

Site Visit Report: Engaging Fathers Project

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Cluster: National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System

Grantee: Indiana Department of Child Services (Marion County), Fathers and Families Center, and the Indiana University School of Social Work

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SUMMARY

The National Quality Improvement Center for Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC NRF) (www.fatherhoodqic.org) 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 Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS) to locate and recruit nonresident fathers of children in the Marion County child welfare system to participate in fatherhood classes. The goal was to increase fathers' involvement with their children and the child welfare system.

The fatherhood classes met for 20 weeks and used 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 December 2008 and December 2010, 98 fathers participated in these classes.

The following are examples of successful strategies used by the project to engage nonresident fathers and help gain buy-in from caseworkers:

- DCS staff led some sessions, which helped build rapport and trust between the fathers and the agency. The fathers said they were impressed that someone from DCS would provide them with so much useful information and that this helped them see they were all on the same team.
- The project received funds to make the DCS lobby more father friendly, including installing a baby-changing table in the men's restroom, leaving out literature about fatherhood, and hanging pictures of fathers with their children.

- The project had one staff member based in a DCS office. The staffer, who served as a liaison between the fathers and the agency, helped caseworkers better understand the program, what their roles were, and the resources available to them. Having the liaison based at a DCS office eased caseworkers' concerns about confidentiality and information sharing.
- Fathers who participated in the program spoke on panels for the caseworkers. This helped the caseworkers view the fathers as more than names in case files and helped them better understand how to engage fathers in case planning.

The QIC NRF subgrant ended in March 2011, but the Marion County DCS plans to continue offering classes to help engage fathers in the child welfare system. Additionally, Indiana DCS will continue incorporating father engagement into its case practice and issued a statewide request for proposals to establish fatherhood liaisons in all 18 regions of the State to conduct location and engagement efforts with nonresident fathers.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Engaging Fathers Project in Indiana" (<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 Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS) (www.in.gov/dcs) to conduct a project in Marion County, which includes Indianapolis, the State's capital and largest city.

The model for this project, like that of the other three subgrants, consisted 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.

DCS collaborated with the Fathers and Families Center (FFC) (www.fatherresource.org) to implement this project. FFC is a local nonprofit agency that seeks to build the capacity of young fathers and provides fatherhood, workforce, educational, relationship, and other services. Fathers who go through the QIC NRF program are always eligible for additional FFC services. FFC placed a staff member in the Marion County DCS office to serve as a bridge between the project and Marion County DCS, which helped DCS staff better understand the project and alleviate any concerns about issues such as information sharing and confidentiality.

The Indiana University School of Social Work conducted the project's evaluation.

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

Locating and Contacting Nonresident Fathers

Every 2 to 3 weeks, State-level data staff sent the liaison a list of all removals in Marion County during the previous 45 days. The liaison checked the list for cases in which there was a nonresident father and then conducted a background check for other project criteria that might exclude a father from the program (e.g., being a perpetrator of child maltreatment or domestic violence). Fathers' contact information sometimes was available in the list, but the liaison often had to search for the contact information elsewhere, including the Indiana Child Welfare Information System, child support database, US Search, and even FFC service records.

After finding a father's contact information, the liaison tried to contact him via phone calls, letters on FFC letterhead, or visits to his home. Once he made contact, the liaison told the father that he and the project wanted to assist him and explained the program.

Fatherhood Classes

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

- 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 were conducted in the order listed; the remaining nine were conducted in the order that met the cohort's needs. The sessions were led by a project facilitator, and guest facilitators would often attend. Guest facilitators included:

- DCS staff
- Parenting specialists
- Attorneys

- Workforce staff from FFC
- Staff from Child Support Access and Visitation

The other eight classes were based on the needs of each cohort and frequently included follow-up sessions by the guest facilitators.

Trainings and Awareness

The project developed an online father engagement training for case managers, which included topics such as the importance of engaging fathers, how to engage them, and how fathers may have different learning styles. The project also has conducted seven fatherhood panels for DCS audiences across Indiana. During these panels, father participants spoke with case managers and other DCS staff about their experiences. Additionally, the National Fatherhood Initiative, a QIC NRF partner, conducted two trainings about father-friendly practice for case managers.

