EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of noncustodial fathers in the lives of low-income families has received increased attention from policymakers and programs in the past decade. With welfare reform placing time limits on cash benefits, there has been a strong interest in increasing financial support from noncustodial parents as a way to reduce poverty among low-income children. Although child support enforcement efforts have been increasing dramatically in recent years, there is some evidence that many low-income fathers cannot afford to support their children financially without impoverishing themselves or their families. To address these complex issues, a number of initiatives have focused on developing services and options to help low-income fathers become more financially and emotionally involved with their families and to help young, low-income families become stable.

The Partners for Fragile Families (PFF) demonstration program intended to effect systems change, deliver appropriate and effective services, and improve outcomes for both parents and children in low-income families. The goal of the projects was to make lasting changes in the way public agencies (especially child support enforcement agencies) and community- and faith-based organizations work with unmarried families to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and parents. The demonstration focused on promoting the voluntary establishment of paternity; connecting young fathers with the child support system and encouraging the payment of child support; improving the parenting and relationship skills of young fathers; helping young fathers secure and retain employment; and strengthening family ties, commitments, and other types of father involvement when parents do not live together.

Sponsored by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Ford Foundation (with several other foundations also making contributions), the PFF demonstration was initially developed in 1996 with planning grants to 16 sites. Thirteen of these projects in nine states moved forward to the demonstration phase, operating from 2000 to 2003 and funded by federal (provided under a federal waiver) and foundation resources. Unlike other program initiatives for noncustodial fathers, PFF targeted young fathers (16 to 25 years old) who had not yet established paternity and did not yet have extensive involvement with the child support enforcement (CSE) system. The underlying theory was that, by targeting new fathers at a point when they had little or no previous involvement with this system and when they still had an opportunity to develop a positive relationship with the mother of their children and the children themselves, the projects could better assist these young parents to become strong financial and emotional resources for their children.

This report, the first of several from the national evaluation of PFF sponsored by HHS, describes the design and implementation of the 13 projects. The report is primarily based on discussions with staff from the program and key partners as well as focus groups with participants at each project. Subsequent reports will include case studies of selected fathers and their families and an analysis of economic and child support outcomes.

The PFF Demonstration Projects

Men's Services Program at the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development, *Baltimore, MD*

Young Fathers/Responsible Fathers in the Office of Male Initiatives, Baltimore City Department of Social Services, *Baltimore, MD*

Father Friendly Initiative at *Boston Healthy Start*, Boston Public Health Commission, *Boston, MA*

Partners for Fragile Families, Family Services of Greater Boston, *Boston, MA*

Young Fathers Program at Human Services, Inc., *Denver, CO*

Father Resource Program at the Fathers and Families Resource/Research Center (affiliated with Wishard Health Services), *Indianapolis, IN*

The Fatherhood Program, in Bienvenidos Family Services, *Los Angeles, CA*

Role of Men, City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, *Los Angeles, CA*

Truevine Community Outreach Young Fathers Program, *Los Angeles, CA*

The FATHER Project, Minneapolis, MN

Fathers Strive for Family at STRIVE/East Harlem Employment Services, *New York, NY*

The Fatherhood Project,Goodwill Industries of Southern Wisconsin and Metropolitan Chicago, *Racine, WI*

Family Matters, Chester County Housing Development Corporation, *West Chester, PA*

Note: Illinois had a PFF project in Chicago but withdrew early in the demonstration; additional projects in Los Angeles and New York City also withdrew early.

Program Design

Established organizations, usually nonprofits, implemented most of the PFF projects. The sponsoring organizations included a housing development corporation, a faith-based program administered by a church, local health departments, a local social service agency, and private service organizations. About half the PFF agencies had previous experience serving noncustodial fathers; the other half started PFF from scratch. Even those with previous experience had not focused on the target group of young fathers with little or no involvement with CSE.

A key goal of the PFF program was to support the formation of viable partnerships between public agencies and community-based organizations to strengthen the involvement of both parents, but particularly fathers, in the lives of their children. To ensure strong partnerships, the demonstration incorporated a planning period, supported by foundation grants, to allow these relationships to be developed in each site. Most of the PFF projects developed collaborations to serve young fathers that included CSE agencies, workforce development agencies, health and social service organizations, and schools, and some involved more partners than others. The state and local CSE agencies were partners in all the projects. Although the CSE agency played a

more significant role in some PFF sites than others, this linkage is notable because it has been difficult for other programs serving low-income fathers to involve this agency in a substantial way.

