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Increasing Outreach, Connection, and Services to Low-Income Non-Custodial Fathers: How Did We Get Here and What Do We Know

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Abstract

This paper documents a model for outreaching, connecting, and serving low-income, ethnically diverse, non-custodial fathers. Men are engaged “where they are” by building their strengths and addressing their needs. The Male Involvement Network’s (MIN) collaborative model was created in Connecticut to help fathers become positive and healthy role models by increasing their attachment to their children and families (Smith, 2003). This clinically informed, case

management model addresses their physical, emotional, mental, economic and spiritual health needs. Through a relational approach and social modeling it includes skill development in education, economic stability, family/child support, and mental and physical health. Implications for testing this approach are suggested.

Keywords

Fathers; low-income; outreach; community collaboration

Introduction

Written and oral history of fatherhood provides evidence to support the role of men in raising children and in family development (Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000; Coley, 2001). Traditional conceptualizations of fathers ask that men be married to their female partners, live with their partner and children, and provide financial support (Coley, 2001). They also provide moral leadership, authority, gender role modeling and portray and pass on the traditional construct of the male role to their sons and daughters (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, Lamb, 2000).

Efforts to shape and address father involvement have primarily focused on middle-class, White fathers (Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000) and overlook fathers who are not married, economically sound, and residential, thus limiting their role in child development (Coley, 2001). Over the years, the number of low-income, non-custodial fathers has increased, especially among minority groups (Maldonado, 2006). Meeting the social expectations of fatherhood has received much attention due to the observation that not all fathers, irrespective of income level, reside in traditionally nuclear families (Coley, 2001).

Fatherhood in a Low-Income Context

Low-income, non-custodial fathers are overlooked in fatherhood contexts. They present with needs that affect their economic stability (Sorenson & Zibman, 2003), involvement in healthy relationships, and participation in family and community life (Aronson, Whitehead & Baber, 2003; Sorenson & Zibman, 2001). Meeting societal expectations for the father role is challenging for low-income fathers (e.g. physical and behavioral health issues, improving co-parent relationships; Aronson, et al, 2003). In addition to racial discrimination and ethnic prejudice, barriers to employment faced by this population include limitations in health, education, work experience, transportation, housing (Sorenson & Zibman, 2001), incarceration and reunification with families and communities after incarceration (Sorenson & Zibman, 2001).

The importance of father involvement among low-income, minority fathers is also evident in the child maltreatment literature. Families where all children were referred to child protective services for abuse/neglect or who were currently in foster care with an available father figure had higher levels of cognitive development and perceptions of confidence and social acceptance than children with an absent father (Dubowitz, Black, Cox, Kerr,

Litrownik, Radhakrishna, et al., 2001). Children with involved fathers also had shorter stays in foster care settings (Coakley, 2007).

Program Efforts to Support Low-Income Fathers

In an attempt to help low-income fathers meet the expectations for their role, many programs have been developed nationwide (New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, 2007; Stapleton, 2000). These programs have added to the scientific knowledge on evidence-based fatherhood programming. For example, programs now consider how to incorporate culturally appropriate teaching methods and materials, to select teachers and facilitators who believe in the program and to provide them with the relevant training and coaching, to create a high staff-participant ratio (see Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Metz, 2008 for a complete summary).

In tandem with the development of these fatherhood programs and initiatives, the Personal Work and Responsibility Act of 1996 (PRWORA) was passed by Congress to increase the responsibility of non-custodial fathers by strengthening child support enforcement laws and payments received from non-custodial fathers so that their children and custodial mothers could make the transition from welfare to work or reduce their experience of poverty (US Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 1996). National fatherhood advocates argued for the inclusion and consideration of the emotional and psychological involvement of men and fathers in the lives of their children and families in all policy-related mandates developed through state and national efforts (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2007; Smith, 2003). Under PRWORA legislation, all fathers, regardless of their status are to assume financial responsibility for their children. This law assumed that all low-income fathers are able to pay child support, disproportionately targeted them, imposed excessive consequences, and demanded that they pay a higher percentage of their earnings for child support than middle or high income men. They also limited low-income fathers' ability to receive public assistance while neglecting to address specific barriers to employment (Curran, 2003; Sorenson, 1999). Recognizing the limitations of the PRWORA, local and state agencies have, through local responsible fatherhood initiatives and policies, sought to address these disparities (Curran, 2003).