Future Plans

Marion County DCS plans to continue the father engagement program with a few changes to the QIC NRF process, including removing the requirement that the participant is a nonresident father. Additionally, the Indiana DCS issued a request for proposals (RFP) that was based on this program. The intent of the RFP is to establish fatherhood liaisons in all 18 regions in Indiana to conduct location and engagement efforts with nonresident fathers. As of June 2011, DCS had awarded contracts to private service providers in 16 of the 18 regions and was going to issue an additional RFP to seek providers for the remaining 2 regions.

Casey Family Programs also has funded pilot father engagement programs in three regions of Indiana. FFC is a technical support provider for this Casey Family Programs initiative and has worked with sites on establishing their programs and better engaging fathers. The pilot programs have less restrictive criteria than the QIC NRF program (e.g., fathers are eligible even if they live in the home or were perpetrators of neglect). The three sites also were given the QIC NRF curriculum as a resource, but the pilot programs primarily focused on father location and engagement rather than the classes.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The primary site visit occurred on January 5, 2011, in Indianapolis, IN, at the Marion County Department of Child Services (DCS) and the Fathers and Families Center (FFC). Attendees included:

- Melinda Wright, Child Welfare Services Manager, and Mingo Morrison, Supervisor, from the Marion County DCS

- Robert Ripperger, Chief Operating Officer, James Melton, Fatherhood Services Manager, and Mike Dix, Fatherhood Services Specialist from FFC
- Father participants: Eric, Mark, Ernest, and Mike
 - Eric was in the process of getting custody of his son and believes the program helped him a lot. He said that the program showed him how DCS and court system work, helped improve his relationship with his child's mother, and assisted him in becoming a better father. Eric stated that the project staff's encouragement, respect, and expertise kept him coming to the classes.
 - Mark said the program was invaluable to him. He was not initially aware he even had a child in foster care and began pursuing custody when he found out. His attorney suggested that he take classes to help with his case. The classes helped him learn more about the child welfare process and how to navigate the system. Mark stated the camaraderie from the group was very important; he had felt he was alone in his situation. Mark was in the process of reconnecting with his son at the time of the site visit.
 - After being released from prison, Ernest took a 5-week Fatherhood Development Workshop at FFC. Later, Ernest found out his son was involved in a DCS case and asked to participate in the QIC NRF program. Ernest believed the program helped him learn about the child welfare and court processes, feel more prepared, and develop a better relationship with his child. He also said that the meal provided by FFC before each class was what brought him back at first, but eventually he came for the information. He did not want to miss what may be said during the class discussions. Ernest is the president of the Fathers Advisory Council for this project.
 - Mike learned about the program from his child's caseworker. He enjoyed the camaraderie with the other fathers, which helped him see that he was not alone in his situation. The program taught him a lot about the child welfare system and how to become a better father. Mike gained custody of his child while participating in the program.
 - All four of these fathers participated in fatherhood panels for DCS caseworkers.

A call was held with Gail Folaron of the Indiana University School of Social Work on January 20, 2011, to discuss the project's evaluation.

LESSONS LEARNED

Location, Recruitment, and Engagement

- The project staff wished it had increased its use of email and social networking sites as tools for locating, recruiting, and engaging fathers. They did, however, use email and Facebook to contact fathers after they located them.

- Many caseworkers need additional training on how to research fathers' information and locate the fathers.

Nonresident Fathers

- Fathers need to want to be involved in the program, otherwise there is probably little the project can do for them.
- Most fathers had some contact with their children prior to the sessions.
- None of the fathers who participated in the QIC NRF fatherhood classes participated in the other fatherhood classes offered by the Fathers and Families Center (FFC), but they did take advantage of the workforce resources and GED courses offered by FFC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nonresident Fathers

- The initial contact from the project should meet the fathers in the evening or after the fathers' finish work for the day, choose a location in the fathers' neighborhood, be sincere, and be open to what the father has to say.
- Projects should help the fathers better understand their financial responsibilities to their children.
- Projects should recognize that the fathers often have other needs and concerns, including housing, food, employment, and access to services.
- The following are recommendations and advice from fathers who participated in the sessions for other nonresident fathers:
 - Even if you are skeptical of the fatherhood classes, just attend and listen; if you do not like the content, you do not have to go back.
 - Have hope about what can be accomplished.
 - Attending the classes cannot hurt your case, but it may benefit you a lot.
- The following are recommendations and advice from fathers who participated in the program for agencies that serve nonresident fathers:
 - Get to know the fathers rather than just basing your opinions on assumptions.
 - Understand that many of the fathers are trying to do the right thing but might not have the proper resources.
 - Recognize that the fathers can change for the better.
 - Treat the fathers with respect.
- One of the fathers suggested that projects should help the fathers access affordable attorneys who specialize in child welfare law.

