

# Navigating the Child Support System

*Lessons from the Fathers at Work Initiative*

**Laura Wyckoff  
Mary McVay  
Dee Wallace**



**Public/Private Ventures**

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Finally, we acknowledge the young men whose journeys have provided such valuable lessons for those seeking to assist noncustodial fathers as they gain employment and assume the responsibilities of parenthood.

# Introduction

**Y**ou've probably heard of "deadbeat dads"—men who have the ability to support their children but refuse to do so. But what about "deadbroke dads"? If you are a workforce development professional serving low-income people, you've undoubtedly met them. Deadbroke dads are low-income fathers who do not have custody of their children nor the ability to financially support them, but nevertheless want to take care of them. Many are young, do not have a high school diploma, have a criminal history and may be struggling with addiction or other barriers to employment and stability. They are often motivated to improve their lives for the sake of their children—to stop engaging in criminal activities, to get clean, to find a steady job with future prospects or to improve their education. They want to be positive role models and give their children the steady life they themselves did not experience growing up.

When deadbroke dads have money, they may give their child's mother cash or provide for their children by buying clothes and toys, taking them on outings or paying

rent. They may also have formal child support orders that require them to contribute a monthly amount. Often, men struggling with unemployment, recently released from jail and/or working their way out of past "hustling" activities fall behind on support payments. They owe money to the mothers of their children, and if a mother has received welfare or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), they owe money to the state because the mothers are required to sign over their rights to support payments to qualify for welfare. In order to collect support payments, the state will take a portion of a father's wages and his tax refunds. The state can report the bad debt on the father's credit reports, revoke his driver's or other professional licenses and, in some cases, have him arrested. These actions are designed to compel fathers to meet their obligations.

For well-intentioned deadbroke dads, the formal child support system can feel like a trap. Fathers may forgo a formal job because money—up to 65 percent of their paycheck in some states—will be deducted from their checks. Although they are

willing to help support their children, they may feel that payments are too high and don't allow for their own survival. Some men suspect—and in some cases they are correct—that none of the child support money will go to their family, but will go to the state instead. Others prefer to purchase items for their children directly, rather than give money to the child's mother. Many fathers are ill informed about child support, do not trust “the system” and want to remain outside of it. What they may not know is that child support enforcement agencies may be willing to negotiate debt, modify orders and suspend enforcement if the father is cooperative and shows good faith efforts.

For men trying to avoid criminal activity, earning a living “outside the system” is difficult. If they do have support orders and do not pay through the system, they are subject to mounting debt balances and, in some jurisdictions, risk arrest and incarceration. In addition, payments outside the system are not always counted against their debt, and if their children receive welfare and they pay the mother “under the table,” the mother risks a fraud prosecution. For those who do get a formal job, the reality of ongoing monthly payments and significant debt repayment makes working themselves and their families out of poverty seem like an impossible task. In other words, paying child support through the system—with its risks and downsides—can be a disincentive to legitimate employment.

If your organization serves low-income men, many are likely to be noncustodial parents who are affected—or feel threatened—by child support enforcement. Although they may want to support their family and might be doing so outside the system, they can be reluctant to take full advantage of your program for fear that their participation and a job will “spring the trap.” Although it is not a traditional role for workforce development organizations, you can help these men understand how child enforcement support operates, how they might avert coercive action, what they can do to try to arrange more manageable payments and how to pay down, instead of build up, debt while taking care of their families. *Navigating the Child Support System* offers information, resources and tools to help you and your organization assist these young men. In fact, having children can be an inspiration for them to get and keep jobs, and your program can capitalize on this.

#### **Father Talk**

*And, you know, they [the organization's staff] help out, they can basically let you know what's going on through child support, how you're affected by it, and let you know you're not in it alone.*

*—Fathers at Work participant*



## Other Reports from the Fathers at Work Initiative

- **Going to Work with a Criminal Record** by Dee Wallace and Laura Wyckoff. A companion to this guide, *Going to Work* provides lessons and tools for workforce organizations seeking to connect formerly incarcerated people with employment.
- **Leaving the Streets: Young Fathers Move from Hustling to Legitimate Work** by Lauren J. Kotloff. Based on an interview study conducted with Fathers at Work participants who had relied on “hustling” as a source of income, this report examines ongoing challenges faced by the men and suggests recommendations for programs working with similar populations.
- **Young Fathers Video and Workshop Guide.** This two-disc package, featuring the award-winning Fathers at Work documentary and an array of discussion guides, activities and lesson plans, is designed for use in employment or reentry programs or in parenting or marriage workshops.
- **Working Dads: Final Report on the Fathers at Work Initiative** by Shayne Spaulding, Jean Grossman and Dee Wallace (forthcoming). This report examines outcomes of the young, noncustodial fathers who participated in Fathers at Work (using a comparison group design); it also provides insight into the challenges faced by the six organizations providing services.

For more information, visit [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org).

## Where Information in This Guide Comes From

*Navigating the Child Support System* is based on the experiences of six organizations participating in the three-year Fathers at Work initiative: the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), New York City; Impact Services Corporation, Philadelphia; Rubicon Programs Inc., Richmond, California; STRIVE (now a part of Harbor Quest, Inc.), Chicago, Illinois; Total Action Against Poverty (TAP), Roanoke, Virginia; and the Vocational Foundation, Inc. (VFI), Brooklyn, New York. Funded by the Charles

Stewart Mott Foundation and managed and evaluated by Public/Private Ventures, the Fathers at Work initiative was designed to work with low-income fathers toward the following goals:

- Increase fathers’ employment and earnings;
- Promote their greater involvement in their children’s lives; and
- Increase their financial support of their children.

## Services Your Organization Might Offer

For some fathers—even those who want to support their children—getting a job when their whereabouts will be revealed and income reported is more of a risk than they are willing to take. From a workforce development perspective—and the perspective of other organizations trying to help low-income men—the issue of child support presents a challenge to improving the circumstances of their participants. Ideally, by helping fathers manage their child support through the system, organizations can promote stable, formal employment and increase the financial support of children. As the Fathers at Work initiative demonstrated, child support services can be successfully integrated into existing workforce development programs. If your organization is interested in addressing child support issues, you could consider including the following as part of your services:

- **Raise awareness about child support enforcement.**

You can debunk myths by providing accurate general information about child support enforcement as a first step in helping fathers manage their responsibilities.

- **Provide help obtaining information.**

By helping your participants get information about their status with child support enforcement and complete forms,

(for example, determining whether they have support orders or establishing or challenging paternity), your organization can help fathers understand options available for managing their child support obligations.

- **Assist individuals.**

A more intensive service consists of counseling, speaking up for and taking action to assist individuals as they receive or seek to modify child support orders and arrearage payments and/or attempt to have sanctions lifted. You might offer this service to fathers who are clearly determined to obtain formal employment and support their families through the system.

- **Advocate for law and policy changes.**

To bring about systemic change, your organization could educate other organizations, child support enforcement agencies, the courts and government entities about the perspective of “dead-broke dads” and then speak out for adjustments in laws, regulations and practices that affect fathers’ ability to support their families. Child support agencies and legislatures are increasingly receptive to policy changes intended to remove barriers to employment.

Although the child support services discussed in this guide target fathers, they can ultimately benefit mothers and children by increasing income, child support payments and parental involvement.



## What Is in This Guide and How It Is Arranged

To help your workforce development or community-based organization better serve participants affected by child support requirements and related fatherhood issues, *Navigating the Child Support System* offers information, examples, resources and tools. The guide is arranged into three sections:

### Section 1 Challenges:

#### *What You Need to Know About the Child Support Enforcement System (page 7)*

This section describes child support enforcement regulations, policies and actions that can affect fathers' willingness to seek employment and participate in the system.

**Tool 1:** *Glossary: Arrearage and Other Terms You Need to Know (page 34).*

**Tool 2:** *Questionnaire About Child Support (page 37).*

### Section 2 Services:

#### *How Your Organization Can Assist Low-Income, Noncustodial Fathers (page 13)*

This section, citing the experiences of the Fathers at Work organizations, describes four services that organizations might offer to benefit fathers and their families.

**Tool 3:** *Straight Talk for Noncustodial Fathers (page 39).*

**Tool 4:** *Snapshots of Three Fathers at Work Programs (page 40).*

### Section 3 Actions:

#### *How to Integrate Child Support Services into Your Program (page 21)*

This section describes actions for incorporating child support services into your organization's assistance to low-income, male participants, including developing a partnership with your local child support enforcement agency.

**Tool 5:** *Elements of a Partnership Agreement (page 43).*

**Tool 6:** *Reflection and Action Worksheet (page 44).*

In addition,

**Tool 7:** *Resources for Assisting Noncustodial Fathers (page 46).*

## Three Things to Keep in Mind When Using the Guide

First, although some noncustodial parents are mothers, most are fathers, and the Fathers at Work Initiative—from which the information in this guide is drawn—was designed for males. Throughout the guide, noncustodial parents are referred to as fathers. However, noncustodial mothers are also required to pay child support, and either parent—custodial or noncustodial—may apply for child support services from a child support enforcement agency. For example, a noncustodial father may apply for the services to establish paternity.

Secondly, while the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement issues guidelines and regulations, child support enforcement is implemented differently in each state and sometimes differently in counties

or cities within a state. Although much of the information and all of the resources and tools in this guide will be relevant for organizations serving low-income noncustodial fathers, you can be most effective when you are knowledgeable about how child support enforcement is carried out in your particular area.

