

# Ohio Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families

## Public Policy Agenda

The Ohio Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (OPNFF) is committed to the well being, stability, and strengthening of all families in Ohio. As such, we recognize the crucial role of fathers as integral parts of each family and as essential to the social and emotional development of their children.

For researchers, practitioners, and fathers themselves, the challenges facing low-income fathers are interrelated. If fathers are unemployed or underemployed, it is much harder to pay child support and maintain necessary health insurance for themselves and their families. Also, many low-income fathers are incarcerated, which makes it extremely difficult to provide financial support for their families. Upon reentry, their criminal records have a negative impact on their ability to find and hold jobs which, in turn, makes it more difficult to connect or reconnect with their children. These interrelated problems often result in fathers being estranged or isolated from their families. The result is devastating for fathers who lose the opportunity to play a positive role in their families and even more devastating for their children who miss out on all the nurturing, caring, teaching, and guidance that fathers have to offer.

First, we must recognize that fatherlessness and its consequences for children is a critical problem in Ohio and throughout the United States. It is estimated that 80 percent of inner-city children grow up with a single mother, thus not benefiting from their other parent who potentially has much to offer them. The problems cited above all contribute to this situation. “What is little understood is that all of these—single fatherhood, domestic abuse, unemployment, crime, and incarceration—are in effect the same problem. They are all part of a destructive pattern of drift, of a tendency for men to stumble through life rather than try to tame it, a drift whose inevitable consequence is the deadbeat dad and fatherless children.” (1)

Since the early 1990's, when the Clinton Administration recognized the seriousness of these problems, governments have begun to address the role of fathers in the lives of their families and children. However, the landmark welfare reform law, ***The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996***, mostly addressed the needs of single mothers and has resulted in millions of women emerging from welfare dependency. What the Act lacked was an understanding of the impact of policy change on fathers. By moving women into the workforce, the Act greatly increased the need for child support from fathers and child care funding from the federal and state

governments. Welfare reform has undermined family unity by treating fathers as irrelevant and pushing them out of the home.

When the 1996 welfare reform law was finally reauthorized this past year (the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, P.L. 109-170), it included a Responsible Fatherhood provision, with mandated funding for states, local and community organizations. Various national fatherhood organizations worked with members and committees of Congress to advocate for this landmark provision, the first of its kind in federal law.

Along with greater governmental awareness and attention to responsible fatherhood, organizations have been formed at the local, state, and national levels that have worked to increase the awareness of social service professionals, political leaders, and the general public about issues relating to fathers and families and what can be done to address them. In addition, a great amount of research has been conducted that has demonstrated the problems of father absenteeism and the importance of fathers to the well-being of their families and the positive development of children.

OPNFF has reviewed various issues and policies relating to fathers and families in the state of Ohio. We have found that, in a number of areas, current public policies are not helping to alleviate the problems faced by men, particularly low-income individuals, who want to be responsible fathers. In some cases, the problem is a lack of funding. In other cases, the problem is that the basic design and approach of the public program is making the situation worse, not better. We have developed this public policy agenda for the purpose of informing public officials, human service professionals, and other interested individuals and groups, about the problems facing fathers and the public policies that are needed to address these problems.

These issues and policies are, of course, not unique to Ohio. They exist in every state and community in the nation, although the seriousness of the problems vary depending on demographic, social, economic, and political factors. Often the problems are more severe in urban environments where there is a higher concentration of low-income and minority populations. But throughout the nation, the trend for decades has been in the direction of declining father presence and involvement with their children. And governmental policies, no matter how well intended, have clearly contributed to this unfortunate trend.

A 2002 report prepared for the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (NPNFF), ***Expanding the Goals of Responsible Fatherhood Policy***, found that "low-income, non-custodial fathers need assistance with finding jobs and mediating their relationships with the mothers of their children in order to spend more 'quality' time with their children. This suggests an alternative to the historic philosophical approach that many agencies have developed over the years – a philosophy driven in large part by the same public policies that

established and sustained the nation's public welfare system for more than 40 years." The report concluded that "it is incumbent upon policymakers to develop public policies, and for traditional human service agencies to implement practices, that enhance their ability to assist fathers as well as mothers and their children." (2)

Many governmental policies and programs *are* relevant to the participation of fathers in the lives of their children, including welfare reform, child support, child care funding, education and training, health insurance, and prisoner re-entry. All relate to efforts underway in states and at the federal level that are aimed at furthering responsible fatherhood and strengthening families.