The PFF projects were generally small by design. The initial goals were to serve between 150 and 300 participants over the course of the demonstration. Primarily because of problems identifying men who met the eligibility requirements, most projects enrolled far fewer participants than planned, ranging from 37 (in New York) to 266 (in Denver). About half the projects enrolled fewer than 100 participants. Several projects, however, served some fathers who did not meet the PFF eligibility criteria through other funding sources.

Although there is variation across the sites, all the projects served a disadvantaged population. The projects, as intended, served young fathers who had limited connections to the child support system. The average age of the participants was 21, and about one-quarter had a child support order in place when they entered the project. Most participants had one child and had never been married. Across the projects, about half the participants did not have high school diplomas or general equivalency diplomas (GED), and only about one-third were working at the time of enrollment. All the projects served a predominantly black population, although some had a significant number of Hispanic participants.

A distinguishing feature of the PFF program design was the public-private partnership among OCSE, the Ford Foundation, local nonprofit organizations, and the National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL), a nonprofit organization that provides services and technical assistance to community-based organizations and public agencies serving young fathers and fragile families. The Ford Foundation and OCSE felt it was important to have a coordinated technical assistance and program development strategy and funded NPCL to serve in that capacity.

The nine PFF states received a federal waiver of some provisions in the child support authorizing legislation, allowing OCSE funds to be used for fatherhood and employment services. Through its intermediary, NPCL, the Ford Foundation initially provided planning grants to each PFF site and to the state CSE agencies to match the OCSE federal funds for the operational demonstration phase. This public-private financial arrangement also involved state CSE agencies in PFF, which received and then distributed most of the PFF funds to the local projects in the state to begin operations. Because of this funding arrangement, however, most state CSE agencies were not involved in the PFF programs during the planning phase. Several projects received funding beyond that provided through the waiver. Most of these additional resources came from private foundations, although some sites received other federal or state grants.

Recruiting and Enrolling Participants

Identifying young fathers who met the PFF eligibility criteria was one of the most critical challenges faced by the PFF projects. Above all other factors, the strict initial eligibility criteria posed the most difficulty: new fathers between 16 and 25 years old, without paternity established, and with little or no involvement with the CSE system. Although the programs could often recruit a pool of men interested in the program, many ended up not meeting the eligibility

criteria and, as a result, most PFF programs were unable to meet their enrollment goals. Other responsible fatherhood initiatives have also struggled with maintaining enrollment levels, but the stringent eligibility criteria made enrollment a particularly challenging issue in PFF. As a result, most projects eventually relaxed the criteria, allowing them to serve a broader population of young, noncustodial fathers.

Aside from the stringent PFF eligibility criteria, projects faced several secondary challenges that inhibited recruitment and enrollment, including lack of interest in project services from many potential participants, difficulty acquiring adequate numbers of referrals from other agencies, referred individuals not showing up for PFF intake and assessment, delays in start-up because of the time that it took to secure federal waivers, and (at several sites) funding uncertainties that resulted in a halt in recruitment efforts.

To address the ongoing enrollment challenges, projects used a variety of outreach strategies to reach a greater number of men, including (1) developing arrangements for other agencies (e.g., hospitals/clinics, courts, probation/parole officers, homeless shelters) to make direct referrals to PFF; (2) distributing brochures and flyers and making presentations at other local human service agencies and programs, neighborhood events, and local centers (schools, community centers, housing projects); (3) conducting neighborhood outreach; and (4) placing public service announcements on radio and television and paid advertisements in local media.

One of the most important recruitment sources was reportedly word of mouth. In focus groups, most participants confirmed that they generally heard about PFF from friends and relatives. The most common reason participants gave for wanting to participate was to get a job; the second most common reason was to get help with child visitation issues.

PFF Program Services

In all sites, the project offered a large number of services, with considerable variation across projects in the intensity of services, number of participants who used various services, and whether activities were delivered by PFF directly, by other units of the lead agency, or by outside agencies. Some sites, particularly Minneapolis, were notable for both the range and intensity of services project staff provided directly. The key services the project offered are described below.