The neglect of non-residential fathers by welfare law, policy and procedures hinders welfare reform's goal of improving outcomes for children (Maldonado, 2006; Orloff & Monson, 2002). Most states have implemented job and employment programs for fathers who are not paying child support rather than address the array of issues (e.g. drug abuse, presence of legal problems, past incarcerations, not establishing paternity) that have been identified as challenges low-income fathers face in meeting their economic demands (Curran, 2003; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Waller and Swisher, 2006). A father's financial support of his children is undeniably important. It does not preclude, however, other aspects of fathering, from providing emotional and social support to being incorporated into programs that seek to strengthen men's skills.

Establishing a Broader Context to Support Low-Income Fathers

Understanding fatherhood requires consideration of the practice of fatherhood across individual, relationship, community, and societal systems. This contributes to a more accurate definition of fatherhood, and highlights each system's impact on men's capacity as fathers to meet their children's needs.

Defining the father role begins with individual conceptualizations of what are the inner psychological understanding, experiences, and motivations that influence men as they assume the role (Daly, 1992; Osherson, 1986). Fatherhood is an emergent identity that is continuously being reshaped and reinterpreted as men encounter new circumstances, challenges, or obstacles (Marsiglio, 1993) with their partners, children, and communities. It is also impacted by their commitment to the role through the development and maintenance of an ethical relationship between father and child, especially when there are competing demands for their time and energy (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Marsiglio, 1993). As a father interacts with society, he is expected to achieve certain standards to successfully perform the role (Marsiglio, 1993).

Research shows that the more involved the father is early in the child's life, the stronger their relationship later in life (Aquilino, 2006; Coley & Hernandez 1999; Lamb, 2005). Attachment theory argues that the quality of early infant-parent interaction has an impact on the quality of resulting relationships between parent and child, between child and peers, and between child and subsequent romantic partners (Bowlby, 1969). Secure attachment styles between fathers and their children can create a foundation for responsible father involvement. Harper and Fine (2006) suggested that paternal warmth and intimacy may decrease problem behaviors among children. Thus, the attachment between nonresident fathers and their children may have an effect on predicting future father involvement, fathering behaviors, and child outcomes (Aquilino, 2006; Lamb, 2005; Harper & Fine, 2006).

Fatherhood also requires behaviors and social markers (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987; Palkovitz, 1997; Doherty, Kouneski & Erikson, 1998; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000). Included are engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb et al., 1987). This allows for the expansion of expectations/behaviors/activities of the father role. Engagement includes sharing activities; and providing emotional support, warmth, affect, sensitivity, support, and participation (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Doherty, Kouneski & Erikson, 1998; Palkovitz, 1997). Accessibility includes planning and consistent availability to children. Responsibility includes running errands, providing financial support, teaching, thinking about children, and establishing legal paternity (Cabrera et al., 2000; Doherty et al., 1997).

The current cultural shift in relation to the role of father in child, family, and community life underscores the need to broaden the conceptualizations and definitions of fatherhood to understand and support fathers. An inclusive definition of fatherhood promotes active involvement in family life and facilitates positive attachment to children, family, and community (Cabrera et al., 2000). The *quality* of father-child relationships is a strong

predictor of the child's well-being (Curran, 2003). Children whose fathers were satisfied with their parenting roles and nurturing behaviors had better cognitive and language skills (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999). Although emotional support and guidance are important, men are still viewed and measured by others solely by how much financial support they provide to their family (Roy, 2004). This narrow conceptualization of fathers may leave men, particularly those with limited financial resources, feeling constrained (Roy, 2004).

The conceptual framework of the Male Involvement Network (MIN) is to outreach, connect, and serve low-income, non-custodial fathers and increase their attachment to their children. This may produce healthier children, families, and communities. Attending to the multiple roles of fathers was the impetus for the MIN, a local initiative that encourages and enables fathers to meet their emotional, social, and financial responsibilities to their families (Smith, 2003).

The Male Involvement Network Fatherhood (MIN) Initiative

Program Description/Overview

The MIN is a collaborative partnership between local social service agencies, interested community members, fathers, local community foundations, state entities, and academic partners that was established in Connecticut in 1999 to address the unique needs of low-income, non-custodial fathers. In aligning itself with a diverse group of service providers, community members, and state entities, it builds on their assets and services offered without duplication. The value added to the constituent partners of MIN is the attention that it brings to developing a clear set of "father friendly" practices that welcome men and support their healthy development and the shared responsibility for the program and its ongoing development.