And, finally, your motivation for offering child support services may vary depending upon your organization's mission. Although *Navigating the Child Support System* will be helpful to organizations that reach out to struggling fathers from a humanitarian, faith-based or social service perspective or to those that seek to increase support and parental engagement for children, the information is grounded in workforce development. Ultimately, it is about helping young, low-income fathers manage their child support obligations so they can confidently take formal employment as the best means of supporting their children.

## Section 1 Challenges

# *What You Need to Know About the Child Support Enforcement System*

There are challenges, but they are not insurmountable. Involvement with child support enforcement is undeniably problematic for many low-income, noncustodial fathers. On one hand, establishing paternity, receiving a child support order and working through the system provide proof of payment and regular support for one's child. On the other hand, if the father has an order and fails to pay support—or fails to reimburse for TANF's support of his family—child support enforcement will withhold a portion of his wages and could take additional actions against him. This section describes the mission, regulations and processes of child support enforcement. In addition to basic information about the system, it offers guidance for learning more about how child support enforcement takes place in your state.

### **Challenge One**

***Child support enforcement focuses on supporting children and recovering funds—not on the fathers' circumstances.***

As originally established, the Child Support Enforcement program—a partnership of federal, state and local governments—focused on recovering the funds that were paid to support children receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or children in the federally funded foster care program. Fathers whose children benefit from TANF funds or foster care must still reimburse the government; however, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement now defines its mission in a more “family first” way:

*To assure that assistance in obtaining support (both financial and medical) is available to children through locating parents, establishing paternity and support obligations, and enforcing those obligations.*

## Challenge Two

*Child support enforcement, a system of federal and state regulations and local policies and practices, can be confusing. And both federal and state laws are being changed.*

The federal child support enforcement program is implemented by the Office of Child Support Enforcement in the Department of Health and Human Services. Each state chooses an agency to implement child support enforcement, but several agencies are usually involved. Enforcement agencies differ from state to state and can include the Human Services Department, Department of Revenue or the State Attorney General's office, often with the help of prosecuting attorneys, district attorneys, other law enforcement agencies and officials of family or domestic relations courts or other jurisdictions in which hearings are conducted. The federal program provides funding to the states to implement child support enforcement with the stipulation that in order to receive TANF funds states must implement a policy of collecting TANF reimbursement payments from the noncustodial parent. States do have flexibility in the way they conduct enforcement; therefore, policies and practices vary from state to state. Different state laws significantly affect how much of a father's child support payments will go to repay TANF debt and how much will go to the family. In addition, child support policies are currently undergoing change in many states. Child support enforcement laws were modified in 2006, and some changes will be implemented over the next few years that include incentives for the states to pass through more of a father's support payments to his family (see Challenge Three below).

## Challenge Three

*The child support enforcement process is defined, but contains variations—especially for fathers whose families receive TANF.*

Child support enforcement assists families in a wide range of contexts, but they fall into two general categories:

- **Non-TANF families:** For most families, child support payments are established following the state's guidelines during a court or legal administrative hearing. In most cases, fathers are required to make payments via an automatic withdrawal from their paycheck, through their employers. The state then tracks the payments and has a record of the payments made. In case of noncompliance, the mothers can request the state to enforce the child support orders and compel the fathers to pay.
- **TANF families:** For families that are receiving or have received TANF, mothers are required to reveal the identity of the father and to cooperate with the state in collecting child support. In most cases, the state then compels the fathers to pay support. Depending on state rules, if the mothers are currently receiving or have ever received TANF, some or all child support payments may go to the state rather than to the family.

## Some Agencies Consider the Fathers' Circumstances

State and local child support enforcement agencies offer varying levels of support to fathers. The experience of the Fathers at Work organizations has shown that agencies may do some or all of the following:

- **Possess open and supportive attitudes** toward fathers, recognize their challenges and understand that families do better when fathers do well.
- **Engage in formal partnerships with community-based organizations** that provide workforce development and fatherhood services. *The New York Office of Child Support Enforcement has approximately 50 partners—some receiving grants for their services.*
- **Reach out through the community** to change their image and create more trust among fathers. *In California, the Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services participates in a one-stop shop for formerly incarcerated people; visits community-based organizations, jails and housing authorities to make presentations; and meets with fathers in environments where they feel comfortable.*
- **Try to streamline the system.** *The Philadelphia Family Court allows a Fathers at Work organization, Impact Services, to “bundle” petitions for a single hearing as opposed to requiring separate court appearances to resolve orders for different children or issues.*
- **Adjust child support payments to a more realistic amount.** *The New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement temporarily reduces the amount of payments so fathers can succeed at becoming financially stable.*
- **Allow a pass through** of child support payments that would otherwise go to repay the state for TANF funds paid for the child. Whether or not to pass through support payments is a decision made by the state (see [Issues Surrounding Families That Receive TANF Grants on page 11](#)).

**The Child Support Enforcement Process.** Involvement in the child support enforcement system begins when a case is opened with the agency administering the state’s child support services. This may be following a divorce or separation, or, if the parents were not married, when one parent files to establish support. The order stipulates the amount and timing for payments for the child. The process becomes problematic if paternity is challenged; the initial support order is incorrect; the father cannot pay the amount required at the times designated; his family receives a TANF grant that must be repaid; the father absconds or is incarcerated; and/or he amasses arrearage and, therefore, triggers coercive actions. Routine steps are described below, as are some steps that can complicate the process.

**How Paternity Is Established.** Paternity is usually established at the hospital when the baby is born, and once the parents have signed paternity papers they become legally binding and difficult to rescind. If the father was married to the mother when the child was born, he is considered the father. If the parents were not married, they can voluntarily establish paternity at any time prior to or after the child’s birth by filling out a form, signing it

and having a witness sign it. Forms are offered at doctors' offices, hospitals, social service agencies and child support enforcement agencies. Some child support agencies strongly encourage DNA testing before fathers sign a paternity form.

TANF recipients are required to name the father when known—although the father may or may not be present to accept or dispute this claim. The law requires that the father be sent a legal notice. If paternity is questioned by anyone, a DNA test can be voluntarily conducted or ordered by a court. If a DNA test is requested, the federal government, through the state child support enforcement agency, pays for part of the cost. Some state or local government agencies offer free paternity testing; however, because of federal deficit reductions that affect funds available for child support enforcement services, the noncustodial parent may need to pay for the testing.

**How a Child Support Order Is Established.** Once paternity has been determined, support enforcement begins by establishing a “child support order.” Governed by state guidelines and put into place by a state agency or court, the order spells out how much the father should pay and when. Child support orders also direct who should pay for health insurance for the child. Although judges and administrators must use their state guidelines, they can deviate from them and have flexibility in determining support orders.

A child support order can be determined without the father's presence. When the father is not present, a presumption is made about his income, an amount that can be higher than what he actually makes. Fathers must receive legal notice of the order, and courts will usually review an order that is based on presumed income. If payments are not made, the father will owe money. This arrearage—with interest, if interest is charged—can then be collected by the state. Again, past due child support payments are sent to the mother unless she is receiving or has received TANF, in which case some or all the money goes toward repaying the state. Often, noncustodial parents are required to reimburse the state for other expenses, such as court fees or hospital fees for the birth of the child. These costs are in addition to the child support order amount and any interest on arrears.

**How a Child Support Order Is Modified.** Child support orders can be modified, though the process for reducing them is usually cumbersome. Orders can be reviewed at the request of either parent; a federal law requires states to review the orders for families receiving TANF grants every three years. For an incarcerated father in states where being jailed is not grounds for review, the child support debt accrues while the father is not earning income.

In general, it is easier to modify an order proactively than to try to retroactively deal with debt. Fathers should provide accurate wage information when the child support case is opened to help ensure the orders are set appropriately. If a significant change in circumstance occurs, such as loss of employment, fathers should inform child support enforcement immediately and request a modification of the order. When child support payments are owed to mothers only, and not to the state, there may be more flexibility because mothers can agree to terms that judges or other presiding officials approve. When the

child support is owed to the state, the state dictates the terms. States are becoming more likely to negotiate on state-owed debt. However, the state cannot forgive the amount owed directly to the custodial parent, nor can the custodial parent affect the amount the noncustodial parent owes the state.

**How Child Support Orders Can Be Enforced.** Once a child support order is in place, child support enforcement agencies use routine collection procedures to obtain support payments, such as locating and informing the father of his obligation. Employers are required to file information with state governments when they hire new workers, and states use this information, in addition to driver's licenses or other permit application data, to track fathers and inform/remind them of their child support orders. States withhold payment from the fathers' paycheck in line with state and federal guidelines.

The state can also compel noncompliant fathers to pay in other ways, depending upon state policy. Support enforcement could include:

- Garnishing tax refunds;
- Freezing and seizing bank or other financial accounts;
- Putting liens on property so that the state can order the sale, for example, of a car, house and/or boat in order to pay child support;
- Revoking a driver's license, professional or business license, or a recreational license;
- Refusing to renew a passport;
- Publishing the fathers' names and the amount they owe on "10 Most Wanted Deadbeat Dads" Internet sites, when the fathers go to extremes to avoid their child support payments;
- Reporting nonpayment to a parole officer; or
- Arresting and jailing the noncompliant father.

