Offer to answer any questions about the class

Fatherhood Classes

- Classes are held at the COF office, which is located on the main bus line, but budget cuts have caused the frequency of the buses to be cut significantly. To help with transportation, the project offers bus passes, and sometimes the facilitator or the fathers will drive participants who need a ride.

Nonresident Fathers

- The fathers often are dealing with multiple issues (e.g., housing, substance abuse) and may need to attend to immediate situations or crises instead of attending class.
- It is often difficult for the project to find other support services in the community for the fathers.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Location, Contact, and Engagement

- The project has begun to use social networking websites, such as Facebook and MySpace, to contact and engage the fathers. One of the fathers helped develop the project's Facebook page, which includes articles and other resources for nonresident fathers.
- Completing the relative resource letters has helped the project locate and contact fathers (see the Project Description tab for additional information).
- Working closely with the county attorney's office has helped locate the fathers because the office has more influence over others (e.g., when trying to obtain the father's contact information from the mother) and the office's database has

- current, easy-to-follow information about the case's progress in the child welfare and court systems.
- Having face-to-face meetings with the fathers was a very effective method of engaging them and getting them to consent to participating in the project. The meetings should be scheduled so that the father does not have to take off work, occur in a location where the father will be comfortable (e.g., their home), and not require the father to travel far.
 - To help ensure that the fathers will continue to attend the classes, the Father Coach calls the fathers weekly to just check in or follow up on a need or issue the father mentioned during the previous week's session.
 - COF staff searched multiple databases at various times throughout the case to gather contact information for the fathers. This helped because of the occasional lag time in entering information into the systems (e.g., a child would be identified as having been removed, but the contact information may not be entered until the next week) and because each database may have different information.

Fatherhood Classes

- COF is located in a residential neighborhood rather than in a typical Department of Human Services building. This helps make the services and the center more accessible to the fathers.
- The fathers have a meal before each class. This helps establish rapport and relax the fathers. Additionally, at the beginning of each class, each father provides a success he had that week, which helps fill the room with positive energy.
- Guest speakers, who are usually professionals in the community, attend most of the classes. This provides the fathers with face time with community leaders and experts who are very familiar with the child welfare and related systems.

Working With Caseworkers

- A project caseworker is based at COF and also has an office at the child welfare building. Because she is a caseworker and understands what other caseworkers are experiencing, she has been very helpful in gaining buy-in from the other caseworkers and letting them know how the project can help them and the children in their caseload.
- COF suggests that email may be a better way for fathers to communicate with their caseworker because it is easier for the caseworker to check and respond to email than to check and respond to voicemail, especially when there are multiple messages. This helps facilitate communication between the father and the caseworker.

OUTCOMES

Design

A common evaluation design for all four subgrants was developed by the National Quality Improvement Center for Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC NRF).

Interviews with participating fathers are the primary evaluation method. After a father consents to participating in the study, a subgrant staffer (e.g., the contact person or the class facilitator) conducts a 25- to 30-minute baseline interview with the father. Follow-up interviews (approximately 10 to 15 minutes each) are conducted at Week 8 and Week 16. Interviews cover the father's employment, education, health, transportation, prior contact with child protective services (as a parent and as a child), child support obligations, and relationship with the mother, as well as the number and ages of his children and their likes and dislikes. Follow-up interviews may include additional questions about income over the previous month and interaction with social services agencies. The interviews can occur by phone, at one of the classes, or at another location.

Two elements of the original cross-site evaluation design were changed in June 2009:

- The evaluation originally was to follow an experimental design, with four or five fathers randomly assigned to each cohort of treatment and control groups. This requirement was eliminated, and all eligible fathers were assigned to the treatment group, because the subgrants had difficulty recruiting enough fathers.
- The original evaluation design also required that contact must be made with the fathers within 45 days of their children's removal in order for them to participate in the study. This requirement was eliminated after the subgrants alerted the QIC NRF to difficulties in gathering contact information and contacting the fathers, resulting in the exclusion of many fathers who might otherwise be eligible. When this requirement was removed, subgrants were permitted to contact fathers who had previously been deemed ineligible due to the 45-day contact requirement.