Child Welfare Agencies

- Projects should be in frequent communication with the child welfare agency management team and have a presence in the child welfare office to help establish a good relationship with the caseworkers and the agency as a whole.
- Agencies and organizations should examine how father friendly they are, including both the culture and the physical environment (e.g., pictures in the waiting area of fathers with their children).

CHALLENGES

Participation, Engagement, and Attendance

- Recruitment challenges were often caused by fathers':
 - Lack of trust and faith in the child welfare system
 - Frequent changes in contact information
 - Not being ready to participate because their basic needs (e.g., housing, employment) were not being met
 - Hesitancy to participate in a lengthy (20-week) program
 - Having scheduling conflicts (e.g., visits with their children, work, school)
- Fathers often had difficulty attending the classes due to transportation problems, child care needs, and work schedules.
- Language barriers prevented the project from engaging 24 non-English speaking fathers. The new request for proposals being developed throughout Indiana will include translator costs.

Working With the Child Welfare Agency

- Gaining buy-in from child welfare supervisors and caseworkers has been a challenge. One reason may be that caseloads are already very high, which may make father engagement a lower priority.
- It was sometimes difficult to obtain information about the father from the caseworker. Many caseworkers did not have the skills to obtain the contact information from the mothers or follow leads provided, and if a mother did not know the father's location, the caseworker tended not to look for information from other sources. The project assisted caseworkers in obtaining information and pursuing leads more effectively.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Location, Contact, and Engagement

- After fathers agreed to participate, project staff maintained contact with them until the first session in order to support their plan to attend.
- Having a non-DCS staff person as the first contact was effective because the fathers may not trust the child welfare system.

Fatherhood Classes

- Having DCS staff lead some sessions helped build rapport and trust between the fathers and the agency.
- To help fathers overcome transportation obstacles and attend the classes, the project issued bus passes and gas cards. Project staff also provided transportation for the fathers, and, in some cases, fathers with cars provided transportation for other fathers.
- The project provided a meal to the fathers at each session as an incentive to attend. After the meal, the fathers each provided their "moment of the week," such as an anecdote about their children or their cases. This helped the fathers develop camaraderie, and hearing the other fathers' success stories raised their hopes about their own situations.
- The fathers appreciated having a DCS supervisor speak with them. They were impressed that someone from DCS would provide them with lots of useful information. The supervisor let the fathers know that DCS was primarily concerned with the child's welfare. This helped the fathers see that everyone was on the same side and helped remove the fathers' negative perceptions of DCS. (from the fathers)
- The sessions with DCS guest speakers were scheduled early in the curriculum to help provide a foundation for the fathers about the child welfare system and allow them a chance to vent. Hearing other fathers' experiences with the child welfare system also let them see that they were not alone.
- The liaison was always present at the first session, even if he was not facilitating it. This helped establish a good transition into the group for the fathers because they knew at least one person there.
- Having three facilitators available helped with scheduling because multiple groups were sometimes occurring simultaneously, and it helped to have different people lead sessions for each group.
- The project used the following retention strategies:
 - Providing a strong male presence throughout the program, especially in the early stages
 - Embracing the father as a viable placement option
 - Providing a realistic picture of the fathers' situations and being honest with them
 - Focusing on the fathers' strengths

- Helping the fathers take advantage of support services (e.g., GED programs, employment preparation, job referrals)
- Providing transportation assistance and a meal
- Channeling the fathers' energy in positive directions
- Keeping the curriculum exciting and interactive
- Fathers found the classes with the attorney to be particularly beneficial because they explained what should be occurring in their cases, and what both DCS and the fathers' attorneys should be doing. This information gave the fathers more confidence to speak up for themselves. (from the fathers)