These measures are taken when they are "triggered" by nonpayment. Each state has different "trigger points" for different measures; these can include the number of months a payment is missed and the amount of arrearage accumulated. In addition, states cooperate with one another so that if parents live in different states—or even different countries—child support is still collected.

**Issues Surrounding Families That Receive TANF Grants.** When a mother applies for TANF, she is required to turn over her rights to child support payments and allow the state to collect child support on her behalf. *Disregard* and *pass through* are important terms related to child support payments made by fathers for their families receiving TANF. *Disregard* is the amount of child support that does not in turn decrease the amount of TANF payments that go to the mother for her children; *pass through* is the portion of the

child support payment that goes on to the family after the state has been reimbursed for some or all of the TANF payment. Historically, states kept the entire amount of child support payments; however, states have much leeway in determining rules governing *disregard* and *pass through* and are increasingly sending the money on to families, especially since the introduction of new incentives in recent federal laws. Some fathers are reluctant to make support payments if the money is not disregarded or passed through to the family.

**See Tool 1:** *Glossary: Arrearage and Other Terms You Need to Know* ([page 34](#))  
.....

### Challenge Four

***Child support policies differ from state to state and, possibly, from city to city or county to county, as do the practices of local agency offices and courts.***

In order to assist your participants, you will need to know more than the basic concepts and components of child support enforcement offered in this guide. In fact, information here raises many questions: How are child support orders issued in your state? What are the guidelines for determining the amount of a child support order? If there are arrears, how can a payment plan be worked out? Is the local child support enforcement agency willing to work with fathers? Are there options for fathers who are being trained or seeking jobs?

A good understanding not only of the federal regulations that guide child support enforcement but also of specific state and local laws, policies and practices will help you:

- Build your knowledge so that you can better inform your participants about child support enforcement;
- Identify opportunities to help your participants navigate the system;
- Determine what type of relationship your program can develop with your local child support enforcement agency; and
- Identify opportunities to advocate for policy reforms in your state when such reforms could encourage/allow your participants to support their families.

Answers to your questions should be available from your state child support enforcement office through both its website and written materials. In addition, there may be advocacy groups in your state that focus on child support issues and can offer their analysis of how state laws affect low-income, noncustodial fathers.

**See Tool 2:** *Questionnaire About Child Support* ([page 37](#))  
.....

After understanding the challenges that the child support enforcement system presents, you can then consider the opportunities for assisting low-income fathers in your program. Based on the experiences of the Fathers at Work organizations, the following section discusses services your organization can provide that could improve both your participants' ability to support their children and their own circumstances.



## **Section 2 Services**

# *How Your Organization Can Assist Low-Income, Noncustodial Fathers*

Challenges beget opportunities. Based on lessons from the Fathers at Work initiative, organizations can respond to the challenges faced by low-income fathers by providing an array of child support services. Aside from providing accurate general information about child support, staff can assist participants in clarifying their standing with child support enforcement, guide individuals as they negotiate the system, help them establish paternity and receive support orders, or try for adjustments that could make payments less onerous and going to work more palatable. In an effort to work more effectively with child support enforcement, Fathers at Work organizations have developed relationships with local agencies and entered into formal partnership agreements. In addition, some organizations have advocated for changes in policies that affect low-income fathers and contributed to the enactment of father-friendly laws and practices. Using the Fathers at Work experience—including examples, tips and cautions—this section describes four services your organization might consider to assist its noncustodial fathers.

### **Service 1**

#### ***Raise Awareness About Child Support Enforcement***

Rumors and myths about child support enforcement are widespread, especially among noncustodial fathers who may have limited understanding of their obligations and rights and cannot afford legal counsel. Your organization can offer clear, accurate information about child support enforcement as a starting point and use this to encourage participants to understand their own situation and address it constructively. Below are ways to raise general awareness about child support enforcement as a prelude to offering more intensive services.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

A program staff member suggested that ignorance and stubbornness stop men from dealing with the system and advised being up front and sending the message that it's the man's responsibility to become a responsible father.

*Father Talk*

*So I'm just here for the heads-up—how do I go about making sure that things are correctly done and nothin' gets broken.*

*—Fathers at Work participant*

**Raise awareness through written or electronic materials.** By finding—and translating, if necessary—or creating an easily read fact sheet about child support enforcement processes and regulations, your organization can offer useful information and open a dialogue concerning participants' child support issues.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

If the child support agency does not have public information available for fathers, you might provide a "fathers' fact sheet." If your program does create material, have the local child support enforcement agency review it for accuracy so you will not unwittingly pass on misinformation.

**Raise awareness during case management.** As part of an initial counseling session, your case managers can explain information about child support enforcement and learn not only about participants' situations, but also about their understanding of obligations and misgivings concerning the system. Staff can answer questions—or help participants seek answers from the local child support enforcement agency. While sharing information, effective staff members will try to understand their participants' perspective and encourage them to face the challenge of supporting their families through regular employment.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Case managers and staff should be aware of typical negative attitudes about child support enforcement and have at hand a set of messages that can offer further insight and another point of view about meeting support obligations. Every father is unique, so it is important to take the time to understand and value each participant's perspective.

.....  
**Another TIP**

Fathers often fail to act upon written notices that provide information about payments, pending actions, or requirements to appear in court or at other hearings. Program staff should encourage their participants to open and read all notices and respond when necessary.

.....  
**See TOOL 3: *Straight Talk for Noncustodial Fathers* (page 39)**

**Raise awareness during group meetings.** As part of the Fathers at Work initiative, participating organizations offered workshops to develop parenting skills; the meetings also

served as a convenient way to provide information about child support enforcement. Your organization might address child support issues during group meetings for male participants or during a special session of life skills training.

**Raise awareness by collaborating with child support enforcement.** Again, program staff should not assume that they know the ins and outs of child support. In order to ensure accuracy, contact the local agency for information, and consider inviting a child support enforcement staff member to speak to your participants, perhaps during orientation to your program.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Local child support enforcement is the primary source of information. A child support enforcement staff member who can empathize with your participants and demonstrate openness and flexibility is the best conveyor of information.

**Raise awareness by offering information in the community.** Organizations can collaborate with other fatherhood initiatives, as well as with the local child support enforcement agency, to increase awareness about how child support operates, the importance of compliance, the consequences of noncompliance and ways to handle support orders. Your organization might distribute information about child support at neighborhood and community festivals and/or seek radio interviews or coverage in your local papers. Along with trying to reach noncustodial fathers, consider offering information to their extended families.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

You may need to raise awareness among your staff. One child support enforcement agency reported that its first activity with any community-based organization is to identify the fathers on its staff who have child support arrears or issues and work with them to resolve these. This can be an opportunity for staff to learn and model, through their own experience, responsibility and practical solutions.

**Service 2**  
**Provide Help Obtaining Information**

Once fathers are ready to address their child support issues, they will need to contact child support enforcement about their standing and legal obligations. This can be done by telephone in all states. Most states provide an automated voice response for information on status and payments. In addition, many states have call-center help for problem-solving. Some websites include access to information online and/or calculators to estimate the amount of the child support payments that will be ordered for fathers according to state guidelines. Participants can access a link to their state’s website at [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/extinf.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/extinf.html). Although your participants can find this information on their own, your organization may be able to facilitate the process, making it faster and easier for them. Below are some actions you can take to provide assistance.

**Partner with child support enforcement.** Although obtaining information from child support enforcement should be routine, it can be a frustrating experience. By forming a partnership with child support enforcement and requesting the information on behalf of the participant, your organization may be able to facilitate this process (see Formalize Partnerships with the Child Support Enforcement Agency on [page 23](#)).

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

According to Impact Services, it took four to six months to establish an effective partnership. Program staff suggest recognizing the authority of child support enforcement and being patient and deferential. Impact’s strategy was to offer ways to be helpful both to fathers and to child support enforcement.

.....  
**Another TIP**

Whether or not you have a formal partnership, you can identify individuals in the child support enforcement agency responsible for information requests and then introduce yourself, describe your program and set about developing a relationship.

**Obtain the information your participants need.** Your participants’ decisions concerning child support—and, perhaps, employment—need to be based on complete, factual information. When requesting information, the father should indicate all locations where his children were born or where his children’s mother(s) have lived after their birth because more than one order may have been issued and/or orders may have been issued in different places. You can help your participants request the following information from child support enforcement:

- Whether an order has been issued;
- Required monthly payment(s);
- Basis for establishing the payment;
- Whether the father was present when the order(s) were issued;
- Fees, TANF debt or other arrears that the father owes the state;
- Amount of arrears the father owes the mother;
- Sanctions currently in place against the father and what triggered the sanctions; and
- Date of the last review, if any, and if and when any automatic reviews are scheduled.

Although you and your participants may have requested the information, the experience of the Fathers at Work organizations has shown that some information can be missing on an initial report. Your assistance with follow-up may be required.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

“Don’t sell a guy a dream...make him aware of the reality.”

When complete information from child support enforcement has been received, participants can assess their situation without relying on rumors or a faulty memory. If a participant has a child support order, he then will know the amount of the order, whether he is in arrears on payment, if the money is owed to the mother or to the state and whether measures are being taken to compel him to pay. He can ascertain how much of any payment he makes will go to the mother of his child.

