

Executive Summary

Children with supportive, involved fathers do better in school, are physically and mentally healthier, and engage in fewer risk behaviors.¹ As such, the fact that the majority of American children will spend some part of their childhood in a single parent household – typically without a father – is cause for concern. To address this issue, hundreds of ‘responsible fatherhood’ initiatives have emerged in cities across the United States.

This report analyzes the lessons learned from responsible fatherhood efforts thus far to suggest opportunities for programming in Austin, Texas. To this end, the researcher adopted a three-part qualitative research strategy:

- Reviewing existing research literature on fathers and fatherhood initiatives;
- Performing an environmental scan of the local service delivery system using Internet research and professional contacts; and
- Conducting informal interviews with practitioners, researchers, and fatherhood programming experts face-to-face, by phone, or through e-mail correspondence.

Key Findings

The key findings of this analysis can be summarized as follows:

1. Responsible fatherhood goals are more likely to be acted upon when fatherhood holds a prominent position on the public policy agenda.
2. Most noncustodial fathers want to be involved in their children’s lives and take responsibility for their needs.
3. Noncustodial fathers face a variety of complex personal barriers.
4. Most fathers aren’t getting the services they need because they aren’t available, they don’t know they’re available, or they’re nervous about accessing them.
5. Fathers require comprehensive services from an array of health and social services, workforce development, and legal assistance organizations.
6. Fathers are easiest to engage during the first few years of their child’s life.
7. Multi-organization partnerships are the most promising approach to ensure comprehensive service delivery yet many initiatives struggle to establish effective collaborations.

8. Organizations must have the buy-in of staff at every level to effectively serve noncustodial fathers.
9. Fatherhood programs are experiencing a temporary period of disinvestment by private foundations.
10. The present lull in fatherhood programming provides an exciting opportunity to reflect on previous initiatives and strategize about the future.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were formulated based on the key findings, the recommendations offered by interview participants, and the researcher's evaluation of Austin's programming for noncustodial fathers. These recommendations are discussed at greater length in the full report.

Area One: The Public Policy Agenda

Objective: Establish an advocacy and education program that raises awareness about the importance of fathers, the needs of noncustodial fathers, and services available to fathers in Austin.

Policy Recommendations

- Local organizations that work with noncustodial fathers should set up a permanent working group dedicated to advocating for responsible fatherhood programming.
- The working group should organize an annual PSA campaign to create and sustain public awareness about responsible fatherhood.
- The working group should develop curriculum to educate mothers and staff that work with fathers in local organizations about the potential benefits of father involvement.

Area Two: Understanding Noncustodial Fathers' Needs

Objective: Policymakers, advocates, and program designers will have access to reliable information on fathers' needs.

Policy Recommendation

- Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin should conduct an in-depth survey of local noncustodial fathers to further explore their needs and characteristics.

Area Three: Service Delivery

Objective: Every noncustodial father in Austin will have access to high-quality services to help him become a responsible father.

Policy Recommendation

- Local organizations that serve noncustodial fathers should develop a responsible fatherhood coalition to coordinate services. Coalition goals should include increasing outreach efforts to noncustodial fathers, making case management available to every father that needs it, and promoting the concept of the family as the unit of service intervention.
- Local schools and organizations that provide youth recreation activities should develop strategies to better engage fathers in parent-child activities.
- Local child support enforcement offices should produce a comprehensive pamphlet describing services available for noncustodial fathers in the Austin area and provide a copy to every father they work with.
- The Texas Office of the Attorney General should partner with the United Way to add a responsible fatherhood search category to 2-1-1 referral systems around the state.
- Volunteer Legal Services of Central Texas, Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, the Lonestar Fatherhood Initiative, and the Texas Office of the Attorney General should work together to improve noncustodial fathers' access to legal counsel, especially regarding visitation disputes.
- The State Legislature should require the Texas Workforce Commission and
- Texas Office of the Attorney General to work together and develop a plan to increase low-income noncustodial fathers' access to workforce programs.

¹ Juliane Baron and Kathleen Sylvester, *Expanding the Goals of 'Responsible Fatherhood' Policy: Voices from the Field in Four Cities* (Social Policy Action Network, December 2002), p. 5.