The following five areas represent some of the key issues and policies identified by fatherhood and family leaders in Ohio. A survey was conducted among OPNFF board members. Many of their issue concerns and policy solutions are reflected in this document.

### **Child Support**

The child support system is in need of reform. As it is currently set up, the system works against the best interests of children and their families. The pressure of child support obligations and the accumulating debt that results have the effect of driving fathers away from their families and alienating the mothers of their children. Many low-income fathers who are incarcerated - for short or long periods of time in jails and state prisons - do not have the ability to earn money needed to meet their child support obligations.

We do not argue that fathers should be relieved of their family financial obligations, only that such obligations should be grounded in reality by taking into consideration the situation of the individuals involved. As one scholar has stated:

"Certainly, fathers should be made to contribute to their children's upbringing, but some fathers do not have the financial ability to pay more than trivial amounts of child support. A narrow focus on punishing nonsupporting fathers without any measures to make it easier for poor fathers to make regular child support payments might be an appealing symbolic way to enforce personal responsibility, but it does little to promote the welfare of American children." (3)

The current system is self defeating. It operates to debase fathers and divide families instead of enhancing the potential of men to be good fathers and of family members to be closer and stronger in their relationships with spouses, partners, and children. The state views incarceration as "voluntary unemployment," which allows it to continue to enforce child support orders during incarceration. Reforms needed include:

- higher legal standards to be met before incarcerating fathers;
- ending arrears accumulation during incarceration;
- a state-owed arrears forgiveness program;
- a meaningful child support arrearage forgiveness program linked to participation in OPNFF-certified responsible fatherhood training programs;
- greater allowance for child support modifications that take into consideration the totality of family circumstances.

What this amounts to is that the state needs to adopt a more supportive set of policies to replace the enforcement and punitive policies that now exist. Some counties already have developed some progressive child support ideas and a committee of the Ohio Child Support Directors Association has developed a pilot plan. But we believe that leadership at the highest levels of state government is needed to change the direction of child support policies in ways that will strengthen fathers and the relationships they have with family members, especially with their children. This can only happen through meaningful reforms aimed at ending the current regressive child support system and replacing it with a pro-father and pro-family system.

### **Job Training and Employment**

Unemployment and underemployment of low-income men, especially among young minorities in our nation's cities, is a serious and growing problem. In order for families to be strong and to provide for the needs of children, financial security is of obvious importance. Financial security depends on one or both parents being able to find and retain good paying jobs. And, in order for this to be possible, there must be adequate opportunities for education and training that can lead to such jobs.

In Ohio, the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs once held by low-skilled, undereducated men has been damaging to the capacity of this population to provide financial support for their families. Little has been done to either replace these jobs or to provide alternative employment opportunities for the men who once held them. When fathers can't find work that will allow them to provide subsistence for their families, they often leave or are forced to leave by the mothers of their children. Some turn to crime. Joblessness is a significant contributor to father absence. And, as many studies have shown, father absence is a significant contributor to problems in the lives and behavior of children and youth – problems like poor educational performance, juvenile delinquency and crime, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and even higher rates of suicide.

It is well known that unemployment is a greater problem among blacks than among whites and that it is worse still among young black men. Long-term trends are worrisome. In recent years,

- the number of unemployed black workers increased by nearly a quarter of a million (214,000);
- the black unemployment rate has increased four times faster than the rate for white workers (1.2 percent versus .3 percent, respectively);
- black teenage unemployment has risen from 30 percent to 40 percent in just one year (between 2002-2003) – in what economists call a jobless economic recovery. (4)

More recent data show that unemployment in Ohio is a full percentage higher than in the U.S. as a whole. (5)

As pointed out in the discussion of child support, that system contributes to high rates of incarceration and the inability of men to find and hold jobs. The child support system and the problems of finding and holding jobs are interlocked in a vicious cycle that undermines men's self-esteem and the potential to be supportive and caring fathers.