With regard to formal employment, information from child support enforcement allows the father to learn what percentage of his paycheck would go toward his monthly child support payment and whether the amount is above the federal limit. He will know in advance how much of his paycheck he will have to live on. The father can also find out how the current amount was determined, and if he has had a significant change in circumstance, whether that change would “trigger” a review or if and when the order will automatically be reviewed. With this information, he might try to have the order adjusted. If information shows that he has arrearage, he could try to arrange a payment plan based on how much he will earn in a job. If there is no child support order, the father can consider whether he wants to have one issued. Simply having an order can reduce the stress of uncertainty on financially struggling fathers—including those recently released from prison who may be dealing with parole, addiction recovery and finding a job among reluctant employers.

**Help participants establish paternity.** For fathers with a child support order, paternity has been established. Some fathers who do not have an order may want to establish paternity for emotional reasons, to protect their custody or visitation rights—which are separate issues from child support—and to launch the support order process. If both parents agree, the voluntary process is simple: The parents complete and sign a form in front of a witness and submit it to the child support enforcement agency.

Occasionally, fathers want to challenge their paternity status. Challenging paternity necessitates DNA testing, which requires the mother’s cooperation or a court order. If the mother is unwilling to cooperate, then the father must go through the child support enforcement agency, family court or another family agency to order a paternity test. Your organization can obtain information and forms from child support enforcement for establishing voluntary paternity and assist participants as they complete them.



**TIP from Fathers at Work**

For men seeking to challenge their paternity status, programs can provide information and help obtain a subsidy for the DNA test. However, if the man is the “father of record” and has been for some time, a DNA test may not remove his status as father in the eyes of the law and he will remain financially obligated. Check state law to determine whether there are limits on paternity challenges.

**Help participants understand their obligations and make good choices.** Program staff can help a participant consider the options available, if any, and the risks and consequences to himself and his family of his decisions concerning child support. In order to provide realistic guidance on whether and how to proceed with attempting to modify a support order or trying to arrange arrearage payments, program staff should know the history and practices of the local child support enforcement agency. In addition, program staff should be careful not to tell fathers what to do, but to help them accurately assess their situations and make choices based on information, rather than on rumor and fear.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Identify and address attitudes that you or your staff may harbor about child support enforcement. For example, some people want fathers to pay support through the system. Others want to help protect fathers from a system they consider unfair and inflexible. Your job is to provide information and help sort out options.

**Service 3**  
**Assist Individuals**

When a father has determined to manage his child support obligations, and if he wants to try to have a support order established, attempt to modify an order or arrange a payment plan for arrears, program staff who are knowledgeable, experienced and trusted by child support enforcement staff may be of enormous assistance. Staff can help a father understand the process, including what documents are necessary and where to take them, and then lend support during the hearings. Although staff members do not actually speak for participants, nor are they an official legal representative, they can explain the father’s program participation and describe his motivation to care for his family. They can also offer encouragement and emotional support.

**See Tool 4:** *Snapshots of Three Fathers at Work Programs* ([page 40](#))  
.....

.....  
**CAUTION from Fathers at Work**

Guard your reputation as a program by being honest with child support enforcement and the courts. For example, when asked by a participant, Total Action Against Poverty staff agreed to assure child support enforcement officials that he was involved in the program only when he was, indeed, participating and meeting program expectations.

**Service 4**  
**Advocate for Law and Policy Changes**

As an organization that deals firsthand with the effects that child support regulations and practices have on noncustodial fathers, especially those seeking jobs, you can be an effective advocate for changes in child support enforcement. In choosing issues for advocacy, your organization will want to address the challenges faced by your own participants. Depending on your experience in trying to help fathers obtain jobs, you might join other

## Fathers at Work Agencies Spread the Word to Other Organizations

### Philadelphia

Impact Services is an active member of the Philadelphia Fatherhood Practitioners’ Network (PFPN). PFPN provides training on fatherhood and parenting curricula and has acted as the primary advocacy group for fatherhood issues in the city. In these roles, the network helped establish citywide procedures concerning fatherhood issues. In addition to participating in PFPN activities, Impact Services has worked within the network to educate other fatherhood service providers about the importance of helping fathers comply with child support orders.

### New York

The New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement has contracted with the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) to raise awareness about child support issues and build the capacity of other community-based workforce development organizations to assist noncustodial fathers. In partnership with child support enforcement, CEO has attended fairs to offer information to other community-based organizations about how they can work with child support and whom to contact to negotiate an agreement or get funding. In addition, CEO has offered classes to staff of other organizations about navigating the child support system and providing fatherhood workshops.

advocates to support the expansion, improvement or increased accessibility of employment services for noncustodial parents. In addition, you could advocate for your state to implement recent options in federal regulations that allow increased pass through of support payments to TANF families. Debt forgiveness and realistic support orders are other policy issues that can affect your participants’ willingness to take formal employment. State guidelines are set every four years; both your participants and your organization can participate in the process of creating or revising guidelines.

.....

#### **TIP from Fathers at Work**

Make the business case for helping fathers. “For every dollar the state invests in fatherhood programs, we generate more in child support payments.”

Because states, counties and local child support enforcement agencies themselves have significant leeway in how policy is implemented, advocacy at these levels can be effective. Positive change within an agency often involves a cultural shift. To promote that shift, your organization can work toward developing a trusting relationship with agency administrators and staff, raise awareness of the fathers’ perspective and identify changes in processes and policies that would benefit the fathers, their families and the agency.

You can also gain support for change by advocating and educating other organizations (see the box above for examples from two Fathers at Work organizations).

### **Consider Offering Fatherhood Workshops**

In addition to the four child support services described above, the Fathers at Work organizations also assisted their participants in their personal role as fathers. Regularly scheduled fatherhood workshops provided parenting information; a safe, social setting; and peer support for men who may not have had a positive model for fatherhood. The sessions also aimed to help the fathers develop coping skills as they assumed the dual responsibility of supporting their children financially—through formal employment—and emotionally—through increased involvement.

### **Know That Fatherhood Encompasses More Than Child Support**

Finally, some Fathers at Work programs provided mediation services between their participants and mothers or other relatives of the child. These services help address custody and visitation issues, as well as other domestic problems, and could be particularly helpful if there is no child support order in place or if child support is owed only to the mother and not the state. For visitation issues, your program can help participants inquire of the appropriate agency about actions to take if their rights are being denied or made difficult to exercise. Remember, custody and visitation rights are different issues from child support and, in many places, handled by different agencies; however, some child support enforcement agencies make referrals to other agencies that mediate and help settle disputes over visitation and other issues between parents.

Having previewed opportunities for helping low-income fathers meet the challenges of supporting their families, you may want to consider how your organization could integrate child support services and fatherhood workshops into your current program. Section 3 offers ideas and guidance.



## **Section 3 Actions**

# *How to Integrate Child Support Services into Your Program*

The six Fathers at Work organizations concentrated much effort on services aimed at increasing their participants' employment, earnings and support for children. However, if yours is a typical workforce development organization—especially one that enrolls mostly women or in-school youth—it is unlikely you will turn full force to offering specific services to noncustodial fathers. Instead, you may want to learn more about how enforcement is conducted and then offer information to those who need it. If the issues affect a large number of your participants, or if you could more effectively reach out to low-income men in your community, you might decide to incorporate additional services into your program. This section discusses how to go about integrating the services described in Section 2 into your current program and includes information on establishing formal partnerships with child support enforcement. It also offers ideas on building capacity and making certain that fathers find empathetic staff members at your organization.

### **Action**

#### ***Link Services to Your Mission***

The child support services you offer will depend upon your mission, the people whose lives you seek to improve, your organization's resources and the local policy environment. To focus initial discussions with staff, board members and partners about incorporating services, consider the following questions:

- Why would our organization want to get involved in child support services?
- Does offering child support services advance our mission? Will child support services, for example, help minimize a barrier to formal employment for our participants?
- Do we have the capacity to add services? If we add these services, what will be gained? What will be diminished?

If you do provide services, you will want to begin with those more easily implemented, such as raising awareness, providing help obtaining information and offering encouragement to fathers enrolled in your program. Depending upon the outcome of these efforts, you could then introduce additional services that require more time and staff training, including those described in Tool 4. If your organization has the capacity, consider running a pilot program to identify and address issues prior to providing services on a larger scale.

## Action

### *Look for Ways to Incorporate Services into Your Existing Program*

Although your organization might not target low-income males and, in fact, might enroll more women than men, you can successfully embed child support services for noncustodial fathers into your current program. For example:

**If you recruit participants:** Make certain that your brochures and other materials describe your child support services and that your recruiters explain the benefits to potential participants.

**If you require a program application:** Inquire on the application form and during interviews whether enrollees are parents and then follow up with questions about their child support obligations.

**If you provide orientation to your program:** Mention child support services in the context of preparing for employment, and schedule individual or group meetings for interested fathers.

**If you already offer case management:** Identify noncustodial fathers, raise awareness about child support enforcement, provide assistance for those wanting to clarify their status, and interact with child support enforcement on behalf of fathers seeking to support their children through the system.

**If you already work in groups:** Tailor sessions to fathers—or to young men who might become fathers—and offer child support enforcement information and/or fatherhood workshops. Life skills training can provide opportunities for raising awareness both about child support enforcement and parenting.

**If you provide job placement:** Have job developers make certain that fathers are aware that employers are required to report employees' names to the state and, depending upon support orders or arrearage, withhold wages from their paycheck. If fathers are uninformed, job developers can refer them to staff to help them determine their status and prepare for reductions in take-home pay.

