

## Issue Brief

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# Father Engagement in Human Services

### Key approaches to father engagement

Fathers want to and can play an important role in their children's lives, but too often human services programs have not focused on supporting dads. Strengthening human services programs to better engage fathers can enhance outcomes for fathers, children, and families. Practitioners from across a wide range of program areas can draw upon a common set of approaches that promote and support father engagement and adapt them to facilitate implementation within their programs.

Efforts to promote and support father engagement efforts can occur at three levels: program, organization, and system.

- At the program level, approaches to promoting father engagement include tailoring recruitment and intake methods to reach fathers, enhancing the service environment to include fathers, and delivering services that resonate with fathers' goals and support their active participation.
- At the organization level, staff in leadership positions can promote father engagement by demonstrating their own commitment to father engagement, developing partnerships with other organizations that serve fathers, and incorporating father engagement into staff development and supervision protocols.
- At the system level, federal, state, local, and tribal government staff, as well as foundations, associations, and other intermediaries, can promote father engagement by identifying and breaking down systemic barriers and ensuring that organizations and programs have resources and authorities necessary for engaging fathers.

## Father involvement affects outcomes for children, fathers, and mothers

Fathers want to be involved in their children's lives. Moreover, this involvement is critical for child health and well-being, and it positively affects well-being and health outcomes for both mothers and fathers. Research shows father involvement relates to the well-being of children throughout their youth, beginning with infancy.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Families where the father is involved have lower rates of births that are low weight and very low weight, preterm, and small for gestational age.<sup>5</sup> Father involvement early on in a child's life positively impacts cognitive and linguistic skills and school performance.<sup>6</sup> These impacts persist throughout childhood and into adolescence: father involvement can help improve children's social-emotional development, reduce risk-taking behaviors, and increase the likelihood of children graduating high school.

Father involvement also has important implications for the health and well-being of mothers when both a father and a mother are involved with parenting. When fathers are involved during pregnancy, mothers are more likely to receive prenatal care and less likely to smoke.<sup>7</sup> After birth, mothers being satisfied with

father involvement reduces postpartum depression.<sup>8</sup> Involvement of fathers after birth also buffers the effects of maternal depression on infant distress.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, when fathers are involved in their children's lives, their own well-being may improve. For example, father involvement with preschool-aged children is associated with lower rates of depression.<sup>10</sup>



### Father Engagement

The term “father engagement” can have different meaning in different contexts. For the purposes of this brief, “father engagement” refers to the purposeful inclusion of fathers (including biological, social, resident, nonresident, and stepfathers) in program services and activities with the objective of improving outcomes for fathers, children, and families. Strategies to promote father engagement may include recruiting, enrolling, and maintaining active participation of fathers in programming, involving fathers in policy and program development, and integrating fathers into program operations.

A range of programs within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) encourage state and local human services agencies to recognize fathers' contributions to and desire to be involved in their children's lives and facilitate ongoing economic contributions and family involvement. As family structures have become increasingly complex, there is a growing interest in developing full-family service models and an increasing need to identify and apply effective father engagement approaches across human services program areas. Programs focused primarily on serving fathers, such as programs funded by the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Program administered by HHS, have extensive experience engaging fathers while other program areas that may have historically been designed to serve mothers are more often now trying to also focus on father engagement. This brief identifies approaches that human services programs can and do take to engage fathers in programming (see Box 1 for an overview of the project).

#### Box 1: KEEP Fathers Engaged project overview

##### KEEP Fathers Engaged project overview

The US Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) contracted with Mathematica to conduct Key Programmatic Elements of Father Engagement to Promote Self-Sufficiency (KEEP Fathers Engaged), a project designed to begin to identify key approaches and strategies for engaging fathers across a variety of program areas and subpopulations. From Fall 2019 through Fall/Winter 2020, the key activities of the KEEP Fathers Engaged project included:

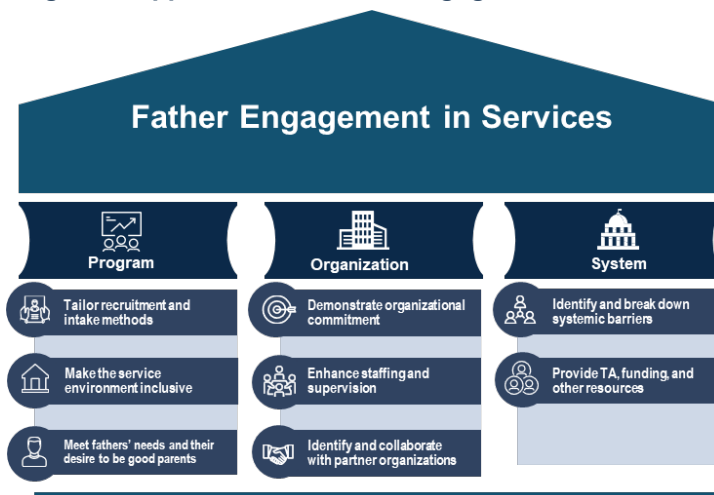
- A program scan and targeted literature review to identify a cross-section of programs that actively work to engage fathers to improve children's well-being, strengthen families, and increase their economic mobility,
- Key informant discussions with a subset of programs to learn about strategies to engage fathers in programming, and
- Case studies with three programs to delve more deeply into father engagement approaches.

All data collection activities were informed by a panel of researchers, practitioners, and federal program experts.

## Key approaches and strategies to engaging fathers in human services

Many human services programs historically have not fully engaged fathers in services, yet fathers often want to be involved in their children’s lives. As Figure 1 shows, several approaches at the program, organization, and system levels can be used to be more intentional about engaging fathers across human services areas. Father engagement is most likely to increase when engagement occurs at all three levels. Implementing each approach can involve a variety of strategies.

Figure 1: Approaches to father engagement in services



### Promoting engagement at the program level

At the program level, staff work to recruit fathers into a variety of services, including father-specific and non-father-specific services, and to maintain their participation over time. Staff can tailor recruitment and intake methods to reach fathers, enhance the service environment to include fathers, and develop programming that resonates with fathers’ needs while leveraging their desire to nurture child well-being.

#### Tailor recruitment and intake methods to reach fathers

Historically, the social safety net has focused on mothers and children, leaving some fathers ignored and even excluded. As a result, some fathers feel distrustful of human services, ostracized from the service system, and stigmatized for needing assistance.<sup>11,12,13</sup> Consequently, recruiting fathers into programs requires tailored strategies with intentional ways of proactively reaching fathers.

***Go into the community to reach fathers.*** One strategy staff use to reach fathers is to go to other programs that serve or have contact with fathers, including child support offices; health clinics; and offices providing the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), among many others.<sup>14</sup> Program staff also go to locations within the community where men are known to congregate, such as barbershops, churches, and community centers.<sup>15</sup> Programs can also use social media as a virtual recruitment tool for finding fathers in need of services and directing them to their programs.<sup>16</sup>

***Highlight fathers’ impact on children’s outcomes.*** Intake and recruitment staff can highlight for fathers and other stakeholders how

#### Program Spotlight

San Diego Paternal Opportunities Program and Services (POPS) serves fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system. Staff promote the message that fathers are not alone in navigating the child welfare system. To build trust and rapport with fathers, POPS staff intentionally distance the program from the child welfare system by recruiting fathers from the community and through court referrals, rather than from child welfare agencies. Referrals from former participants account for nearly half the referrals the program receives. To empower fathers to become more self-reliant, POPS programming includes peer support “Fathers Talk Circles” and fathers that serve as mentors to participants.

fathers can positively affect their children's lives by engaging with the program. For example, in the past, child support programs often focused on the role of the father as a financial support provider and, in some cases, overlooked the importance of father involvement for the well-being of children. To better engage fathers, an increasing number of child support programs have begun to emphasize the importance of the emotional role of fathers for children. Some child support programs advertise the availability of fatherhood programming for child support-paying parents. Other programs let child support-paying parents know that their child support program can help with parenting time arrangements, job searches, and access and visitation rights. Advertising these services and emphasizing a mission to improve fathers' involvement with their children communicates to fathers that the child support program understands the importance of fathers and wants to work with fathers.