Working With the Caseworkers

- The liaison, an FFC employee based in a DCS office, helped DCS employees better understand the program, their roles, the resources available to them, and that nonresident fathers may be a viable placement option for the children. Having the liaison based at a DCS office eased caseworkers' concerns about confidentiality and information sharing.
- The father panels for the caseworkers have helped them view fathers as more than a name in the case file and have helped them better understand how they can engage fathers in case planning.
- Project staff placed father engagement reminders with an Indianapolis 500 theme in several places throughout the DCS offices, including:
 - Paper racecars on the walls with speech balloons from the drivers saying:
 - "How many fathers in your caseload have you involved in case planning this month?"
 - "Have you shown genuineness in completing your last Affidavit of Diligent Inquiry for dad?"
 - "Do you express empathy for fathers with criminal records?"
 - "Do fathers on your caseload have CFTMs [Child and Family Team Meetings] built around them?"
 - A bulletin board that compares father engagement rates for cases in Marion County with other regions and the State as a whole. The bulletin board also uses racecars to show the progress and includes reminders, titled "Pit Crew Notes."

General/Other

- The Fathers Advisory Board gave the fathers an opportunity to teach and share their experiences with others.
- Locating the sessions or other meetings with the fathers in a non-DCS setting may help some fathers feel more comfortable. Some people in the community may have a negative opinion of DCS and may not be as receptive to receiving help directly from the agency. For example, when given a choice of meeting at a DCS office or at FFC, the fathers nearly always chose FFC.

- Similarly, the liaison realized he had more success calling the fathers from his cell phone rather than the DCS office because fathers might not want a call that originated from DCS.
- The project received funds to make the DCS lobby more father friendly, including installing a baby changing table in the men's restroom, leaving out literature about fatherhood, and hanging pictures of fathers with their children.
- A good working relationship with the State agency responsible for child welfare is very beneficial. This can help the project obtain data, find the right people to contact about various issues, and be involved in State-level meetings. Additionally, State officials may be able to use their positions to remind others about father engagement or include it in State policy. For example, the State DCS director sent an email to Marion County DCS staff to remind them about engaging fathers.

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 agreed to participate, 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 might 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 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 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 subgrantees alerted the QIC NRF that difficulties in gathering information and contacting fathers within that time was resulting in the exclusion of many fathers who might have been eligible. When the

requirement was removed, subgrantees were permitted to contact fathers who had been deemed ineligible.

Recruitment and Enrollment Findings

- From November 2008 to September 2010, there were 942 removals in Marion County in which the father was nonresident.
- Of those 942 fathers, 327 (35 percent) were ineligible for the program for the following reasons:
 - Out of jurisdiction (14 percent)
 - Incarcerated (14 percent)
 - History of violence (e.g., domestic violence, child maltreatment) (3 percent)
 - Did not speak English (3 percent)
 - Child had been returned to the home (1 percent)
- Of the 615 nonresident fathers presumed to be eligible for the project, 98 (16 percent) participated in the project.
- Of the 517 who did not participate, the reasons were (percentages based on total fathers presumed to be eligible):
 - Not sufficient contact information (37 percent)
 - Had contact information but could not make contact (22 percent)
 - Identity unknown (10 percent)
 - Contacted and declined (7 percent)
 - Early case closure (7 percent)
 - Agreed to participate but did not complete the baseline interview (1 percent)
- Demographic characteristics of participating fathers:
 - The average age was 29.
 - 65 percent were African-American.
 - 31 percent were Caucasian.
 - 71 percent were unemployed.
 - 50 percent had a high school diploma or GED.
 - 50 percent had prior involvement with CPS as an adult, child, or both.

Fathers' Class Attendance

- Eleven cohorts of fathers participated in the program.
- Of the 98 fathers who agreed to participate, 57 attended any of the sessions.
- The average number of sessions attended was 9, with one father completing all 20 sessions. Forty-four percent of participating fathers attended 12 or more sessions.

DCS Policy and Practice Change

Due in part to the work of this project, DCS has made policy and practice changes to improve father engagement, including:

- Caseworkers now need to complete affidavits of diligent inquiry that specify that the caseworker has taken certain steps to locate family members, including nonresident fathers, as potential placements.

DCS implemented an interactive service referral mapping system that will prompt the Family Case Manager to generate a father engagement referral for a family based on its demographics and other service referrals.