

Engaging Fathers Part 3

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Pat Littlejohn, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families; Andre McCullough, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families; Martha Pearson, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families; Katie Brophy, Spartanburg (SC) Department of Social Services (former)

[00:00:00] MUSIC

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends, and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work, to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

**TOM OATES** [00:00:33]: Here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast we want to connect you to information and stories that you can use to improve your work helping children and families. And in this episode it's our third and final part of our series on engaging fathers. Thanks for joining us. I'm Tom Oates with Child Welfare Information Gateway. And of course you can always connect to the peer-reviewed, federally funded information and resources at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov). And this, well this is our podcast series, another way to bring information and innovation to those working across the nation in child welfare, adoption, foster care, child abuse prevention, and strengthening families.

Now, in parts one and two of our Engaging Fathers series we heard from fatherhood organizations, discussing the tactics and methods to increase the ability and connect with noncustodial fathers and paternal families and involve them in casework along with some of the current barriers that can make engaging fathers so difficult. So if you haven't checked out parts one and two, I encourage you to do so.

Now here in part three we're focusing on a successful relationship between a fatherhood organization and a local child welfare agency, specifically what's happening in Spartanburg, South Carolina between the Spartanburg Department of Social Services and the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition. For the past few years these two have joined forces to support training, understanding, and engagement between fathers and the social workers serving their community.

So we've gathered together Pat Littlejohn, executive director of the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families -- she was also involved in parts one and two of this series; Andre McCullough, the Spartanburg site director for the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition; Martha Pearson, who is a member of the program staff of the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition; and Katie Brophy, who was the executive director of the Spartanburg Department of Social Services at the time of this partnership when it first began. We discuss how the groups came together, how their relationships and how their initial actions to engage fathers began, along with the successes that they are seeing today. Finally, we'll also give you their advice on developing and sustaining this type of relationship from the perspectives of the state, the local agency, the fatherhood organization, and the fathers themselves. We're really glad we could get everyone together. We actually pulled everyone together on the line at the very last minute. So I appreciate their time so much. So here you go, engaging fathers and the relationship between local agencies and community organizations.

So, Pat, let me start with you. Where did the impetus come from to actually partner with the agencies, and how did that start?

**PAT LITTLEJOHN** [00:03:09]: Well, as you know, our primary focus is working with fathers, and oftentimes fathers have a lot of challenges navigating systems. And we learned this early on, particularly with the child support enforcement system that fathers were confused, they didn't understand, they didn't know how to access it and oftentimes felt like they were meeting a brick wall or an unfriendly face. And then what we were finding is that from time to time fathers would come in and then they would say I heard that my child has been taken from the mother or something has happened to my child, and when they would call an agency to find out more information about their child, they were just completely stonewalled and they would not be given any information and they would come back to us and they would be very frustrated with well, you know, why won't anybody help me find out some information about my child.

And so we really started trying to bridge our relationship with offices of child protective services really to help fathers navigate the system, access information about their children, and then as time went on, we really began to go from that to saying well, if a child is being removed from a custodial mother's care, then why can't the noncustodial father be the first in line? And trying to understand what were the barriers to that happening but what would be the kinds of bridges that we could build to help facilitate that fathers in fact should be the first one saw in a diligent search. And then if he could be a part of the solution in helping that child, what could fatherhood programs do to help that?

So it really took off in our Spartanburg location and then that's where Andre and Martha, who are with the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition, met Katie Brophy, who at the time was the director of the Spartanburg County DSS, and then their relationship just bloomed, and we've now been able to learn from their experience to try to replicate what they're doing in Spartanburg and be able to take it statewide.

**TOM OATES** [00:05:36]: Sure. Sure. So, Martha, let me now focus that relationship a little bit and ask you when you started to engage the state, what were those initial conversations that kind of fostered this communication and then fostered the relationship?

**MARTHA PEARSON** [00:05:50]: When Mr. McCullough, my director, came and informed me that we was looking to build the partnership with DSS, I was excited, number one, to be able to go in and speak on the behalf of the fathers because in that situation when the child is taken out of the care of the mother, the fathers are not informed on what's going on and even when they are, they're not looked as an option.

So we met with Miss Brophy and she welcomed us with open arms so we was able to go in and help with the treatment plan in regards to offering free parenting classes and other assistance that we have here such as employment, we offer healthy relationship classes, economic stability, and health. And with that partnership we've been able to help those who did have a DSS treatment plan complete those. With the success of that we've been able to get 163 kids I believe right now out of foster care. And what was so awesome with that is that 43 fathers were able to get custody of their kids so that was just mind-blowing. So that's basically how it all started.

**TOM OATES** [00:07:06]: So, Katie, let me ask you this, once you're presented with this, how do you incorporate the training into the entire case plan? So how do you kind of merge this together so it's at least seamless for your staff and seamless for the parents involved?