***Use current and former participants to recruit fathers.*** Word-of-mouth referrals from current and former participants are a compelling endorsement that father's value.<sup>17,18,19,20</sup> One way programs can support word-of-mouth referrals is to hire former participants as outreach specialists. Other programs use mothers as referral sources. For instance, one maternal and child health program encourages participating mothers to ask fathers to take part in programming with them.

***Adjust intake procedures to increase initial program engagement.*** Fathers want to be involved, so minimizing the lag time between initial referral and first program contact may increase the chance that fathers will participate in the program. In addition, using assessment tools developed specifically for fathers further supports the message that the program values fathers. The California WIC Association's "Engaging Men & Dads at WIC" [toolkit](#) provides one example of how programs can assess the needs of fathers whose family members are eligible for WIC services<sup>21</sup>.

### **Make the service environment inclusive of fathers**

Because many human services have historically been geared to serving women and children and have excluded fathers, service environments have also been designed with women and children in mind. For instance, men might feel alienated in program offices decorated with pictures of women and children and staffed primarily by women, or if they encounter program materials that focus on mothers. Program managers can make fathers feel more welcome in these environments by hiring male staff and fathers, creating a father-friendly environment, and creating a peer group for fathers to learn from each other.

***Increase male staff representation.*** Hiring men and fathers as staff can make the program environment feel more friendly to fathers.<sup>11,12,13</sup> Having a for-men, by-men approach can encourage participation by increasing the extent to which fathers believe that staff understand who they are and from where they are coming. For instance, some Head Start programs intentionally recruit fathers to the agency Policy

#### **Program Spotlight**

Mecklenburg County's Child Support Enforcement Department collected data from fathers in pre- and post-orientation surveys about fathers' thoughts and opinions about the child support program. They found that fathers felt the child support program was "against them," and they expressed feeling uncomfortable to speak about their financial and family situations. To enhance fathers' comfort with the program, they recruited male staff to apply for positions in their office and modeled the program to have a "for men by men" atmosphere. This has increased the representation among their child support program's staff of individuals who are "married, fathers, and community leaders who all possess the skill set to assist other men in parenting and life skills."

Council, so fathers contribute to decisions about their local Head Start programs and become active members of the Head Start community. Programs that employ men or involve men in program design report that men open up to other men and appreciate seeing people like them reflected among the program staff.<sup>22,23,24</sup>

***Create a father-friendly environment.*** When increasing male and/or father staff representation is not possible, carving out a space for men and in which men feel safe can increase fathers' trust in the program, which might increase their willingness to engage in programming. This is particularly important for programs historically viewed as being adversarial toward or excluding fathers. Adding posters of men and fathers and using gender-neutral language in program materials can also make fathers feel more welcome at the service site.

***Provide father-to-father learning opportunities.*** Program staff report that fathers respond positively to peer learning and father-to-father mentorship.<sup>25,26</sup> Incorporating peer learning and mentorship can help create a service environment in which fathers feel supported, valued, and understood. Many program areas use this strategy, including home-visiting programs, Head Start programs, and employment programs.<sup>27,28,29</sup>

### **Develop programming that meets fathers' needs and recognizes their desire to be good parents**

Despite fathers' desire to be involved in their children's lives, many human services programs are not designed in such a way as to keep fathers engaged over time. Programs may be able to better meet fathers' needs by developing a variety of services that respond to the diverse life experiences, cultural norms, and unique needs of fathers, while also motivating engagement by focusing on the widespread desire fathers have to contribute to their child's well-being.