The MIN aims to improve the health status of men; increase their vocational skills and opportunities; increase their general knowledge about their role in child, family, and community development; and increase their financial investment in their children. It acknowledges that low-income, non-custodial fathers present with unique challenges to assuming and maintaining their financial responsibilities. It seeks to provide fathers with the resources, skills and opportunities important for their success (e.g., emotional, social, attachment and financial) to create a healthy environment where children can flourish.

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, the MIN can be described through three primary systems: individual, family, and community. Individual interventions include providing educational interventions, employment and career development, and addressing the physical, mental, behavioral, and emotional health needs of the men. Family interventions include identifying and addressing family/child support needs, legal services, and mediation/access and visitation challenges. Community interventions include a relational model of outreach and case management, providing modeling and mentoring to promote their attachment, and involving fathers as leaders and community assets. Services are coordinated through partner agencies and integrate follow-up and systems navigation. Fatherhood development skills training, workforce development, individual counseling, consultation and services related to anger management, domestic violence, court readiness,

paternity establishment and support enforcement services are embedded into these core-intervention frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

The public health approach to prevention serves as the theoretical basis for the creation of the MIN. There are three levels of intervention that aim to address and prevent problems: universal strategies that target everyone in the population; selective strategies that are focused on populations at heightened risks; and indicated strategies aimed at those in the population who have experienced or are affected by the issue of interest (Brome, Saul, Lang, Lee-Pethel, Rainford, & Wheaton, 2004; see Figure 1).

At all levels, the goal of the MIN is to offer assistance and services that promote and encourage health while strengthening the family's economic and social ties. This allows the MIN to create three parallel levels of services oriented around needs and grounded in prevention: self-serving/universal, maintenance/selective, and intensive/indicated.

The universal/self-serving approaches target the general public and decision-makers/opinion leaders, seek to increase community awareness and opportunities, advance policy, and foster knowledge about fathers' roles of and resources. Included activities are educating legislators; holding high visibility public events; participating in other local events (e.g., community fairs); and holding seminars or workshops. These activities are estimated to reach about 3,000 adults and 10,000 children.

Selective/maintenance activities usually are initiated by third-party stakeholders (e.g. court order, DCF, DSS) with the goal of motivating and exposing the men to healthy alternatives. Men are informally screened and oriented to available services and receive preliminary problem solving assistance. The intentions of these services are to promote responsible fatherhood and provide opportunities for men to be better family and community members. These services reach about 150 adults and approximately 225 children.

Indicated/intensive activities provide support for a subset of fathers from the selective intervention level who presented with multiple issues/needs (e.g., legal adjudication, substance abuse problems). An intensive service plan is created where in it direct services and/or referrals to other community resources are outlined. These services reach about 100 adults and 500 children.

Interventions

The MIN has identified nine core intervention strategies upon which the framework for service delivery is established. Member agencies work with the MIN to deliver these strategies, please refer to Table 1 for a summary of these services.

Strengths

Low-income fathers present to social service agencies with specified needs that often extend beyond their initial referrals. Fathers can enter into services through any of the MIN's partners and or nine core intervention areas presented in Table 1.

- This approach identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each man
- Is aware that no agency has all of the required resources to meet the needs of this population
- Each partner agency provides services using strategies consistent with their stated mission
- This strategy reduces interagency competition and expands the agency's clientele, while requiring ongoing review of the service model delivered.

Certification

The Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative Act of 1999 (PA 99–193) was designed by the state of Connecticut in collaboration with the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (NPNFF) to promote the positive involvement and interaction of fathers with their children through programs and resources. It requires programs to identify effective methods that increase the positive involvement of fathers by making services available to them (CT Fatherhood Initiative, 1999). The MIN was among the first cohort of programs certified through this active and critical Fatherhood Certification process. Certification connotes competence across seven core areas required for effective fatherhood practice: purpose and activities, organization and management, parenting skills development, personal and social skills development, workforce skills development, father support services, and evidence of success.

Certification is granted through DSS to programs that have historically and successfully promoted fatherhood through programming; included fatherhood in their mission and purpose; documented and described the fathers' demographic characteristics; described current services; articulated well, why certification should be granted; demonstrated commitment to the certification process and its quality assurance checks at the management level; and identified technical assistance needs for the program (CT Fatherhood Initiative, 1999).

Lessons Learned in Supporting Low-Income Fathers through the Male Involvement Network

Welfare policies have resulted in unintended consequences for poor men. Policies such as PRWORA and the National Fatherhood Initiative may greatly benefit from the MIN's approach, design and philosophy: serving low-income fathers and families through attention to the barriers faced and strengths held and addressing them with proven interventions. The MIN, its design, structure, and philosophy hold promise. The current evaluation observations are based on dialogue and review by study authors, MIN actors, and its ability to engage and support fathers through services provided.

