

Year Two Follow-Up on the FRPN State Planning Grant Initiative

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Introduction

In October 2019, FRPN released a Request for Proposals inviting states to apply for a small planning grant to develop long-term plans to promote systematic change aimed at enhancing father inclusion in state programs and policies. Eligible applicants included nonprofit father and/or children's advocacy and faith-based organizations, universities, and government agencies. To maximize policy outcomes, applicants were required to create a state planning team that included the State Child Support Director, a fatherhood or family-policy researcher, and at least one other high-level state leader such as a director of a state agency or program that serves fathers and families. Twenty states applied for an FRPN planning grant and in January 2019, FRPN made awards of \$10,000 to 11 states: Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Washington, and Wyoming. Grant funds were flexible and could be used on a variety of activities that the planning team determined to be relevant in developing and implementing an action plan. These activities included: focus groups with fathers and key stakeholders, surveys about the state of current fatherhood programming, statewide or regional fatherhood summits, the cultivation of legislative champions, the development of centralized information databases, the conducting of strategic planning processes, and the exploration of long-term funding strategies.

FRPN directors supported the planning processes during the first year in a variety of ways including: holding bi-monthly check-in calls with each planning team to monitor their progress, and provide feedback and suggestions; connecting team members with other planning teams and experts; and hosting webinars on fatherhood commissions, fatherhood summits, and engaging with state legislators. At the conclusion of the one-year grant period, each team prepared an *action plan* that summarized their activities, accomplishments, and next steps. Subsequently, FRPN directors prepared a cross-site overview of the initiative that highlights

similarities and differences in goals, activities, challenges, and accomplishments (Pearson, 2020) (<https://www.frpn.org/asset/frpn-research-brief-implementation-lessons-learned-the-frpn-state-planning-grant-initiative>).

In July-September 2020, FRPN conducted a second round of interviews with the planning teams. The goal was to assess their activities and accomplishments during their second year of operation, highlight new challenges, and discuss their plans for the future. The following presents themes that emerged from those conversations.



Activities and Accomplishments

Multi-agency Coalition Building

Nearly half of the planning grant teams continued to meet regularly in-person and, following COVID-19 shutdowns in March and April 2020, virtually. Whether or not they met, all grantee sites continued to pursue many of their first-year activities: building coalitions with state agency partners and nonprofit organizations and pursuing fatherhood champions in the executive and legislative branches.

Washington used its planning meetings to “firm-up its mission vision” as well as to discuss how to cultivate public funding support. It pursued several partnerships with various programs regarding father inclusion: health programs to further father engagement at the prenatal and perinatal stages, WIC programs for case management with fathers during mothers' visits, and NCP employment programs using an OCSE Section 1115 waiver with a local foundation providing the required match to draw down federal funds. The planning team also wrestled with ways to sustain father engagement at the policy level including the possibility of pursuing a Memorandum of Agreement across state agencies if statutory authority for a fatherhood commission is not feasible in the current budget climate.

The statewide planning team in **Michigan**, known as Michigan Action Plan for Fatherhood Involvement (MAP FI), continued to meet to “build their vision and infrastructure for ongoing work,” pursue collaborations, and map fatherhood resources statewide. Its child support agency also began to collaborate with its Department of Workforce Development to create a child support payer Employment Program using an OCSE 1115 waiver with the Department of Workforce Development supplying the local match funds (see below).



In **Minnesota**, the planning grant recipients reported being reenergized by the grant. Some members were focusing on prenatal to three issues via public policy forms coordinated by Elders for Infants, others had become fatherhood doulas to engage more men in the childbirth process, and various departments within the Minnesota Child and Family Services Administration were collaborating with the University of Minnesota to develop a Design Lab to address father issues through specific projects, policies, and legislative initiatives.

The planning team in **Wyoming** stopped meeting due to the move of the team leader to a new position but the state child support agency was actively engaged in developing an NCP Employment Program in collaboration with its Department of Labor and Workforce Development using TANF funds (see below).

In **Rhode Island**, the FRPN grantee, Parent Support Network (PSN), continued to be hired by the Department of Children, Youth, & Families (DCYF) to assist with father engagement by retaining father graduates of its recovery workforce development program to do outreach to fathers with children in DCYF to encourage their involvement.