***Design flexible programs to meet fathers' needs.*** To facilitate ongoing participation in services, some programs offer fathers flexibility in how and where they engage in services. For example, some local Head Start programs offer at-home activities in addition to in-school engagement opportunities. Other programs find that strict, classroom-based structure provides a sense of stability desired by fathers whose lives might otherwise be unpredictable. For example, some fatherhood programs require weekly attendance at group-based workshops. These approaches to service delivery have tradeoffs between initial engagement, sustained engagement, and total services delivered. In a study of responsible fatherhood programs, programs that required daily attendance had low initial participate rates, but in the end, many participants received more than half of the workshop content. Conversely, programs that had a more flexible program structure had higher initial participation rates but lower sustained participation rates and received less content.<sup>30</sup>



#### **In their words**

"[Fathers] have one thing in common, and the common ground is that they are all fathers who love and want something better for their children."- *Ridge Project staff member*

***Recognize fathers' individual differences and shared desire to be good parents.*** Fathers share a common desire to be good parents, and program staff can appeal to this shared goal. To do so, staff can engage fathers by emphasizing their critical role in children's development and well-being and by designing programming that provides opportunities for fathers to interact with their children.<sup>31</sup> Although

fathers share a desire to be good fathers, personal challenges can create barriers to being effective fathers. These challenges may include unemployment, substance use disorder, and mental health challenges. To motivate father engagement in services that address personal challenges, programs can leverage fathers' desire to nurture their child's well-being. For instance, the Milwaukee Health Department encourages fathers to advocate for their child's health by being informed about developmental milestones, and then leverages that engagement to improve fathers' own health outcomes (for example, by encouraging them to quit smoking).

Programs can leverage fathers' shared desire to be good parents while also taking steps to address the unique needs and different backgrounds of fathers they serve. For example, resident fathers have different characteristics and needs to support their involvement in their children's lives than fathers who live apart from one or more of their children, and justice-involved fathers have needs that differ from fathers without justice involvement. Fathers, like other populations, bring an array of cultural differences.<sup>32,33</sup> To recognize the importance of these unique needs, staff can adjust their engagement approaches based on cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

### Promoting father engagement at the organization level

Agency leaders are responsible for implementing strategies that will promote father engagement while recognizing that many organizations may not have been designed to serve fathers. Leaders that want to promote father engagement can demonstrate their organization's commitment to facilitating father engagement, identify partnerships that will enhance the organization's capacity to promote father engagement, and support a staff and supervisory structure that will promote father engagement.

#### **Demonstrate organizational commitment to father engagement**

Agency leaders can provide administrative support, resources, and messaging to promote an organizational culture that values and promotes father engagement. In turn, when program leaders champion a cause, program staff are more likely to mirror the same commitment. Staff buy-in is also likely to increase if staff have the resources to implement new procedures.<sup>34</sup>

***Align father engagement with the organization's mission.*** Prioritizing father engagement might require staff and leadership to think more broadly about the value and role of fathers as it relates to achieving positive family well-being and how this can be promoted through agency policy and practice. Agency leaders can emphasize to staff how father engagement aligns with the organization's mission. For instance, fathers can offer critical support when families are involved in the child welfare system. Data from the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR) show that when children were in foster care, agencies were more likely to provide support to mothers than fathers to participate in their children's school activities, medical appointments or other activities to promote a positive parent-child relationship; in addition, case reviews found the frequency and quality of parent-

#### **Program Spotlight**

TYRO Dads is a statewide fatherhood program in Ohio that serves incarcerated and recently released fathers. TYRO Dads has several federal funding sources, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Labor, and U.S. Department of Justice. Each funding source has criteria for which populations may be served with the funding stream, so having multiple federal funding sources enables TYRO Dads to serve more fathers and types of fathers. The program also partners with local community colleges that offer opportunities to pay for training and refer interns who are fathers to the program.



child visitation to maintain or promote relationships was stronger for mothers than fathers. The reviews also found that agencies made more efforts to identify, locate, and evaluate maternal relatives as possible placement resources. Further, when child welfare agencies were involved with families when children remained in their homes or in foster care, agencies were less likely to involve fathers in planning for the child's safety, permanency or well-being.<sup>35</sup> However, agencies often now regard fathers as a critical support to the family unit and emphasize to staff the importance of engaging with fathers to better serve children. For example, through CFSR Program Improvement Plans, title IV-B Child and Family Services Plans, and other required federal plans, child welfare agencies are now implementing strategies that recognize the importance of fathers and strengthen their engagement.