Reforms that are needed include:

- More funding for job training so that men can gain the skills needed to obtain and retain gainful employment.
- Addressing the problems and challenges created by the child support and criminal justice systems for fathers in becoming gainfully employed so that they can contribute to their family's financial well-being.
- Incarcerated men should be given job training and help with job attainment as part of their reentry into society and into the lives of their families. Policies should be developed that will alleviate the restrictions placed on ex-offenders in attaining jobs.
- All working men and women in the state of Ohio should receive a "living wage."
- Ohio government – both the legislature and the executive branch – should focus attention on the disproportionately high unemployment rates among low-income minority males. A goal should be set to reduce unemployment in this population to less than 10 percent within three years.

## **Welfare Reform/TANF**

Traditionally, women have been viewed as nurturers and men as providers. This perception is changing as society has modified the social and economic roles of men and women. In the past thirty years, women have entered the workforce in huge numbers and have become important financial contributors to their families. For fathers, along with the traditional provider role, there is a newer emphasis on the caretaker and nurturer role. This role is seen more and more as a shared responsibility, especially as women spend more time than ever in the workforce and away from home.

In the past, family has been operationally defined as centering on mothers and children. Welfare reform and other federal and state policies have not, until recently, viewed the father as a central part of the family structure. Yet, the deficiencies of these policies and changing attitudes toward men and fathers, have led to an understanding that public policies must recognize the crucial role of fathers in the building of strong and healthy families.

The 2006 welfare reform reauthorization includes a Responsible Fatherhood provision which recognizes that “Children do better academically, emotionally and socially when both parents are involved in their lives. Resources are provided to find “innovative ways to promote responsible fatherhood through marriage promotion and divorce reduction, parenting skill building, and where appropriate, expanded opportunities for strengthening the employment opportunities of low income fathers.” This provision is targeted at families with incomes below 150 percent of poverty. (6)

The state of Ohio needs to take full advantage of reforms in national welfare policy that has made responsible fatherhood into a federally funded program. Policy recommendations include attention to these areas:

- State and local governments in Ohio should be actively pursuing demonstration and other grant opportunities through the federal Responsible Fatherhood program that is part of the recent TANF reauthorization.
- More TANF funds should be used for fatherhood and cooperative parenting programs, as was proposed in Ohio SB 241.
- Federal TANF policy allows funding for two-parent families and non-custodial fathers. Yet, Ohio has done little to take advantage of these policies, even though there is nearly a billion dollar TANF surplus. State officials should recognize the potential of pro-family policies and use available resources to implement programs that will benefit low-income families.

- Public officials must recognize that there needs to be a shift away from the past bias toward single mothers in welfare and family-related programs. In designing and funding programs, they must recognize the key role that fathers play in strengthening families.

### **Fathers, Families and Professional Support**

Ohio, like most states, has not provided the resources and programs to equip fathers for the difficult but necessary and rewarding challenge of responsible fatherhood. The system is highly dysfunctional because the lack of resources contributes to welfare, unemployment, incarceration, and loss of productivity. This is highly cost ineffective for society and financially, socially and emotionally damaging for families.

A particularly serious problem for unwed fathers is that of custody and visitation. Ohio state law gives sole custody of a child born to unwed parents to the mother, thus creating an immediate legal barrier to a father's relationship with his child. There is no provision for a process that gives father the opportunity for custody or visitation. And, the child support system is completely separate from the juvenile court system which handles custody issues involving unmarried parents.

Fatherhood training is necessary in order to foster personal maturity, motivation, self-esteem and confidence, self sufficiency, and skills that will enable men to be supportive, caring, and nurturing parents to their children. Fathers must understand their parental rights and responsibilities. These are topics that are not well understood by many individuals, especially young and immature men. Creating an environment of responsible fatherhood will require adequate funding for education and training of professional fatherhood practitioners as well as for programs of fatherhood training.

Professional service providers are central to helping fathers develop in ways that enhance the lives of all family members. These professionals have the knowledge, skills and expertise to work with fathers of all ages, races, education and income levels. Through their work, fathers gain the parenting skills necessary to be nurturing and supportive parents. A qualified corps of fatherhood professionals to work with fathers in need of parenting skills is essential to realizing the goals of responsible fatherhood and healthy families.

Policy proposals:

- The Ohio legislature should appropriate \$20 million annually during fiscal years 2007-2009 to support local fatherhood programs.

- The legislature should appropriate \$500,000 annually during fiscal years 2007-2009 for the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood.
- Additional funding should be provided for fatherhood training so that young men will understand the need for accepting social and financial responsibility when they have children
- Mentoring programs should be established for boys who themselves are fatherless; these programs would help to lessen the likelihood that they will continue this pattern of the absent father.
- Adequate funding should be provided for the training of qualified professional fatherhood trainers and service providers.