Structured workshops and case management. All the PFF projects featured a series of workshops, based at least in part on an NPCL fatherhood curriculum that included instruction on such topics as fatherhood, parenting, job readiness and job search, child support, health and sexuality, anger management, domestic violence, child development, drug and alcohol abuse, and life skills. Some projects scheduled weekly workshops or group meetings over two to four months. Others developed more intensive components, such as sessions that met for several hours a day, albeit for a shorter period (e.g., six weeks). All the projects provided case management, which included meeting with participants at enrollment to conduct an assessment, arranging for them to participate in PFF project activities, making referrals to a range of services from other agencies, and monitoring participation and progress.

Peer support. Peer support groups provided the fathers with an opportunity to discuss their own situations, share experiences, get advice, and think out loud. Based on focus group

discussions, these sessions were popular among many young fathers, and project staff considered the sessions important for addressing the day-to-day issues that arose in participants' lives. Some sites incorporated peer support sessions into part of the workshops, and others had stand-alone peer support sessions.

Employment services. Employment services such as job readiness instruction, job search assistance, job referral and placement, and referrals to education and job training were viewed as critical to eliciting interest in the project and maintaining participant involvement. These services were a core element of many, although not all, PFF projects. Some projects sponsored separate activities on employment issues; others devoted certain workshop sessions to the topic; and some made referrals to other organizations for these services.

Child support services. Administrators and staff from CSE and PFF indicated that the PFF project was very important in opening or expanding the dialogue about the issues facing low-income fathers. In many sites, CSE and PFF staff felt that this new relationship helped the child support system learn more about and acknowledge these issues and begin to change the "deadbeat dad" image. In most sites, there was a designated CSE staff person whom PFF participants and staff could contact directly; in many projects, CSE staff made presentations at workshops to educate participants about their policies and procedures. Child support staff also assisted participants on issues regarding paternity and child support orders and worked to help PFF participants understand and use the flexibility in the system. Sites with CSE staff colocated at the PFF project were especially proactive and engaged with participants, and staff from both agencies reported this arrangement as particularly effective in addressing participants' child support needs. However, very few state-level policies were established to provide more flexible CSE policies for PFF participants.

Parenting and relationship services. Although improving parenting skills was a key goal of the PFF demonstrations, it was not given equal emphasis across sites. Some projects offered more comprehensive services than others, such as regularly scheduled activities devoted to parenting issues. Even though the demonstration was designed to intervene with participants while the connection with the custodial parent was relatively strong, project staff reported that this relationship was sometimes strained or tenuous because of a range of issues, including child support, visitation, and the extent of parental involvement with the children. Most projects made referrals for mediation services as needed, but only a few provided counseling for couples.

Implementation Challenges

The experiences of the PFF projects provide a number of insights into how to develop, structure, and operate interventions for low-income fathers.

Start-up challenges. Some projects ran into more problems than others, and some weathered the challenges better than others. In several sites, start-up was relatively easy, in part because the organizations had operated similar fatherhood programs in the past that could be built upon, and experienced staff were already in place to begin recruiting and serving young fathers. Other sites had to start from scratch, securing PFF grant funds, hiring and training staff, designing their intervention, developing a new curriculum or adopting one from another source, developing recruitment strategies, and taking all other necessary steps to begin operations.

Although several challenges were common to all PFF sites, each project faced different issues from the planning stage to full-scale implementation.

- **Narrow PFF eligibility criteria hampered efforts to initiate the projects.** The problems encountered by many PFF projects in identifying program participants originated from the underlying goal of reaching young fathers. Theoretically, a focus on young men with no connection to the child support system made sense to all involved. However, this targeting substantially narrowed the pool of available disadvantaged fathers from which sites could recruit. In addition, the remaining pool of young fathers was among the most resistant to join such programs and was disconnected from potential referral sources (including the child support system and courts). Because they were not yet engaged with the child support system, many fathers did not fully understand the potential financial burden they could face and did not have strong motivation to enroll.