The Illinois Department of Child and Family Services provides another example of aligning father engagement with organization mission. The agency conducts a Fatherhood Initiative Caseworker Training that emphasizes the importance of fathers for child development and trains caseworkers to engage fathers and their families as resources and incorporates fathers' experiences and views into the organizational outlook. Additionally, organizations can use resources such as the [National Fatherhood Initiative's Father-Readiness Assessment](#) to understand how well the organization engages fathers in programs and services and how well the culture of organization is suited for effectively engaging fathers. Results of such assessments can help organizations develop plans for increasing father engagement.

***Secure diverse funds for father engagement activities.*** Although some organizations might be able to fund father engagement strategies with existing funding sources, others might need to find new resources due to budget constraints or restrictions from funders. Diversifying funding sources can be a useful strategy for some organizations. Relying on a mix of public and private funding can help organizations sustain father engagement activities if a given funding source is no longer available.<sup>36</sup>

***Collect data for continuous quality improvement.*** Collecting, analyzing, and using data is critical for gauging whether and how well organizations are engaging with fathers. Standard measures of engagement—such as enrollment, dosage, and length of participation—help organizational leaders and staff establish a baseline and identify benchmarks for improving engagement and programming for fathers. To achieve these objectives, organizations should collect father-specific data as well as data that can be disaggregated to analyze whether programs effectively serve fathers vis-à-vis other parents and populations served. All human services organizations can implement strong continuous quality improvement processes. For example, Head Start programs can record data on fathers' attendance at in-school activities, and local WIC programs may choose to collect information on fathers' attendance at programming for their family members, such as breastfeeding support groups. Organizations can use this information to assess how engaged fathers are in services and identify benchmarks for improving engagement. Programs can also collect father feedback on their experiences in programming to improve quality. Capturing such information demonstrates that the organization values fathers' voices while pushing organization staff to consider how they are engaging fathers. Putting fathers at the center of program development can help empower fathers, reduce organizational bias, and promote collaborative decision making.<sup>37</sup>

### **Enhance staffing and supervision**

Ensuring that staff are committed and empowered to engage fathers is one of the most important approaches an organization can take to improve and support father engagement. If staff do not have the motivation or skills to engage fathers, it might not matter how much organization leaders support father

engagement or with whom the organization partners. Therefore, organizations can consider whether available training meets their needs and what practices will best support staff.

***Train all staff to engage fathers.*** All staff—including transportation providers, receptionists, employment service providers, childcare providers, and fatherhood facilitators—can receive cross-functional training to promote father engagement. Cross-training can help staff understand and explain to fathers the services available in other parts of the organization and identify opportunities to strengthen the way they engage with and support fathers.

Specialized trainings can enhance staff ability to engage fathers. For instance, motivational interviewing and training in trauma-informed approaches have been proven to enhance the ability of staff to engage with fathers.<sup>38,39</sup>

Training staff to recognize their own implicit bias about fathers and how to overcome that bias is also important for shifting an organization’s approach to father engagement. For example, a child protective services worker who experienced domestic violence in her own life might view men as a danger to the family and might be either consciously or unconsciously unwilling to consider a father’s home as safe for a child being removed from their mother’s home. In addition, leaders can examine and address the extent to which institutionalized racism contributes to bias against fathers in their organizations.<sup>40,41,42</sup>

***Create supervisory practices to support and monitor father engagement.*** Supervisors are the intermediate level between organizational leaders and frontline staff and therefore can be key to ensuring frontline staff implement the vision of organizational leaders.<sup>43</sup> One strategy some programs use to ensure supervisors support father engagement is to require supervisors to check in on how well all staff are engaging fathers in programming. If staff are struggling with father engagement, supervisors can use one-on-one or group settings to review case examples and discuss promising or effective engagement strategies.<sup>44</sup>



### In Their Words

“...we took [the] case manager training to serve fathers, even though we aren’t case managers. Understanding how to interact with the fathers enhanced my ability to understand how to navigate the conversation so that I could get or impart the information that will help them be more successful...we don’t have to be experts, but we need to cross-functionally understand the nuances of service delivery. It helps us relate to one another and appreciate what we do individually and collectively.”—*People for People employment services provider on cross-functional training*