**If you engage in policy advocacy:** Add issues concerning noncustodial fathers to your agenda.

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**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Don't start from scratch—use existing expertise to develop your own unique program.

**Action**

***Examine Your Own Attitude Toward Noncustodial Fathers and Toward Child Support Enforcement***

Having identified areas where you can most readily incorporate child support services, make certain that staff members know what will be offered and what their role will be. Be aware that some staff may not have instant empathy for noncustodial fathers, especially if they are not paying support or have arrears. If staff members seem reluctant or disinterested, consider offering training during which fathers and representatives from fatherhood programs present the low-income fathers' perspective. Conversely, staff may have a bias against child support enforcement, possibly from personal interactions with the agency and their own unresolved support issues. This may create a bond with participants, but if your organization's goal is to help fathers deal effectively with the system, staff must offer objective guidance and a positive—or at least a neutral—position on child support enforcement.

**Action**

***Formalize Partnerships with the Child Support Enforcement Agency***

As described in Section 1, child support enforcement presents many challenges, not only to low-income fathers but also to organizations seeking to assist them. Focused on its mission, backed by laws, regulations and historic practices, your local child support enforcement agency may not recognize or respond to the dire circumstances of low-income fathers. In fact, just as your organization may need to adjust its own culture from “us vs. them,” a shift in culture at the child support enforcement agency may be necessary to allow you to effectively work together to assist your participants.

Two observations might be helpful here: First, when you encounter what you consider a callous or inflexible position, concentrate on the value of improving family life for children. Secondly, know that others have successfully risen to the challenge. All six Fathers at Work organizations were able to develop formal partnership agreements with their local child support enforcement agencies—although they had varying experiences with agency responsiveness. You can begin working toward an effective partnership through the following actions:

**1. Research your local child support enforcement agency.**

Perhaps the most immediate feedback about the local agency's enforcement of child support will come from fathers in your program. Their experiences can guide your organization as it helps them negotiate the system. However, you should search the media for information on how the agency handles its mandate to identify noncustodial parents and enforce support orders. You should also study the agency's own policy statement, talk with the agency's partners in the community and consult child support

advocates to get a balanced view of the issues and what you can expect to accomplish on behalf of your participants (see *Some Agencies Consider the Fathers' Circumstances* on [page 9](#)).

**2. Determine a strategy for approaching the agency.**

Based on what your participants experience and what you learn during your research, decide how you will approach the agency. Your strategy should address the level at which your organization will make contact. For example, you might:

- Have your upper management contact the agency at a high level, perhaps the local manager or regional director, to inform the official about your program, explore mutual interests and test concepts for specific activities—and a potential partnership.
- Contact frontline staff members, inform them about your program and invite them to attend your organization’s classes or graduation. Upon developing a relationship, approach the agency’s decision-makers who can enact a formal partnership.
- Encourage staff to strengthen professional relationships with the child support enforcement staff they know personally and seek insight on the best way to move toward an interorganizational partnership.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Find an individual in child support enforcement who will be your champion.

**3. Identify specific opportunities that offer mutual benefits.**

During the Fathers at Work initiative, the Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services and the New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement offered the following insights on the benefits of working with community-based organizations:

- *Workforce development organizations are getting men jobs, but they don't keep the jobs because the wage garnishment causes them to quit. We have to find a way to make the child support order feasible so that the men will keep their jobs and support their families as best they can.*
- *Child support enforcement agencies often have only a small staff. When you have a community-based organization to work with you, you suddenly have double the staff.*
- *The community-based organizations help fathers who have not worked in 10 years become self-sufficient, and then that brings in collections.*

These observations suggest that aligning goals with child support enforcement, when possible, and helping the agency do its job of obtaining support for children can result in its cooperation. They also suggest that advocating for sufficient funding for child support enforcement to better serve noncustodial parents, especially as the agency faces budget cutbacks, could bring about positive changes for your participants.

**4. Negotiate a partnership agreement with child support enforcement.**

An agreement with the child support enforcement agency—or other entities, if you intend to become involved with the separate issues of custody or visitation—should address the motivation and benefits for both organizations. An agreement, or memorandum of understanding, should include:

- Responsibilities of each partner with clear timeframes for actions and levels of effort;
- Specific staff members at both organizations responsible for carrying out actions;
- Steps for each partner to inform its staff of the agreement and the staff members’ roles;
- Channels of communication between the organizations and what should be communicated;
- Agreement to hold regular meetings with the purpose and attendees identified; and
- The point at which the agreement will be reviewed for revisions and/or expansion.

An initial partnership agreement could be very basic, with the intention of expanding it over time as trust builds and more resources become available.

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**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Fathers at Work organizations found that an effective agreement specifies that with confidentiality waivers program staff can directly receive information from child support enforcement about support orders. To implement this procedure, the agreement should identify a point person both at the organization and at the agency responsible for communication. The agreement should also outline a process for requesting information and responding to requests. For example, an agreement might specify that a form should be sent by fax to a certain number or that a child support enforcement representative will meet with a program staff member at a regular time each week to accept requests for information and confidentiality waivers and deliver previously requested information about participants’ child support status.

Overall, formal agreements can guide and support a partnership that benefits the participants of your organization; however, the real collaboration exists between your staff and the staff at partnering agencies. To realize the potential—and the spirit—of the agreements, your staff should be open, reach out and intentionally develop trusting relationships with staff at child support enforcement.

.....  
**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Treat child support enforcement staff as part of your team, especially if they spend time at your site. Invite them to attend your meetings or team-building events, and recognize their contribution to achieving your goals.

.....  
**See TOOL 5: Elements of a Partnership Agreement (page 43)**

## 5. Don't abandon the idea if you encounter resistance.

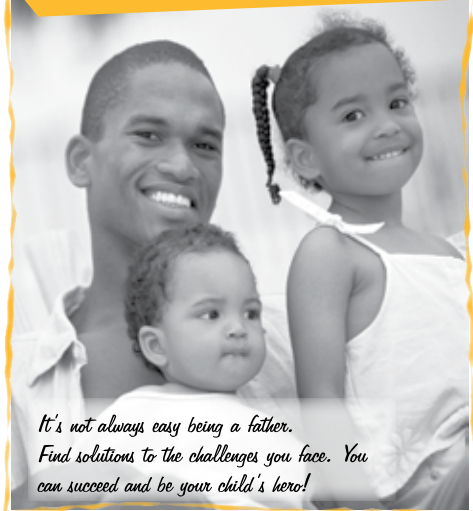
Partnerships involving child support enforcement may take time to formalize—or in some cases be difficult to arrange. Keep in mind that the potential for a real partnership depends most substantially upon child support enforcement and not upon your organization's hard work and passion for helping your participants. If you are unable to make headway in developing formal agreements, you can still help fathers request information and complete and submit the appropriate forms that can clarify and, perhaps, improve their situations.

### Action Develop Strategies for Involving the Fathers

Child support is a sensitive subject. Low-income fathers may be reluctant to discuss support issues or family difficulties because they fear they will be judged as “deadbeats.” Some are ashamed of having child support orders—especially if they are behind on payments. Indeed, your organization may be challenged in identifying fathers who can benefit and in informing them of your services. The Fathers at Work programs used a variety of strategies to encourage participants to take advantage of their child support offerings and fatherhood workshops. Among these strategies were the following:

- Ensuring confidentiality by stating on forms and during interviews that the organization was gathering information to help serve participants better and that information would not be shared.
- Publicizing the services in marketing materials and on posters on site by using language and images that remove the stigma of participating in the activities (see the example above).
- Demonstrating that the organization was on the father's side, or neutral on support issues, and not out to label or trap fathers who were not in the system.
- Marketing services to low-income males through churches and at small businesses frequented by men. Fathers at Work organizations also used parole officers and programs that work with incarcerated and previously incarcerated men to inform potential participants about services.

## FATHERS MATTER!



*It's not always easy being a father.  
Find solutions to the challenges you face. You  
can succeed and be your child's hero!*

If you are a dad 17 to 30 years old not living with your children, check out the **FATHERS AT WORK Program**.

Services are FREE and walk-ins are welcome.

*The Fathers at Work Program of Rubicon Programs Inc., in cooperation with the Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services, is one of six national fatherhood sites supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.*

Call the location nearest you for more information.

**RICHMOND**  
232 Broadway  
Richmond, CA 94804  
(510) 412-1725

**NORTH RICHMOND**  
116 West Grove Avenue  
Richmond, CA 94801  
(510) 233-4966

**PITTSBURG** (#1 Public Housing Authority)  
62 Treatro Avenue  
Pittsburg, CA 94565  
(925) 726-2760

- Job preparation and placement
- Good employers and wage growth
- Paid job training
- Assistance finding affordable housing
- Help with legal issues
- Child support case assistance including:  
DNA testing, drivers license releases,  
modification of support orders, reasonable  
arrests payments
- Fathers Taking Responsibility support groups  
*Support Group meetings are safe, and drug and alcohol free.  
Food is provided during meetings.*

- Encouraging participants to tell their friends about the services and to get them involved.

.....

**TIP from Fathers at Work**

During the Fathers at Work initiative, Total Action Against Poverty co-located a staff member at the child support enforcement office to identify potential program participants and help current participants get information about their orders and how to proceed—a strategy that proved successful as the organization worked to develop an effective partnership with child support enforcement.