- **Changes to the child support system overtook PFF and reduced the enthusiasm of potential organizations to partner with PFF.** Although the concept of PFF was unique when it was developed in 1996, by the time the demonstration was fully implemented, other responsible fatherhood programs had started in many communities nationwide. Independent of PFF, the child support enforcement system was already incorporating more "father-friendly" approaches to service delivery at about the same time PFF was in its developmental stages. The child support system had begun to absorb the lessons learned from earlier fatherhood initiatives (such as the Parents' Fair Share project and the Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration). By the time PFF was operational, some may have viewed it as less pioneering than when it was conceived several years earlier. In addition, the number of young fathers who had not established paternity for their children decreased in the mid- to late 1990s as a result of the success of in-hospital paternity establishment initiatives across the country that established paternity at the time of a child's birth. The pool of young fathers without paternity established for their children had diminished in the PFF sites by the time the projects were implemented.

- **The waiver process was much slower than anticipated.** States with PFF projects received a federal waiver of some provisions in the child support authorizing legislation that allowed federal OCSE funds to be used for fatherhood and employment services. Administrators in virtually all the demonstration sites indicated that the waiver process took much longer than they expected, creating uncertainties about when funding would arrive and making it difficult to determine when to hire staff to start the project. The delay also created a discontinuity between the planning grant phase (when the waiver was not in place) and full-scale PFF implementation (when federal funds through the waiver became available). This loss of momentum was particularly problematic in sites that did not already have a responsible fatherhood program or alternative funding sources to support workshops and other activities.

- **Ongoing operational issues.** Projects also faced challenges providing services and maintaining interest among partnering organizations and participating fathers.

- **Identifying eligible participants was difficult in most project sites.** As with many other programs serving noncustodial fathers, identifying eligible participants was

extremely difficult from the beginning in many sites, and did not become much easier as the demonstration effort unfolded. The PFF programs were generally able to get the word out in the community about the program, but the strict eligibility requirements made it difficult to identify a significant number of men who could enroll in the program, even though these requirements were relaxed over time.

Dropout rates were often high. Project managers in several sites estimated that attrition rates were very high (as much as 70 percent), with many participants dropping out before completing program services. Some participants dropped out for positive reasons, such as finding a job or moving to another locality, but others encountered various personal problems that prevented them from attending project activities (such as an arrest, a substance abuse relapse, a conflict with the child's mother, or a desire to avoid involvement with the child support system). Staff also reported that dropout rates were high in part because many participants were young and immature; as a result, they were often unwilling to commit themselves to attend project activities regularly, were mobile and difficult to track, and were easily distracted by friends and other neighborhood activities. Because participation in PFF projects was voluntary, staff could not sanction PFF participants for failing to attend activities.

- **Roles and responsibilities were not always clear among the various agencies and organizations involved in the PFF demonstration.** From the PFF site perspective, several layers of administration and oversight were involved in the initiative: the local child support program, the state child support agency (which provided PFF funding and, depending upon the site, technical assistance), NPCL and Metis (which provided guidance and technical assistance, including help with data system development), the Ford Foundation (which provided funding), and OCSE at HHS (responsible for overseeing the demonstration). Sometimes sites received mixed signals from the various organizations overseeing their projects, ultimately hampering the operation of their initiatives.

- **Management information systems were not fully implemented at some PFF sites.** Throughout the demonstration effort, PFF sites struggled with understanding and meeting data reporting requirements. Most had problems fully implementing their client data tracking systems and collecting useful and valid participant data. Although most sites tracked the basic demographic characteristics of participants served fairly successfully, many experienced substantial difficulties tracking the types of services provided to and outcomes for participants.

- **Uncertainties about PFF funding resulted in a slowdown of recruitment and service delivery for several sites.** Administrators at several sites indicated that they had not received all the funding they had anticipated under the demonstration or reported significant delays in the receipt of funding. Several claimed that uncertainties about receipt of funding affected their ability to meet enrollment goals and maintain their service delivery system.

Lessons from the PFF Demonstration

The PFF projects provide insights into how to structure and implement programs for low-income, noncustodial fathers. Below are several lessons from the program implementation experiences of the PFF projects.

Careful consideration should be given to the eligibility/targeting criteria in responsible fatherhood initiatives. If targeting is too narrow, programs will struggle to attract sufficient numbers of participants. PFF administrators and staff felt that targeting resources on those most in need was important, but that flexibility was needed to avoid becoming so prescriptive that projects failed to serve many young fathers in real need of services. For example, several administrators remarked that they would recommend increasing the age threshold from 26 to 30 years in a program such as PFF. Several administrators also noted that even noncustodial parents with significant previous involvement with the child support system need parenting education and help resolving child support and visitation issues.