### **Incarceration and Reentry**

Incarceration is at record levels in the United States. More than half of the men in prisons are fathers and nearly half of them have lived with their children prior to incarceration. Over 10 million children have a parent or parents who were incarcerated at some point in their lives. (Family and Corrections Network, "Every Door Closed: Barriers Facing Parents with Criminal Records," 2002). (7)

Research has shown that, during a parent's incarceration, children often suffer from depression, withdrawal, poor academic performance, and engage in antisocial and aggressive behaviors. Reentry into the family following incarceration too often does not improve the family environment. Fathers, often with little education and few skills, have a difficult enough time finding employment, but the stigma of a prison record, makes landing a job even more difficult. Many owe large amounts in child support, which further estranges them from the mothers of their children. For these reasons, instead of being a joyful reuniting with family, for many fathers, re-entry is a socially and economically traumatizing experience.

In Ohio, as elsewhere, as prison populations have grown, so have the numbers of ex-offenders. Unfortunately, these individuals are too often released without the rehabilitation necessary to make a successful reentry into community and family life. In its mission statement, ***The Ohio Plan for Productive Offender Reentry and Recidivism Reduction***, states that the goals of reentry and recidivism involve a joint effort to be "accomplished through associations with community partners, families, justice professionals and victims of crime." Among the report's recommendations are for additional family visitation in the rehabilitative process. The plan's slogan "Going Home to Stay" makes clear the central role of family in the entire reentry process. (8)

In large urban areas, like Cuyahoga County and particularly the city of Cleveland, the ex-offender population is disproportionately high. It is forecast that approximately 4,000 ex-offenders will be returning to Cleveland on an annual

basis. Many of them are fathers who want to return to their families. But in order to give them the opportunity to reenter the community and be able to provide financial support for their wives or partners, and children, re-entry services, especially help in obtaining employment, are needed.

Policy recommendations:

- The state legislature should provide adequate authorization and funding to implement key recommendations of the ODRC Ohio Plan for Productive Offender Reentry and Recidivism Reduction.
- Programs and services should be established to help individuals make a positive adjustment that gives them the opportunity to remain out of the criminal justice system. These programs should include mentoring, coaching, and self-sufficiency training that will help men understand their past actions, accept responsibility for these actions and learn from them.
- Families should play a central role in the lives of incarcerated fathers through increased child visitation and family involvement in the rehabilitation process.
- Funding should be provided job training and job placement services to help ex-offenders who want to become legitimate wage earners, enabling them to be supportive of their families.
- The Ohio Fatherhood Commission should play a key role in reentry policies.

## **Conclusion**

In this Public Policy Agenda, the Ohio Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families has focused on some of the key issues and policies facing fathers and families in Ohio. We have highlighted five issue and policy areas: Child Support; Employment and Training; Welfare Reform/TANF; Fathers, Families, and Professional Support; and Incarceration and Reentry. This is not an exclusive list. But it is representative of the issue and policy priorities of leaders in the fatherhood and family field in Ohio.

As the foregoing issue descriptions and policy recommendations show, there is a lot of work to be done in Ohio in order to create a society of responsible fatherhood and strong and healthy families. Good parenting involves both mothers and fathers and it does not just happen. In times of social strife and economic hardship, when forces beyond individual control push against the related objectives of responsible fathers and healthy families, government can play a positive role. This does not mean that these policy objectives are only the responsibility of government. There need to be cooperative relationships between private organizations devoted to fathers and families and public

agencies. Organizations like OPNFF have the expertise to advise and work with public officials in developing legislative proposals, planning and implementing public programs that address the issues and policies outlined in this document. Among our recommendations are some that call for increased spending of state and federal dollars to create new and enhance existing programs. We believe that these are funds that will be cost effective in the long run because they will save the state much more in remedial services. Funding for job training and fatherhood training among ex-offenders, for instance, will reduce the incidence of recidivism. Not only will public funds be saved but lives will be enriched. We hope that this report will help both the public and government officials in the state of Ohio in policy efforts that promote responsible fatherhood as an essential part of family and community well-being.

This Report was prepared for the Ohio Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families by Roger P. Kingsley, Ph.D.

## References

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