

## Program Snapshot: Engaging Fathers During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Armando Yañez and Rebekah Selekman

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many human services organizations, including fatherhood programs, adapted their engagement approaches as the needs of the people they serve changed. This Program Snapshot—part of a project on father engagement strategies across human services programs called KEEP Fathers Engaged<sup>i</sup>—explores how a fatherhood program in South Carolina adapted its program to better engage fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlights three strategies this program and others used during the pandemic that may help strengthen service delivery going forward. These strategies include (1) emphasizing retention of fathers in programming, (2) adjusting program services to meet new needs that arose during the pandemic, and (3) using the opportunities created by virtual service delivery.

### Program Overview: Father to Father, Inc.

Located in Charleston, South Carolina, Father to Father, Inc. is one of six local organizations supported by the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families network. For over 20 years, Father to Father, Inc. has provided free services and support to fathers and families in several counties throughout the state. These include fatherhood programming, employment coaching, assistance with navigating the child support system, guidance on legal issues, peer group sessions that offer fathers a safe space to talk and support each other, referrals to other support services, and other services to help meet fathers' individual needs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Father to Father, Inc. adapted its service offerings to meet pandemic-related challenges. For example, many fathers needed printers to support their children's home schooling, so the program allowed parents to bring their children's homework to its office for printing. Similarly, to help fathers access virtual services, the program extended Wi-Fi to the parking lot so participants could access it from their cars outside. One participant said, "I felt like even though the world was changing, [Father to Father, Inc. was] proactive in getting things done and keeping the ball rolling."



#### What is father engagement?

In this Program Snapshot, the term "father engagement" refers to **the purposeful inclusion of fathers in program services with the goal of improving outcomes for fathers, their children, and families**. This engagement may be with father-specific services (e.g., participation in responsible fatherhood programs) or with programs primarily designed for children, mothers, or families (e.g., taking part in children's school activities or attending prenatal appointments with mothers).

Fathers' involvement in the lives of their children improves child and family well-being. For example, father involvement can lead to improved social-emotional development, school performance, and cognitive and linguistic skills.<sup>1</sup> But historically, the safety net has focused primarily on mothers and children, leaving some fathers ignored or excluded from important social services. This has led some fathers to feel distrustful of human services organizations and programs, ostracized from the service system, and stigmatized for needing assistance.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

In recent years, many human services organizations and service systems have been reexamining their approaches to serving fathers and identifying ways to improve father engagement in services.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>i</sup> More information and resources from KEEP Fathers Engaged is available at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/father-engagement>.

Additionally, when adapting in-person group sessions to the virtual environment, Father to Father, Inc. administered father engagement surveys at the end of each virtual group session to inform program improvements. From the surveys, program staff learned that fathers did not respond well to pre-recorded videos because fathers were not able to engage with other participants. Therefore, the program pivoted to Zoom sessions and made sure to incorporate opportunities for father-to-father interactions, which made its virtual group sessions more successful. One father reported, “To be honest with you, the Zoom meetings are just as helpful as [in-person group meetings]. You know, a lot of times, us as men, we don't have the space to actually say how we're feeling, you know, talk about things that are bothering us. And that's something that Father to Father, Inc. provides that I'm really grateful for.”

*[Fathers] had to have access to technology, and they needed to know how to use it... But if you were serving fathers... you need to find a way to connect dads to learning.*  
— Kirk Berry, project manager, Public Strategies, Inc.

### Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lasting Lessons for Engaging Fathers

As more in-person services become safer and some COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions ease, Father to Father, Inc. and other fatherhood organizations have identified several lessons from their operations during the pandemic that they may seek to retain in some form in order to strengthen their programming.

**Emphasize retention of fathers in programming.** At the start of the pandemic, organizational leaders had to quickly identify how they would structure their programs to maintain and sustain father engagement in an environment in which face-to-face interaction was not possible. The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families (SCCFF), an agency guiding the work of six fatherhood programs in the state, developed the Growth, Positioning, Sacrifice, and Sustainability model to identify how and where the organization could grow in response to the pandemic, how it could position itself and its service offerings, what services needed to be sacrificed, and what services needed to be sustained to continue operations. This approach informed the organization's decision to reduce its focus on recruitment, repurpose program resources, and focus on providing case management services to current participants. SCCFF believes that programs can more easily recruit fathers when the program is effective at service delivery. To that end, SCCFF encouraged case managers to “dig deeper” into meeting the needs of fathers already enrolled in the program, referred to as “keepers”. This was accomplished through more intensive case management focused on helping “keepers” complete their program. By ensuring that programs continued to serve fathers effectively during the pandemic, SCCFF aimed to continue achieving program outcomes for fathers despite disruptions in services. When the pandemic ends, SCCFF hopes to maintain elements of this deeper focus on existing participants while returning to recruitment and seeking to expand its reach. SCCFF also found that despite their reducing active recruitment, enrollment of new program participants did not stop entirely, as many fathers and stakeholders knew about SCCFF programs due to its existing reputation in the community.