Providing services designed to help low-income fathers understand the child support system is critical. Child support agencies were involved in all the PFF projects. PFF staff and participants reported that having a contact person within the child support system was particularly valuable. In several sites, CSE staff visited the PFF project periodically to disseminate information or lead workshop sessions. Such involvement helped alleviate participants' fears and concerns about becoming involved with the child support system. The projects with the strongest child support links colocated at least one CSE staff member with the PFF project staff. The colocated CSE staff were able to directly answer questions about the system, handle tasks such as establishing or modifying child support orders in a timely manner, and work with participants more consistently and more proactively to resolve issues.

One goal of the PFF initiative was to make lasting systemic changes in the ways public agencies and community organizations work with low-income families, but this goal was difficult to attain. The PFF projects were relatively small-scale, local efforts, and entire systems or organizations did not have to change for the projects' development and implementation. Because the PFF programs remained relatively small, all the sponsoring organizations had the capacity to operate the program. In addition, although state CSE agencies were the conduit for the resources because of the waiver, many of them were not actively involved in the planning or operational process and generally did not make state-level changes as a result of PFF. This lack of involvement may have limited the PFF-related state-level institutional and policy changes on noncustodial fathers. Overall, this type of demonstration, which primarily focuses on developing individual, local programs, does not appear to be an adequate vehicle for enacting more systemic institutional or policy changes.

Identifying organizations with experience serving this type of population and providing appropriate staff training can enhance program operations. As noted, several PFF sites had experience operating programs for noncustodial fathers before PFF, and these sites were able to implement the program more easily. Given the unique needs and circumstances of this population, when experienced staff are not available, it is important to provide adequate training to staff on techniques for best providing services to this population. It may be necessary to develop these training programs, as this is an area where training options are often limited.

Help with resolving visitation issues and legal representation helps attract and retain young fathers in fatherhood programs. In focus groups for this study, several fathers indicated that they came to and remained engaged with PFF because of a desire to resolve visitation issues with their children. Another critical concern was the difficulty of obtaining legal representation and the costs associated with legal services. One PFF project (Minneapolis) that offered legal assistance on-site found that fathers used these services in several areas, including paternity establishment, custody, visitation, and child support. Programs that can assist fathers with resolving visitation issues and providing or arranging for low-cost legal representation will likely find it easier to recruit and hold on to participants.

Sponsorship by or strong ties with local public health departments can help with recruitment and access to much needed health services. Several PFF projects either were operated by public health departments or featured strong links with local public health departments. These projects were able to recruit young fathers through their close connections to the public health system, which already had well-established referral channels in low-income areas. After recruitment, case managers were able to easily refer PFF participants to services offered through the public health system, including health, mental health, dental, and substance abuse services.

- **Providing a comprehensive range of services tailored to the individual needs of each participating young father is important.** At a minimum, the following core components (provided through the program or outside providers) are critical:

  - assessment and employability development planning, ongoing case management, and individual counseling;
  - job search, job development, and job placement services, including workshops, job clubs, help identifying job leads, and job placement assistance;
  - job training services, including basic skills and literacy instruction, occupational skills training, on-the-job training, and other types of work experience, such as internships or fellowships;
  - postplacement follow-up and support services, such as additional job placement services, training after placement, support groups, and mentoring;
  - incentives for participation in program services, particularly flexibility in meeting child support obligations in certain circumstances;
  - strong linkages with the child support system, preferably featuring colocated child support personnel to assist program participants with establishing paternity and child support orders, and resolving child support payment and other issues as they arise
  - other support services provided directly through the project or through referral arrangements with other health and human services organizations, including parenting education; alcohol and other substance abuse assessment and counseling, with referral as appropriate to outpatient or inpatient treatment; child care assistance; transportation assistance; referral for mental health assessment, counseling, and treatment; referral for housing services; and referral to low-cost legal services.

The experiences of the PFF projects underscore the importance of providing a comprehensive range of services to address the varied problems of young fathers in becoming more involved, both emotionally and financially, in the lives of their children. Their experiences also strongly suggest that this is a difficult undertaking, requiring time to develop and establish the projects as well as a strong commitment by a number of organizations and partners at the community level.