**KATIE BROPHY** [00:07:21]: Seamless, that's a good question. Well, back when we started this, the department was under some mandates, federal mandates that they had not achieved for a while. And so I was hired in June of 2012 and tasked with this is one of the things you got to do. We don't engage fathers well. And so that's one of the things that the department, the leadership in state office recognized was an issue, and I think those were conversations that Pat probably had with leadership at the state level. And so how do you trickle down that to practice is a very intentional process, and when Martha and Andre showed up at the door and said we're from the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition and we'd like to talk to you, it just happened to be very timely because I really needed to talk to them too.

So we identified common goals that we too wanted to engage fathers, but we wanted to keep kids safe, and we can't concede in situations where kids wouldn't be safe. And so safety had to be number one, but, you know, Martha and Andre had a process with Spartanburg DSS before I got there that it appeared to me it wasn't working well. DSS would send referrals over there sometimes; sometimes they wouldn't. It wasn't consistent practice. It wasn't something that there was any kind of knowledge within the agency of the value of their work. And so we made a commitment to have Martha and Andre talk to our staff about what they would do to help them with their cases in engaging fathers. And I said that it was something that we needed to do in Spartanburg. And so Martha and Andre and I created a tracking system where we kept spreadsheets, Martha kept spreadsheets on every father, every family that they worked with and how many children were involved in that. And so my philosophy was if it's important, you're going to track it. And so we tracked it because we thought it was important. And part of tracking it was me holding them accountable to come to our offices to talk to staff. Part of it was them holding me accountable to make sure that my staff were following the procedures. And then the end result was part of us celebrating when we realized what a difference it was making in the common mutual goals of children and families that were impacted.

I think the one side note was that Andre is a trained mediator. So when you work in CPS and you have contentious cases, every once in a while you got to call somebody in to diffuse a situation, and he was able to do that so that things didn't get out of control with people that are upset because you took their children, right.

**TOM OATES** [00:11:00]: Yeah.

**KATIE BROPHY** [00:11:01]: And it made a difference in many cases, one that I believe they still keep in contact with, huh?

**TOM OATES** [00:11:07]: So, Andre, let me now ask you this because if there's another agency somewhere across the country that wants to mimic a program like this, a relationship like this, what does that look like, what's the structure, what's the contact like, what is that give and take that is, you know, that when you talked about having common goals and you hear about tracking, you've put together some sort of structure in this relationship. So, Andre, what does that look like for what you're doing with Katie or what happened in Spartanburg?

**ANDRE MCCULLOUGH** [00:11:35]: I think one of the things that Martha and myself, we actually have developed I think what we call leadership is our passion and drive. And many times that when Katie and

myself, we developed the referral because a lot of times we were getting feedback from the case managers. And we wanted to find out foster goals and objectives and what are some of the barriers that they actually were facing. And because of that, I think one thing is that our classes are free and it's affordable. And one of the things that we talk about that if we could change their [unint.], then we could change their passion and their drive. And with the relationship with the case managers, we begin to have some dialogue along with Katie and Martha myself. And we talk about the goals and objectives. How can we be involved and help them become responsible?

**TOM OATES** [00:12:34]: So, what did starting small look like for you guys when you had to bring this in and you're just getting off the ground, what were those first initial steps just to gain momentum?

**ANDRE MCCULLOUGH** [00:12:46]: I think when we first started out, we were having some problems with the contacts or with the referrals. In fact, I think one of the positive things is that when we first started out with the referrals, we were having problems with the contacts and being able to contact the participants. I think when we first started, there were like I think 99 referrals but yet there wasn't any feedback. And I think that's one of the times we – as two – went to Katie and also between the DSS case managers as well as Fatherhood staff and see how can we overcome that to make it better as it relates to the communication process. And because of that, we was able to make better contact because some of our participants because they were working and other things and I think also too at one point in time the referrals, which were the DSS clients, they were having challenges with completing the treatment plan. And with that we were able to come together and help offer quality services but also provide quality support as well. And because of that we were able to help 127 participants actually complete the parenting component, and that was very challenging.

And with that, not only the -- once we identified their problems, but we also was able to help them be a part of the Fatherhood Initiative, which in that process and in the helping we were helping them to provide -- helping your children learn effective communication and co-parenting, but also we talk about goals and objectives and able to get to the root cause of some of their problems and making healthy choices, and because of that we begin to see better outcomes.

**TOM OATES** [00:14:50]: So, Martha, now where are you today? What is the program implementation? What does it look like in terms of what you are providing and what they are receiving on the other end? What does that look like today?