*We were a high-touch organization. So how do you go from high touch to high reach?... We're going to serve the keepers, deeper. So, whoever we got, that's who we're rolling with—we're going to dig deeper on those people.*  
— Richard Barr, vice president of strategic and organizational development, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families

**Adjust program services to meet newly-identified needs.** Father to Father, Inc. and other SCCFF programs have long helped the fathers they served access transportation, meals, and employment assistance. After the pandemic hit, program participants began asking for assistance for other, newly-identified needs, including maintaining secure and stable housing and supporting other family members whose education, jobs, or health were affected by the pandemic. To help fathers meet these emerging needs and to facilitate fathers' continued involvement with their families, fatherhood programs had to adapt the services they provide. For example, Father to Father, Inc. began helping fathers access technology and Internet service, so that resident children could attend school virtually while fathers worked virtually, if possible. Fathers also needed technological support to attend virtual fatherhood programming. In South Carolina, SCCFF told programs how to repurpose funds previously set aside for recruitment to help families overcome food insecurity caused by loss of school-provided meals and help fathers pay for Internet connections at home.

**Leverage the opportunities created by virtual service delivery.** Virtual program options have expanded the reach of fatherhood programs. Before the pandemic, some work schedules may have made attending fatherhood programming challenging. Additionally, fathers who had other responsibilities, such as attending court-mandated activities or probation meetings, may have had scheduling conflicts with the fatherhood program; travel time to and from different commitments might have also prevented fathers from attending services. Practitioners from SCCFF and Father to Father, Inc. perceived that virtual service delivery offers more flexibility as to when case management and workshop-based classes are available. Additionally, practitioners reported that virtual service delivery has minimized transportation as a barrier to participation. For fathers living in remote areas, where transportation to and from program offices is often challenging, accessing virtual services has kept them engaged in fatherhood programs. Moreover, some program staff have noticed an improvement in outcomes such as following through on supportive service referrals when fathers have the flexibility to attend program services virtually. Because of the added benefits of virtual service delivery, some programs have acknowledged that even after the pandemic, they may keep virtual service delivery available as another strategy for father engagement. For example, Father to Father, Inc. plans to continue its virtual orientation because it can offer it in the evening, and participants would not have to travel to a specific location to learn more about the program.

*This is where it shows that opportunity can come out of this pandemic...we started virtual orientations.... We are going to meet with a new audience we never expected to meet with because of this virtual orientation.  
— Sean Wilson, lead intervention specialist, Father to Father, Inc.*

**About the study.** 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.

The approaches described in this Practice Guide/Fact Sheet/Program Snapshot reflect practices that selected programs reported to be effective at engaging fathers, and the lessons identified are informed by findings from the KEEP Fathers Engaged project. The impacts of these specific approaches on father and family outcomes were not formally evaluated as part of this study. The KEEP Father Engaged project findings are broadly applicable across human services programs; however, they do not fully address situations where programs determine additional intervention is needed to facilitate fathers' healthy involvement with their families, such as cases involving family violence. For more information about the study, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/father-engagement>.

Mathematica presented on father engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic at the American Public Human Services Association's Third Thursday Virtual Mini-Series of Health and Human Services Collective Learning conference on March 18, 2021. This presentation included Kirk Berry, project manager at Public Strategies; Richard Barr, vice president of strategic and organizational development at the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families; and Sean Wilson, lead intervention specialist at Father to Father, Inc. Mathematica staff also interviewed John Ward, a former Father to Father program participant in March 2021 about his experience receiving services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The content of this fact sheet is informed by this conference presentation. This fact sheet was developed for the project entitled Key Programmatic Elements of Engaging Fathers to Promote Self-Sufficiency (KEEP Fathers Engaged), sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Additional resources developed as part of KEEP Fathers Engaged are available at <https://aspe.hhs.gov/father-engagement>. The authors thank Kirk Berry, Richard Barr, Sean Wilson, and John Ward for their contribution to this project.

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- 1 Karberg, E., J. Finochiaro, and N. Vann. "Father and Child Well-Being: A Scan of Current Research." Washington, DC: National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2019.
  - 2 Berlyn, C., S. Wise, and G. Soriano. "Engaging Fathers in Child and Family Services: Participation, Perceptions and Good Practice." *Family Matters*, vol. 80, no. 37, 2008.
  - 3 Ferguson, H., and F. Hogan. *Strengthening Families Through Fathers: Developing Policy and Practice in Relation to Vulnerable Fathers and Their Families*. Waterford, Ireland: The Centre for Social and Family Research, Waterford Institute of Technology, 2004.
  - 4 Rogers, T.N., and C.R. Rogers. "Social Services Professionals' Views of Barriers to Supporting Homeless Noncustodial Fathers." *Family Relations*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2019, pp. 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12345>.
  - 5 Father engagement has different meanings for different stakeholders. The definition used in this fact sheet was informed by Selekmán, R., K. Berry, R. Barr, and S. Wilson. "Father Engagement During COVID-19: Lessons from the Field." Webinar for the American Public Human Services Association Third Thursday Virtual Mini-Series of Health and Human Services Collective Learning. March 18, 2021.