**Action**  
**Build Your Organization’s Capacity**

All staff members should be able to explain the child support services that your organization offers to partners, the public and potential participants. Specific staff members, for example, case managers and trainers, need to be able to provide information about child support enforcement and, perhaps, assist in obtaining information about individuals’ support orders and arrearages. Should your organization choose to move beyond generally helping participants obtain information to assisting individuals, you will want to identify, or perhaps hire, and train staff for the additional tasks.

**1. Choose staff carefully.**

In many organizations, counselors or case managers are obvious choices to provide child support services and fatherhood workshops, if your organization chooses to offer these. However, these staff members may need to acquire new knowledge, learn new skills and assume additional responsibilities. Organizations intending to add intensive services might also consider recruiting professionals experienced with child support issues to help fathers navigate the system and those with experience/expertise in parenting—as well as empathy for young noncustodial fathers—to facilitate fatherhood workshops.

The duties of staff who support fathers as they interact with the child support enforcement agency may include helping fathers try to arrange payment plans for arrearage, request reviews and reductions in child support orders, regain a suspended driver’s license or challenge paternity, among other actions. To provide support, staff should:

- Become informed about the type of information a father needs and the process for acquiring it.
- Communicate information accurately to the father.
- Help him complete and submit forms to clarify his status or seek adjustments.
- Assist as the father prepares what he will say to child support enforcement staff or during court hearings. Preparing a father could include playing the role of a child support enforcement officer, judge or other official.

- Work with child support enforcement or the courts to schedule hearings or other meetings so the father can avoid missing training or work.
- Certify that a father is active in the program and abiding by its rules.
- Encourage the father and offer emotional support.

Staff facilitating fatherhood workshops offered during the Fathers at Work initiative used the Fatherhood Development Curriculum of the National Partnership for Community Leadership (see [www.npclstrongfamilies.com](http://www.npclstrongfamilies.com)). The curriculum is made up of 25 workshops of several hours each. They offered information and facilitated discussion on personal development and life skills—including budgeting, responsible fatherhood, relationships and health and sexuality. Effective workshops require staff who can facilitate lively participation, allowing fathers to vent, share their perspective, call one another to account, and articulate solutions aloud. Staff enriched the fatherhood workshops by organizing family events—picnics, field trips to amusement parks or the movies, bowling and holiday parties. These activities created a positive family atmosphere and provided fathers with fun activities to offer their children that they otherwise could not afford during their transition to employment.

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**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Your organization may want to recruit alumni volunteers to help organize family activities.

**Father Talk**

*You hear about women in support groups. You don't hear much about men's groups, talking about things we all go through.*

*—Fathers at Work participant*

.....

**TIP from Fathers at Work**

Noncustodial fathers are often young men, while the organization's staff may be older. Staff may need to think carefully about how they relate to younger men in order to build credibility and become effective mentors.

Equally important to competence and experience is empathy for the circumstances of low-income fathers, which often includes dealing with the aftermath of incarceration. In fact, the Fathers at Work organizations found it helpful to use staff with backgrounds similar to those of their participants. If your organization is unable to hire this type of staff, consider engaging volunteer speakers and mentors who have personally and successfully dealt with issues participants face, including rejoining the community after incarceration as well as dealing with child support enforcement.



### *Father Talk*

*And I told Mr. Tallerson [VFI staff] my situation and how everything was going and...he made me feel at home, told me don't worry about it, he'll help me do it, you know, I just gotta be willing to do what I gotta do...*

—VFI Fathers at Work participant

## **2. Orient staff to the organization's goals.**

Staff need to understand the organization's specific goal(s) for offering child support services. For example, if the organization's goal is for fathers to meet their obligations through formal employment, staff should make certain that participants truly intend to find a job, keep it and make regular support payments, most likely by wage withholding—before expending time and resources dealing with child support enforcement.

## **3. Train staff to deliver child support services.**

Successfully advocating for individuals requires specialized knowledge. Your staff can learn much about the system by cultivating relationships with child support enforcement staff. More formal training may be available through the child support enforcement agency itself, child support initiatives or advocacy programs. If training is not available locally, your organization could develop its own information and training package based on the training provided in each state to its child support enforcement officers. In addition, organizations such as the Center for Family Policy and Practice offer information valuable for training staff or mentoring organizations providing child support services (see Tool 7: Resources for Assisting Noncustodial Fathers on [page 46](#)). Good training is important to help ensure that staff members do not pass on misinformation about child support enforcement.

## **Action** **Monitor and Assess Services**

According to Fathers at Work organizations, taking action with child support enforcement proved to help fathers, but having child support orders reduced was not an easy task. In some states or local systems, little could be done to change an order or payment schedule. In others, much more opportunity existed for adjustment. Before providing this service, you should consider your program's goals, capacity and the likely outcome.

Just as you can incorporate child support services into case management and training, monitoring and assessment of child support services can also be integrated into existing oversight and service-improvement activities. You might consider conducting more frequent monitoring at the early stages of implementation when staff members are assuming new responsibilities and expanding their skills. In addition, it is important to gather participant feedback and use it to improve services. As always, if you are going to offer additional services, you'll want to make sure that the effort is making a difference.

## Action

### Seek Funding to Support Services

Some child support services, such as raising awareness or guiding fathers to information, can be easily integrated into your existing program and will consume little time or resources. Assisting individuals could require additional funding, however. If you intend to provide intensive services for your participants, you might explore the following funding options:

- Bundling the cost of child support services into your regular contracts and grants for workforce development by making a case that they are integral to assisting low-income males, including those with criminal records who are likely to have arrearages.
- Funding services through your state child support enforcement agency, if it offers grants to support noncustodial parents. If this support is not available, consider advocating for child support enforcement to allocate funds for this type of service.
- Funding from private foundations in your state concerned with family and children's issues.

**See Tool 6:** *Reflection and Action Worksheet* ([page 44](#))

## Concluding Thoughts

At first glance, providing child support services may seem similar to providing other support designed to minimize barriers to employment and stability. However, customary services often involve partnering with organizations as eager to assist your participants as you are. This may not be the case with child support enforcement agencies. Because their mission does not encompass the needs of noncustodial parents, state or local agencies may make supporting children easier on struggling fathers—or not. In fact, some Fathers at Work organizations were often frustrated as their participants confronted obstacles involving child support. If your organization wants to offer child support services, it should keep in mind two key actions:

First, your organization should educate itself about child support enforcement—not only about the governing laws and regulations, but also about the inner workings, practices and culture of the local agency. With this knowledge, you can align your activities and present your services in terms of the agency's mission and procedures.

Second, your staff should develop relationships with child support enforcement staff, especially those who can make changes or exercise flexibility that will help your participants manage their obligations. If possible, your organization should develop a formal agreement that outlines how you and child support enforcement will interact on behalf of fathers seeking to support their families.

If you are interested in child support issues as they affect low-income fathers, you've undoubtedly witnessed their struggles and seen how substantial arrears or unrealistic orders can affect a father's personal circumstances as well as his outlook on formal employment.

Perhaps you've already tried to help individuals obtain information, seek adjustments in support orders or quell coercive actions against them. We hope that the experiences of the Fathers at Work organizations presented here give you additional information about the challenges fathers face and the opportunities for you to assist them—and that this guide ultimately inspires you to serve low-income fathers even more effectively.



## The Tools



## **TOOL 1:** *Glossary: Arrearage and Other Terms ..... You Need to Know*

**Arrearage:** Past due, unpaid child support owed by a noncustodial parent.

*What this means to you:* Unemployed fathers with orders for child support, particularly formerly incarcerated individuals, can accumulate significant arrearages—sometimes in the six digits. Once the parent starts working, child support enforcement will collect the debt, along with current support payments, through wage withholding of up to 65 percent per paycheck. Withholding, especially in large amounts, is a disincentive for people to take the formal employment that workforce development programs promote.

**Child Support Enforcement:** A federally authorized program that collects child support. Child support enforcement is carried out by state and local agencies, whose policies and practices vary. Agencies focus on locating parents, establishing paternity and support orders and enforcing the orders.

*What this means to you:* Child support enforcement policies include withholding wages for child support payments and for arrearage repayment (see Arrearage above). Policies to ensure compliance include suspending driver's and occupational licenses and, in some states, taking legal action that could result in a jail sentence. You may be able to partner with your local child support enforcement agency to share information and discuss actions that encourage your participants to both seek employment and meet their obligations.

**Custody:** The legal right and responsibility for raising a child, making decisions and supervising upbringing. Custody usually includes the right to have the child live with a designated parent or relative, most often the mother.

*What this means to you:* Although custody issues can influence whether noncustodial fathers are willing to pay child support and, therefore, affects their willingness to take formal employment, both custody and visitation rights are separate from child support enforcement and overseen by different agencies—usually the courts. Workforce development organizations are less likely to get involved with custody and visitation, although some may offer mediation between parents or refer participants to legal assistance.

**Disregard:** The amount of support payment that is ignored when determining TANF assistance to a custodial parent for her children. States have much leeway in determining rules governing disregard, as well as pass through (see Pass Through on the following page).

*What this means to you:* Your participants may be reluctant to become involved with child support enforcement—or to seek employment—if their support payments will affect the amount of TANF payments their families receive.