The Center on Fathering also collects additional information beyond the cross-site data, including:

- Contacts with the fathers during the recruitment process
- Fathers' weekly contact with their children
- Why fathers stopped attending the classes
- Evaluation data for the caseworker trainings

Recruitment and Enrollment Findings

- Between September 18, 2008, and September 20, 2010, 845 fathers had a child taken into custody by the El Paso County Department of Human Services.
- Of those 845 fathers, 300 (36 percent) resided in the home with the child at the time of placement, which made them ineligible for the project, and 544 (64 percent) did not reside in the home.
- Of the 544 nonresidential fathers, 14 (3 percent) were deceased, and 8 (1 percent) had their parental rights terminated.
- Of the remaining 522 fathers, 262 were ineligible for the following reasons:
 - Out of jurisdiction (64 percent)
 - Incarcerated (20 percent)
 - History of violence, including domestic violence, child abuse, and other safety concerns (12 percent)
 - Other (4 percent)

- Of the 282 fathers who were presumed to be eligible for the project:
 - 23 enrolled (8 percent)
 - 22 declined to enroll (8 percent)
 - 24 were contacted but did not return letters or phone calls (9 percent)
 - 106 did not have enough information to be identified (38 percent)
 - 107 were presumed to be eligible but could not be contacted (38 percent)

Demographics of Enrolled Fathers at Baseline

- The following is a breakdown of the enrolled fathers' employment situation:
 - 32 percent were employed full-time.
 - 5 percent were employed part-time.
 - 50 percent were unemployed.
 - 14 percent were students.
- 36 percent had no high school diploma or GED.
- Fathers reported having problems with the following issues:
 - Supporting themselves and their families (68 percent)
 - Finding a job (64 percent)
 - Legal problems (36 percent)
 - Finding permanent housing (32 percent)
 - Relationship with the child's mother (32 percent)
 - Depression or other mental health issues (23 percent)
 - Substance abuse (18 percent)
- Fathers reported the following about their children and their relationship to them:
 - Fathers had an average of 1.5 children.
 - 77 percent reported living with their children at some point.
 - 68 percent said they had been involved with their children throughout their lives.
 - 28 percent reported being "in and out" of the children's lives or having entered their children's lives recently.
 - 5 percent reported never having much contact with their children.

Fathers' Class Attendance

- Six cohorts of fathers have participated in the project.
- Of the 23 fathers who enrolled in those six cohorts:
 - Six (26 percent) never attended any classes.
 - 16 (70 percent) attended classes until at least session 8.
 - Nine (39 percent) attended all 20 sessions.
 - Two (9 percent) were still attending sessions as of the site visit.

Caseworker Training Findings

- Training sessions were held in the following locations throughout Colorado: Grand Junction, Pueblo, Denver, Fort Morgan, and Durango.
- Training sessions were primarily for caseworkers, but attendees also included other professionals, including child welfare supervisors and managers, parent educators, and health department nurses.
- 105 surveys were returned from all sites except Durango. (As of publication, the project was still awaiting the data.)
- The majority of attendees reported the following as being a major challenge or somewhat of a challenge in their practice:
 - Obtaining information to locate the fathers
 - Involving fathers in case planning
 - Convincing the family that the father should be involved
 - Convincing the father his child needs him to be involved
 - Finding appropriate, affordable services
 - Keeping fathers engaged in services
 - Working with fathers without slowing down the case
 - Getting other agencies involved to help locate the fathers and provide services
- When asked how they felt about the challenges of finding and working with fathers after the training, 52 percent of attendees reported being much more optimistic, and 45 percent reported being somewhat more optimistic.

PRODUCTS

- *Bringing Back the Dads: A Model Program Curriculum for Non-Resident Father Engagement*