**MARTHA PEARSON** [00:15:01]: Today it looks awesome. Like I said, Mr. McCullough was saying in the beginning things did kind of start slow as far as the referral process, and I think it was all about relationship because when we connect with these families, they are torn at the fact that they don't have their kids and so we embrace them. We don't look at them as, you know, you done messed up, but we embrace them and we show them a better way of going about parenting their kids. And so today right now I have 160 referrals already. It's a lot and it's a blessing as well to be able to provide those services to them. So we are rolling. We are rolling. So it's great. It's great.

**TOM OATES** [00:15:51]: And so, Katie, follow up on that for me on the state's benefit of this because you were able to implement this training. What's happening then on the state side that this can become kind of the part of the process along the way? So this relationship how does it become as easy for all sides as possible? Because we kind of see the state is operating on one end, a lot of these organizations are operating at the other and trying to forge that partnership. So what does that partnership look like on the state's side?

**KATIE BROPHY** [00:16:19]: So, it's like a win/win situation. DSS has clients that have to get through a treatment plan in order to be able to evaluate whether they can safely parent their children, and the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition is providing them with support services to get them through that treatment plan. So, potential kids that could have lingered in foster care forever and never, never gone to anybody could be reunited with a parent or a relative because a lot of times the work that they do may not result in the father getting the child but maybe the grandparents or an aunt or uncle. And that's the common goal that DSS wants. They don't want kids in foster care. They want children to be with their family. They want children safe. And so it builds a community that has a mutual respect for the work that the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition does and recognizes that the value of the training that they give them in their program that Andre and Martha had talked about.

**TOM OATES** [00:17:26]: You had mentioned at the beginning of how you were brought in and the state and Spartanburg saw the need. They saw the need to engage fathers was an issue. So, you kind of had an easy sell. You had a buyer who was very interested in moving in toward open engagement. What would you give in terms of advice to another agency in how they can kind of communicate that need up the chain, up to the state leadership to kind of show the value of engaging fathers?

**KATIE BROPHY** [00:17:57]: The data speaks for itself. And so early on -- and Pat and I had talked about this too and Richard Barr that you've got to be able to prove the work that you do in human services by looking at the data and the outcomes. And so, you know, the way it looks now is that you're engaging fathers and you're engaging families. And that end result of that of course, you know, you want children safe, but the end result really is that the federal government who provides money to states to administer foster care is getting what they pay for because they set the outcomes that you have to achieve. They set the goals on the federal audits that states have. And it was the first time I ever knew that we passed an audit for God's sake. I mean that's a big deal. It was a big deal. It was huge. It was huge.

So, I mean it was a win/win. Right? You know, I think initial barrier number one was we opened the door literally. Martha and Andre say that all the time, we opened the door. We literally had to let them in the building. They couldn't get in the building before. They used to leave them in the lobby, sitting in the lobby and just wait and wait and wait until somebody could come out and talk to them. And so just opening that line of communication is really important, but it was about the leadership that the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition took. Once they knew what they had to do, they did the work. And so they proved their value, you know, to the caseworkers. And the caseworkers are there not because they make a ton of money but because they want to keep kids safe and they want to make a difference in the lives of children and so they saw the value in the work that they did.

**TOM OATES** [00:20:01]: I want to kind of go around to everybody. And, Pat, I'll start with you, and I want to ask the question from your point of view. And so, Pat, we'll take a look at maybe from the state point of view what are those things that you would tell either another state or another agency or another organization, what's the one thing that's key to success in sustaining success with this kind of a partnership?

**PAT LITTLEJOHN** [00:20:22]: Well, I think a couple of things. One is I think that the leadership's belief that fathers matter and communicating that belief through policies and practices and training. I think that has to be where it starts. I think the other thing that -- and it's not training just one time but a part of orientation and ongoing training. Two, I think creating open pathways for communication. And then

the third thing is, you know, working together to figure out a positive funding strain. One of the things that I think is so important is that we can either do this kind of work in partnership with one another and find a safe home for a child which, you know, I think everyone's ultimate goal is for it to be with one of its biological parents.

But then when that's not able to do that, you know, I think everyone agrees that foster care or another kind of solution begins to be the least desirable. And when you think about how much it costs our state to put children in foster care and then you look at, you know, they may be in foster care I think the average is two years before they're adopted, and so we're going to spend a lot of money and resources on those kinds of interventions that maybe could have been prevented if we had been able to forge the kind of partnership that engaged the father and engaged the father's family.

So then at the end of the day it becomes a cost savings. And then how could we reinvest those cost savings that we took for a more expensive intervention like foster care and put it more up front and put resources into supporting the programs and contracting with these local fatherhood programs to provide the kinds of services that they're providing?

**TOM OATES** [00:22:37]: Excellent. I mean you see everything that comes in from that top level buy-in that you need. So, for Andre from the organization point of view, what do you think your sister organizations like yours across the country, what do you think that is the key for maintaining success in a relationship like that for those organizations?