**Garnishment:** See Wage Withholding on the next page.

**Noncustodial Parent:** The parent who does not have primary care, custody or control of the child, but has an obligation to pay child support.

*What this means to you:* If your organization serves low-income males, you are likely to have participants who are noncustodial parents. Even those intent upon supporting their children may be ill informed about child support enforcement and reluctant to deal with a system able to take coercive actions against them.

**Pass Through:** The portion of the support payment that the child support enforcement agency chooses to pay a family receiving TANF.

*What this means to you:* Noncustodial parents may be reluctant to make payments through child support enforcement when their money goes to the government, not to their families. To ensure that their children receive both TANF and their payments, they may prefer to support them informally. You can make sure that participants have accurate information about where their payments are going. In addition, your organization might consider advocating for increasing the pass through amount so poor families receive more income.

**Paternity:** Legal determination of fatherhood. Paternity must be established before child support can be ordered.

*What this means to you:* In the absence of marriage, establishing paternity is the first step in involvement with child support enforcement. Once paternity is established, noncustodial parents will receive a child support order and be expected to make regular payments to support their children. Your organization may help fathers establish, or challenge, paternity by helping them complete and file forms correctly.

**Petition:** A formal written request submitted to the court or child support agency stating facts and circumstances and containing a request for relief, such as modifying a child support order, reducing or arranging arrearage payments, or suspending payments while in job training.

*What this means to you:* If a petition is granted or changes negotiated, a father may be more inclined to complete your program and seek employment. Your organization might help fathers complete and file their petitions and offer support and testimony during hearings.

**Support Order:** A judgment or decree issued by a court or an administrative agency for the support of a child. Support orders can dictate how often, how much and what type of support a noncustodial parent must pay and whether an employer must withhold support from wages.

*What this means to you:* Participants with support orders will need to pay the amount ordered in the way indicated or face coercive actions that can affect their ability and motivation to take a job.

**Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF):** Public assistance payments made to poor families. Applicants for TANF benefits are automatically referred to child support enforcement to establish paternity and child support for children. Payments by non-custodial parents allow the state to recoup some of its public assistance expenditures.

*What this means to you:* See Disregard and Pass Through above.

**Visitation Rights:** The level of contact a parent or other significant person in a child's life can have with the child.

*What this means to you:* See Custody above.

**Wage Withholding:** A process in which scheduled deductions from wages for child support are automatically made. Wage withholding is often incorporated into the child support order. It dictates that an employer must withhold the specified amount and transfer it to the appropriate agency: the Centralized Collection Unit or State Disbursement Unit.

*What this means to you:* Some noncustodial fathers may be reluctant to take a job knowing that their wages will be withheld for child support and they will be left with reduced paychecks. Depending upon your state's policies, it may be possible for your organization to help participants try to arrange a payment plan for arrearages.



## **TOOL 2:** *Questionnaire About Child Support*

Answering these questions can help you better understand child support regulations in your state. You can use Tool 7: Resources for Assisting Noncustodial Fathers to find the answers or make an appointment with staff at your local child support enforcement agency to clarify specific questions—and begin establishing a relationship. This questionnaire could also serve as a training resource for your organization’s staff or as an assessment of their understanding of child support.

### **Establishing Paternity**

- How and where can paternity be established?
- Where are the forms distributed and who has the authority to administer them?
- Who can request a DNA test and how? Who will pay for testing?
- How can paternity be contested and by whom?

### **Establishing Child Support Orders**

- Which agency generates child support orders?
- Are they determined within the child support enforcement agency administratively or by a court order?
- How does a custodial or noncustodial parent request an order?
- What are the guidelines for determining the amount of a child support order?
- What type of documentation are fathers required to bring to a child support hearing?
- Who can request information about a child support order, and how?

### **Reviewing and Modifying Child Support Orders**

- What are the rules for modifying the child support order as opposed to reducing debt or implementing a plan to pay arrearage?
- Who can initiate a review of a child support order, for what reason and how?
- Are there automatic reviews?
- Is there a minimum amount that a child support order must increase when reviewed?
- Is there an option to decrease a child support order, and under what conditions?
- What is the rule when a father is incarcerated? Are payments still owed? Is a review automatic? Can a father request a review from prison?
- If arrearage exists, how can a payment plan be worked out?

**Collecting and Distributing Payments**

- What are the “trigger points” for different collection methods?
- What percentage of a father’s wages can be withheld for child support?
- Are child support payments “passed through” to mothers receiving TANF? All or some?
- How can a father find out how much he has paid into the system, his payment status or the answers to other questions about child support?

**Assisting Fathers**

- How receptive is the child support enforcement agency to working with fathers?
- Is the child support enforcement agency currently working directly with organizations such as yours to engage noncustodial fathers?
- Are there programs to help low-income fathers get a job or improve their career prospects, if yours is not a workforce development organization?

## **TOOL 3:** ..... *Straight Talk for Noncustodial Fathers*

To help noncustodial fathers be realistic about their status and obligations, use these, or similar, messages:

- *If you have an order, the state will catch up with you and you will face the consequences.*
- *If you ignore an order, it can undermine all your other efforts to get your life together and provide for your family.*
- *Payment plans for debt can be worked out. Use this message only if you are in a state that allows negotiation.*
- *If your order is unfair, you can challenge it, and you might be able to work out a fairer deal. Again, use this message only if your state is willing to make downward adjustments.*
- *There is no risk in talking to us about it, and we will help you look at the risk of becoming involved with the agency vs. the risks of staying away.*
- *There are downsides to becoming involved with child support enforcement, yes, but having an order and paying through the system provides proof that you have paid and can help you offer regular support to your child.*
- *The state has a lot of power when it comes to child support enforcement, but you have rights in the system, too.*

## **TOOL 4:** *Snapshots of Three Fathers at Work Programs*

Use these snapshots to help you envision how child support services can be offered.

### **Snapshot 1**

#### **Impact Services**

Since 1974, Impact Services has provided training programs for low-income people in Philadelphia and surrounding areas. Impact's programs have included the Helping Offenders Work (HOW) program, which serves people with criminal records and histories of substance abuse; the Greater Philadelphia Works and EARN Center welfare-to-work programs; and services to homeless veterans through its Veterans Services Division. Its Fathers at Work program, known as Step-up, worked with two key referral sources: Philadelphia County's Work Release Program and the Pennsylvania Bureau of Probation and Parole. Impact offered its participants life skills and job readiness training, job placement, fatherhood workshops and mediation counseling. To support fathers, Impact engaged in the following activities:

#### **Entered into a partnership with child support enforcement**

A memorandum of understanding with Philadelphia Family Court provided special provisions for Impact Services participants, including:

- Order reduction: an immediate petition to reduce support orders to a minimum when a participant was enrolled and participating in the program.
- Case consolidation: including child support orders, orders for multiple children and custody or visitation cases. If a participant had many cases pending, this streamlined process reduced the number of times that he missed program activities or jobs in order to appear in court.
- Gradual increase in order payment: increasing support payments by increments, rather than have a participant's employment trigger immediate and significant payment increase. This gradual increase allowed fathers to put some money aside to stabilize their living situations, making it easier for them to retain employment.

#### **Acted on behalf of individual fathers**

The partnership with the Family Court described above allowed Impact's staff to:

- Solicit information about support orders—with participants' permission.
- Contact participants while they were incarcerated and assist them to halt accrual of child support debt.
- Counsel participants about their options regarding support payments.
- Help participants fill out required paperwork.
- Accompany participants to meetings and to court and advise them on how to proceed, behave and respond. Participants were educated on how to present a "pro se" case, but legal counsel was made available when needed, most often in cases involving custody.
- Use its relationship with administrative and supervising judges, who were then willing to inform courtroom judges about Impact and its work with fathers.

#### **Advocated for change that benefited fathers**

In the Philadelphia Family Court, judges have much discretion in determining individual outcomes of cases involving child support. During court workshops, Impact Services informed judges about the perspective of noncustodial fathers and the services that Impact offered. These workshops highlighted the importance of judges having complete information about a father's paternity, child support orders and custody in the same courtroom and resulted in procedural changes. Every division of Family Court now has child support and paternity information readily available during hearings.

## Snapshot 2

### Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)

The Center for Employment Opportunities operates a workforce development program designed to offer immediate and comprehensive employment services to men and women returning from prison and detention facilities to New York City. The organization provides one week of intensive classroom instruction; meetings with a job coach; paid transitional work at a CEO-supervised work site; vocational assessment and job development; unsubsidized job placement; and job retention support. CEO continues to provide services offered during the Fathers at Work initiative, including fatherhood workshops and parenting and group support to enrollees who choose to participate. Responsible Fatherhood Program participants can also work with the program's child support advocates on their child support issues. During the Fathers at Work initiative, CEO engaged in the following activities:

#### Entered into a partnership with child support enforcement

Because CEO is often the first employer after incarceration, its transitional jobs program receives the first notice of the participants' current child support obligations. To support fathers, CEO entered into a partnership and memorandum of understanding with the New York City Human Resources Administration, Office of Child Support. This agreement allows participants to sign waivers so CEO staff can ascertain their obligations.

