

ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION AMONG FATHER INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS AND BATTERED WOMEN'S ADVOCATES

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The Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy (CFFPP) is located in Madison, Wisconsin. CFFPP is a policy organization that focuses on the impact of national and state welfare, fatherhood, and child support policy on never-married, low-income parents and their children. The center was created, in part, to provide public education and information as to the concerns of very poor individuals and families who are attempting to negotiate social welfare systems. Because of the inadequacy of advocacy or policy analysis of these issues from the perspective of very low-income and unemployed fathers, we have concentrated on that perspective. The concerns of these fathers and their children make a national discussion about fatherhood especially urgent. This case study details the effort to encourage collaborative work among advocates for battered women and for low-income fathers.

Programs for low-income fathers were originally designed to provide neighborhood mentors and peer support, and to assist them in finding work and accessing education and training. The peer support provides these men with opportunities to talk about their children and interaction with the children's mother, and to raise concerns about how to provide for themselves and their children while dealing with poverty and racial discrimination. It is important to note that the fatherhood programs described above developed spontaneously in community-based organizations that were already serving women and children. Relatively more economically stable men in the neighborhood and community-based organizations realized the necessity of reaching out and providing services to poor men who were struggling with potentially destructive problems.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

From the beginning, CFFPP began to reach out to women's organizations and to advocates for battered women. The intent was to openly discuss the potential impact on women (particularly battered women) and children of increased father involvement. CFFPP entered this discussion in order to provide education and information about the need for social services, such as those provided by fatherhood organizations, for men, and to provide the bridge between fatherhood groups and women's advocates. In the years since we began this work, we have developed relationships with both battered women's advocates and fatherhood program staff who understood the need for this kind of collaboration, and were eager for the opportunity to brainstorm possible solutions to the challenges raised by father involvement work in the domestic violence setting. The collaboration has progressed slowly but surely. There are three ways we have been able to work together towards the objective of safe father involvement: 1) discussion groups and forums that allow advocates for low-income men and women to provide each other with basic information and explanations about their work; (2) working groups and conferences in which battered women's advocates and fatherhood program staff

brainstorm ideas and program structures for safe family interaction; and (3) collaborative presentations, consultation on projects, and co-authorship of papers.

CHALLENGES

One of the challenges to the success of these types of collaboration is the perception that each group has of the other. Many battered women's advocates' perception of fatherhood groups is negatively associated with fathers' rights groups or government-sponsored responsible fatherhood programs. Our work at CFFPP has been to explain to battered women's advocates the need for men to be able to access vital social services. We have also, in our technical assistance work with fatherhood programs, tried to emphasize and encourage the provision of these services. CFFPP has also worked within individual fatherhood programs to facilitate discussions about domestic violence. CFFPP has also provided information to fatherhood programs regarding the high incidence of domestic violence and the gravity of its impact on women and children.

Another challenge has been that some fatherhood programs interpret the discussion of the need for safety as implying that battered women's advocates think all men are violent, and specifically that all poor men of color are violent. And there are the practical issues, such as the question of how fatherhood programs can (or should) respond to—or anticipate—domestic violence. Should that response include intervention, or prevention, or both? In what ways should fatherhood programs be like or unlike batterer intervention programs? Will community-based organizations continue to get participants if they highlight the issue of domestic violence?

The people who have run these community-based fatherhood programs for years say that recruitment is one of their most urgent issues. Many poor men are reluctant to come to service organizations. Given that reality, it is important to recognize that any kind of screening or assessment for domestic violence could further reduce the number of men who come for services. These are clearly complex issues. The crafting and execution of this discussion and collaboration will require delicacy and forthrightness from all stakeholders.

LESSONS LEARNED

Though we are still faced with many challenges, in our discussions we have been able to identify important information and insights necessary to structure the future collaborative programs and proposals. Advocates of these two important fields, the domestic violence movement and the fatherhood movement, have been willing and able to work together toward a common goal of supporting and helping to create healthy, safe, nurturing and secure family environments for children and parents. Everyone involved can benefit from some of the lessons learned even at this early point in this crucial work:

- It is incumbent upon father involvement programs to incorporate responses to occurrences of domestic violence. However, one of the next steps is to work collaboratively to figure out exactly what the nature of that response should be.

- Fatherhood programs, legislation, and policy initiatives benefit from the input of mothers and other women. Their perspective on cooperative parenting issues is essential to the success of programs designed to re-involve fathers.
- The collaboration between these two groups does not necessarily mean being directly involved in each other's work. Battered women's advocates should not be called upon to encourage father involvement. And fatherhood program staff should not be called to do the counseling and restorative work of batterer intervention programs. Most important to the success of the collaborative work is that each group become informed of the work of the other, and become a voice of support for that work.
- Father involvement programs or philosophies that encourage men to take control over their children and the children's mother will not be well received by many women or by women's advocacy organizations.
- Battered women's advocates should not ignore or dismiss the cultural or personal significance to a woman of the man with whom she has had a child. This significance may not be diminished even in instances where the woman decides that it is best for her and her child that they discontinue any further contact him.
- Most fatherhood programs are eager to understand the issues involved in domestic violence and are interested in providing services that help promote the safety and well being of women and children.
- Many advocates for low-income mothers understand that poor fathers need the same social welfare services that poor mothers need (e.g., employment and training, housing assistance, emergency cash assistance), and that these are some of the most important services fatherhood programs provide. Many poor women prefer that their children's father be allowed to get social services so that he will be able to help support their children.