The MIN's strength rests on its acknowledgement that fathers have often not been seen as needing support in their role. Our challenge has been to help our partners recognize these needs, understand them, and develop strategies to address them. The model creates a foundation for assisting low-income, non-custodial, fathers and programs through a collaborative network that uses their respective strengths and needs across the nine core

intervention areas of education; employment and career development; family and child support; health; housing; legal services; mediations, access, and visitation; economic stability; and outreach and case management. The MIN integrates a triage system of care: universal/self serving, selected/maintenance, and indicated/intensive. Men receive more intensive or less intensive care based on his presentation, expressed needs, and success at meeting the goals outlined in his service plan. Intervention areas most often include outreach and case management and mediation, access and visitation.

The MIN garners support and buy-in from over 20 key local and state constituents whose collaboration is fostered through individual referral and monthly meetings. This support, however, can be further strengthened through the documentation of its impact and the abilities across its nine core intervention areas. Success in the core intervention areas further reinforces the MIN's claim that low-income fathers can and ought to be supported in their role in healthy child, family, and community development. Intervention and program structures must also be refined to accommodate the changing needs and presentation of the men, especially through attention to untapped community capital for fathers and their children. The MIN's long-term view attends to and includes interventions at the individual, relational, community and system levels. It challenges community-based programs with similar goals to engage with the MIN in articulating how they approach their work with low income men. Other evaluation activities include examining service program and participants' responses and success in this strategy.

Conclusions

Engaging men around their role as fathers can be a conduit to healthy child, family, and community development. The MIN model seeks to extend what constitutes "fatherhood work" and examine how past and current policies and zeitgeist either limits or expands this understanding. Finally, the MIN seeks to include a more holistic conceptualization of fathers and expand the definition of father as financial contributor to include the healthy role he can play in family and community life. Strategies based on these principles may be more effective and may help to increase the status of low-income fathers' children and families.

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Structure of Services for MIN

The Male Involvement Network

Figure 1.
Structure of Services for the Male Involvement Network

Table 1

Program Framework for the Male Involvement Network

Program Area	Definition	Activities
Educational interventions	The MIN offers educational opportunities by facilitating men's entry into GED and other post secondary educational opportunities, as well as technical/vocational programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parenting classes • Child development training • Life skills training • Connection to vocational training • Connection to institutions of higher education
Employment and career development	The MIN focuses on helping men gain and retain employment and pursue employment/vocational activities by considering with the men the role that employment and career development play in achieving self-sufficiency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resume development • Interview skills training • Career development • Job searching • Employment referrals • Employment readiness and skills development
Family/Child Support	Through the MIN, non-custodial/non-residential fathers receive support and guidance in navigating the child support enforcement system, enabling them to meet their financial responsibilities for their children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Clinical services • Court readiness • Court advocacy
Health	The MIN believes that physical, mental, behavioral, spiritual, and emotional well being is extremely important. Healthy men make healthy fathers who contribute to the development of healthy families and communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referrals to local service providers • Health Education • Connection to health screening • Connection to health insurance through local department of social services • Address child abuse/neglect through programming and intervention
Housing	The MIN collaborates with partnering organizations that help to secure stable housing for fathers, families, and children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referrals to housing resources in the community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Transitional housing – Sober housing – Public housing • Foreclosure counseling • Connection to home ownership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – First time home buyers education
Legal Services	The MIN provides legal consultation services in conjunction with the CT Legal Council and New Haven Legal Aid.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal consultation • Legal representation • Referral to legal aid • Referral to state-wide legal services • Education about legal rights and responsibilities • Paternity establishment

Program Area	Definition	Activities
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing custody
Mediation/Access and Visitation	The MIN offers mediation services with a focus on co-parenting to determine what is best for the child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizes visitation centers Supervised visitation services Creates supervised community activities Mediation Establishing visitation orders
Economic Stability	The MIN desires to help men make sound financial decisions and plan for their financial future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Money management training Financial planning Financial literacy Budget and budgeting
Outreach and Case Management	The MIN staff works aggressively throughout the community to engage fathers and create avenues to services. These community-based strategies seek to engage men in their natural setting and create links between those settings and constituents represented through its core interventions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case management Outreach services Fatherhood support group Community forums