#### Acted on behalf of individual fathers

Using the information obtained through the agreement, the staff discusses with the father his status and options and accompanies him to the child support enforcement office on days/hours reserved for appointments with CEO participants. Prior to the meeting, the CEO advocate coaches the father on what to expect and provides a letter to child support enforcement stating that the father is enrolled and fully participating in the program. At this initial meeting, child support enforcement officials, when possible, can lift administrative sanctions, including reinstating a driver's license, adjusting the amount of arrearage accumulated during incarceration or eliminating some penalties and fines.

CEO also helps fathers complete petitions for court hearings, often on a fast track of four to six weeks. The advocate prepares the fathers for the court appearance by counseling them on appropriate dress, demeanor and emotional control. CEO staff goes with them to court, presents a letter of employment and answers honestly any questions from the magistrate regarding compliance with the program. For participants with open child support cases outside of New York City but an inability to travel because of lack of funds or parole conditions, CEO, with the support of local child support agencies, initiates a telephone conference hearing.

Typically, child support orders are reduced to \$25 per month while the fathers are enrolled at CEO. CEO then helps fathers set up another court date once they become employed outside the program. Over a period of time, the magistrates have become familiar with and trusting of CEO staff, a relationship helpful to participants.

### Snapshot 3

#### **Rubicon Programs Inc.**

A community-based corporation since 1973, Rubicon Programs Inc. provides employment, job training, mental health and other support services to individuals with disabilities, homeless people and those who are otherwise economically disadvantaged. Rubicon integrates its services so participants can access all components of its program. As a Fathers at Work organization and to better serve low-income, noncustodial parents, Rubicon engaged in the following activities:

#### **Folded support for fathers into its existing workforce development services**

The organization provided:

- Job readiness, transitional employment, job placement and career development.
- Case management services to ensure that participants received extensive personal support and were linked with health services, housing, probation and parole, and other assistance.
- Behavioral health services including drug rehabilitation and mental health services.
- Fatherhood workshops, parenting classes and group support.

#### **Provided child support services for noncustodial fathers**

To attract participants, Rubicon offered young fathers access to the services listed above, as well as child support services. They included a staff person who worked directly with Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services to help fathers understand their status, their options and what to do to adjust a child support order. Rubicon provided on-site access to child support enforcement staff for meetings and hearings to adjust support orders. They also provided parenting workshops for the fathers.

#### **Entered into a partnership with child support enforcement**

Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services, the local agency, agreed to provide on-site information and training to Rubicon's staff in order to provide quick access to information about the participants' child support orders and status, to meet with participants to review their orders and to work to adjust the orders to reasonable levels for fathers making good faith efforts to work and support their children. As the partnership evolved—and with signed permission from participants—Rubicon's staff discussed with child support enforcement the fathers' progress in preparing for work that would allow them to take up their support obligations.

#### **Advocated for adjustments in the child support enforcement system**

Rubicon worked with the local child support office to educate both its staff and other offices about its fatherhood program and to identify adjustments in the system that could allow it to function better for fathers and families. Partnering with the Contra Costa office to change regulations that forbade forgiving arrearage owed the state, Rubicon's staff, along with fathers in the program, testified before the legislature. Their advocacy helped establish one-stop services for prisoner reentry called "Going Home, Staying Home." Some fathers from Rubicon became leaders in promoting a more "father-friendly" child support enforcement system.

## TOOL 5: *Elements of a Partnership Agreement*

Fathers at Work organizations and their child support enforcement partners developed formal agreements outlining their respective responsibilities. In developing your own partnership, consider incorporating the following elements, based on a memorandum of understanding between Rubicon Programs Inc. and the Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services.

### The child support agency will:

- Provide training to the workforce organization staff on key issues concerning child support enforcement and on the agency’s processes and terminology.
- Accept referrals for services (*a designated number*) and refer eligible applicants to the employment program. (*List eligibility criteria for fathers’ participation.*)
- Provide services to participating fathers. (*List agreed-upon services such as assigning a specific staff member to meet with participating fathers to review support orders, negotiating arrears payment and adjusting wage withdrawals, reinstating licenses, and establishing paternity.*)

### The workforce development organization will:

- Provide employment-related services to participating fathers. (*List services such as intensive case management, employment and training, and facilitated peer support groups.*)
- Provide current program status of participating fathers to child support enforcement.
- Obtain a signed agreement from participating fathers identifying their responsibilities to child support enforcement.

Each party will **designate a staff member as a single point of contact** between the organizations. (*List specific names and contact information for the liaisons at both organizations.*)

## TOOL 6: *Reflection and Action Worksheet*

Use the worksheet to reflect upon, discuss and plan actions to provide effective child support services for your participants.

Reflection and Action Worksheet		
Key Questions for Deciding on Child Support Services	Reflection "I wonder..."	Actions "Next week, I will..." "Next quarter, our program will..."
<p><b>Could our participants benefit from child support services? In sufficient numbers to make offering services worthwhile for our organization? How do services connect to our mission? For example, could child support services:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve circumstances for fathers?</li> <li>• Increase willingness to obtain formal employment?</li> <li>• Increase child support payments?</li> <li>• Increase parents' engagement with their children?</li> <li>• Have other positive outcomes?</li> </ul> <p><b>How are our participants affected if we do not provide these services?</b></p> <p><b>What child support services should we offer noncustodial fathers who enroll in our program? For example, could we:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise their awareness by providing accurate information about child support enforcement?</li> <li>• Provide help obtaining information about their status with child support enforcement, including completing and submitting forms?</li> <li>• Take actions on behalf of individuals, including advocating for them with the child support enforcement agency?</li> <li>• Advocate for law and policy changes that would benefit noncustodial fathers?</li> <li>• Provide other child support related services?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Example:</i> ...whether our job retention would increase if we offered information about child support enforcement.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i> During this month's follow-up, we will ask those who have quit their jobs about child support withholding and whether that was a factor in leaving.</p>



<b>Reflection and Action Worksheet</b>		
<b>Key Questions</b> for Preparing to Offer Services	<b>Reflection</b> "I wonder..."	<b>Actions</b> "Next week, I will..." "Next quarter, our program will..."
<p><b>What would we need to do to offer child support services? For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn more about child support laws and local practices?</li> <li>• Begin to develop a relationship with child support enforcement?</li> <li>• Learn what forms/procedures are required to make adjustments in unrealistic child support orders or arrearage repayments?</li> <li>• Develop a formal agreement with child support enforcement that allows access to records and, if possible, rapid attention to participants' issues?</li> <li>• Train staff to take action with child support enforcement on behalf of individual fathers?</li> <li>• Advocate for changes that could benefit fathers with other organizations, child support enforcement or the government, as appropriate?</li> </ul> <p><b>How might we address child support issues/offer services through our current program components? For example, during our:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting</li> <li>• Orientation</li> <li>• Case management</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Job placement</li> <li>• Referrals to other organizations</li> <li>• Policy advocacy</li> </ul> <p><b>What current processes will we need to add/change/adapt to offer child support services? For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff/Staff training</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• Monitoring/Assessment</li> <li>• Funding</li> </ul> <p><b>How might our services have unintended consequences?</b></p>	<p><i>Example:</i> ...if we could get child support enforcement to present during our in-service trainings so we could learn more and start a relationship.</p>	<p><i>Example:</i> Our director will contact the appropriate person at the agency to arrange a presentation during next month's training.</p>

## **TOOL 7:** *Resources for Assisting Noncustodial Fathers*

Organizations serving low-income noncustodial fathers have a variety of resources available to assist them in their efforts. Here are a few that proved useful for sites in the Fathers at Work initiative.

### **For learning about child support laws:**

*The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement* offers information about federal laws governing child support enforcement and about state laws and processes through links at: [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/).

### **For serving formerly incarcerated fathers:**

*The National H.I.R.E. Network* offers a clearinghouse for state-specific resources, information and assistance for job-related and legal services related to criminal records and employment. [www.hirenetwork.org](http://www.hirenetwork.org).

*Public/Private Ventures* provides a variety of reports and tools that are useful to programs working with formerly incarcerated fathers, including other reports from the Fathers at Work Initiative: *Going to Work with a Criminal Record* offers information on helping formerly incarcerated people gain employment. *Leaving the Streets: Young Fathers Move from Hustling to Legitimate Work* presents findings from an in-depth interview study of 27 Fathers at Work participants who had relied on “hustling” as a source of income; it examines ongoing challenges faced by the men and suggests recommendations for programs working with similar populations. *The Young Fathers Video and Workshop Guide* provides a variety of discussion guides, activities and lesson plans that accompany the award-winning Fathers at Work documentary; it is designed for use in employment or reentry programs or in parenting and marriage workshops. [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org).

### **For advocating to change law and policy:**

These organizations advocate on behalf of low-income fathers at the federal level. Their websites provide information and links to other advocates and to technical resources.

*Center for Family Policy and Practice* [www.cffpp.org](http://www.cffpp.org) (For example, *State Laws and Administrative Codes on the Treatment of Child Support for Families Receiving TANF Cash Assistance* is available at [www.cffpp.org/publications/index.html](http://www.cffpp.org/publications/index.html))

*Center for Law and Social Policy* [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org) (For example, a policy brief describing new rules regarding pass through is available at [www.clasp.org/publications/more\\_cs\\_dollars\\_policy\\_brief\\_v10.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/publications/more_cs_dollars_policy_brief_v10.pdf))

**For serving low-income, noncustodial fathers:**

*National Partnership for Community Leadership* [www.npclstrongfamilies.com](http://www.npclstrongfamilies.com)



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