### Program Spotlight

ForeverDads, an Ohio community-based nonprofit fatherhood organization, has developed a network of partners to better support fathers’ needs. To build this network, ForeverDads engages with community stakeholders as educators in their program, engages with the fathers through activities and events, and encourages stakeholders to financially support fatherhood efforts through fundraising endeavors. In addition, ForeverDads staff and board members participate in various community-based committees and build relationships with other organizations. These partnerships include schools, courts, agencies, faith-based organizations, other nonprofits, as well as, businesses, employment-based, government and law enforcement entities and the philanthropic community, to create a broad pool of resources for the organization and fathers. A central part of the dynamic development of partnerships was demonstrating the potential for the partnership to benefit both the collaborative partner and ForeverDads. ForeverDads stakeholders find that “those who partner with ForeverDads, prosper.”



## **Identify and collaborate with partner organizations**

Developing partnerships can help organizations engage fathers in several ways. First, partnering with organizations that provide complementary services can conserve resources. For instance, an organization that provides employment services can partner with a fatherhood program so the employment organization does not have to develop its own fatherhood program. Second, partnerships can also serve as recruitment sources. For instance, developing partnerships with organizations such as employment service providers and health clinics can expand the reach of an organization without requiring more recruitment efforts by organizational staff. Third, partnerships can help an organization better achieve its goals. As an example, by partnering with a fatherhood program, a substance use treatment program may be able to support the desire of fathers in treatment to reconnect with their children and to parent effectively. This in turn can provide additional motivation for these fathers to complete the substance use treatment program.

*Develop partnerships to identify new fathers and complement existing services.* Establishing a network of partners to meet the needs of fathers can expand fathers' access to other needed services beyond what a single organization can provide. To encourage other organizations to invest in new partnerships, organizations can highlight how the partnership helps each organization better meet its mission. In addition, partnering organizations might want to consider the advantage of co-locating staff. Locating multiple services by different organizations in a single space can reduce burden on fathers who might otherwise have to visit different locations to receive services. Moreover, if organizations share office space, it may be more likely that a partnering organization will make needed referrals.

## **System-level approaches to promote father engagement**

Human services systems have historically been designed for mothers and children and have often excluded fathers. As a result, longstanding contextual factors beyond the control of any single organization or program might inhibit or facilitate father engagement efforts. In some cases, systemic challenges create barriers to father engagement. Federal, state, local, and tribal governments, as well as associations, commissions, foundations, technical assistance providers, and other nongovernmental intermediary organizations, can promote father engagement and work to dismantle this historical exclusion and bias by identifying systemic barriers and facilitating access to father engagement resources.

### **Identify and break down systemic barriers to father engagement**

Policies, practices, and institutional norms can inadvertently create systemic barriers to father engagement within and across program areas. For instance, data-sharing limitations can create challenges for cross-system collaboration at the organizational and program level. By identifying these barriers, system-level staff and entities can help break down barriers so organizations and programs can access and maximize resources that will facilitate father engagement.

*Review internal policies to overcome historical barriers for fathers.* System-level staff within and across program areas can review program policies for barriers that exclude fathers or might deter fathers from engaging in services. For instance, state child welfare agencies that support prevention services might consider the extent to which fathers are included in these services.<sup>45</sup> One example of this is that states can use child welfare funding to support parents through residential substance use programming, and some facilities allow the child to remain with their parent throughout the duration of their services. However, many facilities are set up to serve mothers and their children, leaving less opportunities for fathers with substance use disorder to continue parental responsibilities while receiving treatment. In addition,

although the WIC program is designed to serve women and children, state or federal guidance from nutrition programs can encourage local staff to ensure that fathers can also access services on behalf of their children. Using whole-family and two-generation approaches also supports active engagement of fathers in programming and serves as a promising model for enhancing father engagement across program areas.<sup>46</sup>

