

Fatherhood

What is the issue?

- All of us would acknowledge the importance of two parents in the lives of children.
- The Governor issued an Executive Order asking Department Directors if this state's policy and practice recognized the importance. He also asked them for recommendations regarding their findings.
- We found that human services are primarily directed to one parent who is being served because of eligibility issues, practice style, or lack of knowledge of how important it is to children to have the financial and emotional support of both parents. Some examples are:
 - TANF programs are focused on the custodial parent even though the non-custodial parent is often also low income.
 - Social service and other income maintenance programs work with the parent who seeks service.
 - Maternal and child services are directed to the mother and the children.
- We also know that there are a substantial number of children in this state who live in single parent households, and that national data indicates associated troubling outcomes for the children in these households.
- Department Directors recommended that this state focus on helping community and state policy makers understand the importance of the recognizing both parents' important roles in the success of children.

Why is the child support program involved in fatherhood initiatives?

- Child support officials at the national and state level have been involved in the development of incentive performance measures related to helping children receive the financial support of their non-custodial parents. These measures focus the program on the factors that lead to non-support.
- We have been given a number of tools by the Congress and the General Assembly that have allowed us to increase the amount of current support paid in the month due. Currently in Iowa approximately 62 % of the support is paid when due for children in the program's caseload.
- There is also a need to help obligors meet their responsibilities when traditional tools are not directed to the helping to remove the barriers that some non-custodial parents face.
 - DHS entered into an agreement with Workforce Development to refer under-employed or unemployed non-custodial parents for services.
 - The General Assembly was also provided for Parental Obligation pilots from TANF funds to help address barriers, such as visitation issues, faced by non-custodial parents in providing support. DHS also issued rules to provide financial incentives such as forgiving a portion of unpaid debt for participants who pay current support.

Information about Federal Access and Visitation Grants

The Department was made aware of concerns regarding the use of the Access and Visitation funding via e-mail, and a conference call hosted by Representative Boddicker. Staff shared that the goal of the grant and the TANF appropriation for parental obligation pilots are similar, and that we are committed by legislative intent to work with communities, and in administrative rules to work with the existing Empowerment and Decategorization community collaboratives. These pilots' mission is to bring attention to fatherhood issues and provide services to non-custodial parents and

their children. This approach was taken after learning from previous experience with the grants. In addition, our work on the Governor's executive order lead us to recognize that in other states the best practice was defined as local programs that meet the needs of that community.

A brief history:

In 1997, a small portion of the federal grant was used to convene four focus groups to identify the primary areas of concern regarding parents' access to their children and issues of visitation. The areas that were identified as Iowa's priority needs were:

- neutral exchange sites for children visiting their parents,
- mediation of parental disputes about visitation, and
- establishing a central clearinghouse for child support information.

It is accurate that \$78,000 reverted to the federal government when we misunderstood in the first year what the period of time was that the state had to expend the funds. Efforts to rectify the situation with the federal grantor were unsuccessful.

- In 1998, three private not-for-profit agencies providing services in the Des Moines and Ames area were given funding directly to provide neutral exchange sites and mediation. Funds were also used to train agency staff to conduct mediation. An external evaluation was also funded and completed for the funded programs. One of lessons learned from this approach is that there was a lack of system supports that connect parents and families with needed services.
- In 1999, the approach to distributing the funding was changed based on the lesson learned from the previous funding year. The funds were directed to Decategorization collaboratives, rather than directly to individual agencies. The advantage of this approach is that a collaborative can:
 - Support the projects in terms of integrating the services into the service system including referrals, coordination with other services to the family and follow-up.
 - Begin the process of ensuring that the absent father is systematically included in the provision of services to children and families.
 - Give a consistent message to the provider community, the consumers and the community as a whole that fathers need to be included in the lives of their children.
- What has been learned from these ongoing projects is that a substantial effort is required to move from a common understanding and philosophy that fathers should be involved with their children, to the actual practice of involving fathers in their children's daily lives and activities. Reaching these fathers and families has been a challenge.
- In this funding cycle, administrative rules are in place to define eligible grantees as Decategorization and Empowerment Boards. This was done because using existing collaboratives reduces the amount of time spent of resolving how the collaborative would function. Instead the community focus can be on fatherhood and how services to fathers can be included in existing community projects and supports.
 - To receive funding, the collaborative was to:
 1. develop a community plan, and
 2. include a core set of services that must either currently be in place or would be provided through the grant award. These core services include: assessment, neutral exchange sites for children to support visitation, job training/job placement/job coaching, parent mentoring, and public awareness.