**ANDRE MCCULLOUGH** [00:22:57]: Okay. One of the things I'm thinking about in regards to our leadership and sustainability, so many individuals that come into our program with a lack of education, they deal with substance abuse, and many other issues that come in, and also I think about partnership is the key, and we have a driving force to have that passion and drive for our participants and our clients. And I think showing them relationship building and really helping them and giving them that guidance and the tools that they need. And I think nothing more means than having that leadership and that relationship.

**TOM OATES** [00:23:38]: And then, Katie, let me bring this from you, from the local, from the agency, really from what you talk about from the boots on the ground so to speak, how do you guys sustain this? Because you see it from the state because you need that buy-in from up top, you need it from the organization, but then it's also happening really at your agency level.

**KATIE BROPHY** [00:23:53]: Yeah.

**TOM OATES** [00:23:54]: How do you sustain success?

**KATIE BROPHY** [00:23:57]: Well, you can't let up. You have to continue to get your managers to focus on the goals every -- you know, we used to have a Monday morning meeting 8:30 every Monday morning. Where are we on all these different things? And this was one of them, just one of them. But when you work in child protection, there's a lot of things that are priority.

And so it's really easy to let that just go by the wayside, but you got to keep focused on what the priorities are and keep tracking it because once you stop watching that data, things start to go downhill. And so it's got to stay up there as a priority, and I think that it's a constant retraining like Pat said, constant training and retraining because you always get new staff in and you can't assume that they

know about programs. And you have to constantly train, retrain, tweak things. And so it's just an attention factor. You have to keep the attention on the matter. One of the other things that we did was the Fatherhood South Carolina Center for Fathers came to our office and did a training, and they asked me how many male staff we had working at the office in child protection. And at the time we had one male staff. And so that was one of the other things that I set as one of my HR goals was to intentionally attempt to hire some men working in child protection. We saw the value in that child protective service workers need to think about fathers. And so if there's no men around, they tend to not think about the father, the father's relatives, the father's family, the potential for placements for children.

**TOM OATES** [00:26:04]: Right. And, Martha, we're not going to forget about you because there is a fourth group involved, and those are the fathers themselves. How do you help sustain their interest and their engagement?

**MARTHA PEARSON** [00:26:15]: Working with the fathers has really been a joy to be able to be involved in a kid's life. With the work that I've done with DSS, some of the fathers do feel like they don't have a chance. And so working with the caseworkers and building that relationship and also too, communicating with them to be open-minded. I know they really are there for the mothers, but, you know, to be open-minded with the fathers as well.

One of the other things that I definitely communicate with the DSS caseworkers is to embrace, like Miss Katie stated. When the fathers used to go over there, there was just female clients -- I mean female caseworkers and they felt like they didn't have someone that could really hear them out. Just to be able to communicate that with the DSS caseworkers have really been a blessing because I have been able to see change with that. We are a team. When I go over to DSS, I look at the caseworkers as teammates. We feel like we're a big sisterhood, and they embrace me. Even though I have my guys right behind me, they embrace me. So there have been change. They really have.

**TOM OATES** [00:27:29]: Martha Pearson, Andre McCullough, Katie Brophy, and Pat Littlejohn, thank you guys so much for your time.

So while the impetus came from a need recognized by the Spartanburg Department of Social Services and the state of South Carolina, these two organizations quickly found common ground and ways each could contribute to improve the level of engagement for fathers in and around Spartanburg to have with their children.

As Katie said, one of the first barriers was the door. And just letting the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition into the building and holding conversations opened up so many benefits. Now, if you haven't listened to parts one and two of this three-part series on engaging fathers, go check them out. You can find them by heading to [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) and just search podcasts. Plenty of information to accompany this can be found on the webpage for this podcast, including links to the Information Gateway web section on engaging fathers and paternal families, and that is packed with resources and state examples, links to parts one and two of this series, a list of national fatherhood organizations, along with some reports on the impact, including the national economic cost of fatherhood.

Now, as always, you can connect to Information Gateway at [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov) and find the most comprehensive collection of tools, data, resources, and publications covering the entire continuum of child welfare at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov). You can also check us out on Facebook and Twitter as well.

## Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Engaging Fathers Part 3 - TRANSCRIPT

My thanks to Pat Littlejohn, Andre McCullough, Martha Pearson, and Katie Brophy for sharing their stories and their insight. Now, if you have topics you'd like us to dive into here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, let us know at [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov). We'd also like to hear if you know of any innovative and exceptional work that the rest of the nation, all of your peers could benefit from hearing and learning from. Well, that will wrap it up for this episode and this three-part series on engaging fathers. My name is Tom Oates, and I thank you so much for being part of this community, and we will talk to you next time on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

**FEMALE NARRATOR** [00:29:34]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov) and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect those of Information Gateway or the Children's Bureau.