***Align policies across programs to streamline father engagement.*** System-level actors can be intentional about improving policies to better facilitate father engagement across multiple programs, organizations, or systems. For example, the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) is a national computer matching system operated by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement to locate child support paying parents for child support establishment and enforcement. Policy and statutory changes including the Fostering Connections Act<sup>47</sup> made it easier for child support agencies to provide information from the FPLS to child welfare agencies for child welfare purposes, such as identifying noncustodial parents who can be a support for the family or to take responsibility for a child's care. In addition, programs may face barriers to accessing or using funding streams that they could potentially use to promote father engagement activities due to restrictions at the system level, including limitations in statutes, regulations, or guidance on how funding can be used. Identifying and breaking down such barriers, which in some cases could be achieved through federal guidance, can further promote organizations' abilities to enhance father engagement efforts.

***Include fathers' voices in policy, technical assistance, and research.*** Policies developed with the direct input of fathers themselves may better reflect their needs and motivations, which can improve the chances that programs and organizations can design programming that engages fathers in day-to-day services. Fathers may be particularly well-suited to identify barriers to their engagement, providing recommendations to systems as to key barriers and systemic biases to try to break down. In addition, as system-level entities develop technical assistance and research initiatives, incorporating fathers' voices into conversations about the goals and designs of these efforts may also improve their effectiveness.

### **Provide technical assistance, funding, and other resources to organizations and programs**

System-level actors can support programs and organizations by sharing their knowledge, lessons learned, and best practices for father engagement through training and technical assistance, and by helping frontline staff and leadership navigate available resources.

***Help organizations identify and access assistance resources.*** Philanthropy, federal and state agencies, associations, and other intermediaries can help organizations and programs identify the range of available resources available to aid their work – from public and private funding streams to training and technical assistance opportunities. Intermediaries can also help organizations overcome barriers to accessing these resources, such as a lack of awareness or limited experience applying for grants. In some cases, system-level entities may directly fund or operate these opportunities or identify a need for new or expanded types of funding or technical assistance.

#### **Program Spotlight**

The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood is a bipartisan effort that includes representatives from all three branches of government; directors from various state agencies including the Departments of Corrections, Youth Services, Health, Education, and Job and Family Services; five members of the public appointed by the governor; and representatives from the Families and Children First Council. The four key purposes of the Commission are to fund fatherhood programs, recommend father-friendly policy, train practitioners to engage with fathers, and bring an awareness to the important role fathers play in their children's lives."

**Encourage and develop statewide fatherhood commissions.** Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, and Ohio have statewide fatherhood commissions, which are legislatively authorized commissions housed within a state government agency dedicated to social services and family welfare. These cross-agency bodies facilitate father engagement efforts by offering funding, training, and other resources to local fatherhood programs and service partners. Establishing a statewide commission can be a good way to ensure that all stakeholders are at the table and able to communicate and engage in efforts to include fathers across program areas.<sup>44</sup>

**Consider providing technical assistance on data collection.** Having and using data on fathers is central to organizations' ability to understand the status of their efforts to design programming to facilitate father engagement and to measure improvement in father engagement over time. Requiring or supporting organizations and programs to report metrics on the number of fathers engaged in services provides system-level intermediaries – as well as organizations and programs – with a better understanding of the reach of their program, positioning them to be better able to assess benefits of father engagement over time.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Facilitating fathers' engagement in services – especially those historically designed for mothers and children – can lead to better outcomes for fathers, mothers, and children. Though father engagement is important and supports fathers' desires to be involved in their children's lives, it can still be quite challenging for human services stakeholders given the historical context. This issue brief summarizes approaches to father engagement at the program, organizational, and system levels that apply across human services areas. Across human services areas, there is a focus on the commonality of the fathers' desire to be good parents and recognizing the importance of fathers' role in the family and their interest in being involved in the lives of their children. In addition, across all father populations, it can be critical to emphasize the importance of authenticity when engaging fathers. More than anything, at all levels, successful father engagement efforts center on valuing fathers—whether through developing programming, structuring the organization's capacity-building activities, or reviewing policies and technical assistance opportunities.

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