Connecticut revised its interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which now includes fifteen partner agencies from the Executive and Judicial Branches as well as the state college and university system. All parties to this agreement commit to working within and across agencies to offer coordinated services, ensure continuity of service, heighten the impact and avoid duplication of services and provide the most comprehensive services for Connecticut's fathers and their families.

Before the pandemic, the **South Carolina** Governor's office hosted a meeting with the Governor's cabinet heads and South Carolina's planning team leader, the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families (SCCFF) to explore expanding partnerships and father-friendly services. SCCFF also held thirteen legislative breakfasts to thank legislators and city councils for their fatherhood work. Although plans to conduct community forums throughout the state and pursue new partnerships and joint funding applications with agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Employment and Workforce, the Department of Corrections, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and the Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services, were put on hold as a result of COVID-19, the SCCFF moved forward with a statewide marketing campaign (the Dads Fact Campaign) to keep fatherhood in front of people during COVID-19 and to co-brand. In addition, the SCCFF worked with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Federal Reserve to adapt a tool regarding the benefits cliff effects for men.

Planning meetings stopped in **North Carolina** but fatherhood activity inspired by the planning effort continued. In one development, the child support agency created a new position to be paid for with regular child support funds to coordinate with fatherhood programs and the FRPN planning team. It is hoped that the new community outreach coordinator will "become the face of child support with different organizations and fatherhood agencies throughout the state." North Carolina was also completing work implementing NC Care 360 in the Department of Social Services. Begun during the first year of the FRPN planning grant, NC Care 360 adds fatherhood programs and child support agencies to a statewide platform initially built for medical professionals to connect patients to services. With the addition of fatherhood programs and child support agencies, county workers will be able to anonymously report a person for various types of services (including fatherhood) and child support offices will be able to accept referrals from providers.





Legislative and Policy Activities

Several planning teams engaged in legislative and policy activity aimed at furthering fatherhood work in a sustainable manner. Notably, **Pennsylvania** launched the Pennsylvania Greater Father Family Involvement Campaign (<https://pagfffc.org/>) to advocate for Senate Bill No. 476 and H.B. 2872, which would establish the Pennsylvania Commission on Greater Father Family Involvement. Both bills enjoy bipartisan support and are likely to be introduced as one companion bill at the beginning of the January 2021-2022 Legislative Session. In addition, caucuses are being formed in several regions of the state (Western, Central, Northeastern and Southeastern), to raise public awareness of the contributions of fathers to the well-being of children, to urge each branch of state government to adopt a father-inclusive posture, to remove systematic impediments to father-child involvement at the state level, and to build support for establishment

of a Commission to promote father involvement by statute. In another policy development, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Support Enforcement created an advisory board that includes child and family advocates (along with local and state court administrative personnel) to infuse those perspectives into the operational and policy decisions made by the agency. An initial meeting was held in January 2020, but subsequent meetings were cancelled due to COVID-19. Future meetings will focus on the equitable use of enforcement remedies and other issues pertaining to child support policy.

In **Rhode Island**, the entity that led the FRPN planning effort, the Parent Support Network (PSN), drafted legislation to recognize its steering committee as an established body and board to lead fatherhood activities for the state. Although it began the process of obtaining sponsors to support and introduce the bill in the legislature, these activities were put on hold when the legislative session was suspended due to COVID-19. A successful legislative development that affects unmarried fathers and others in Rhode Island was the passage of the Uniform Parentage Act (UPA) in July 2020. The UPA updates state law regarding parentage for the first time in 40 years. Although unmarried fathers have had the ability to acknowledge paternity since the mid-1980s, the new law adds a new opportunity known as defacto parentage, and provides multiple paths to establish legal parentage for same sex, unmarried couples.

The legislature in **Washington** passed two child support bills that directly affect fathers: automatic abatement of child support when someone enters prison and a \$50 pass through of child support debt owed to the state for TANF benefits paid for the children. Planning team members noted that the pass-through had not been implemented and might be delayed or withdrawn by the legislature due to the COVID-19 budget crisis.



Kentucky incorporated the Commonwealth Center for Fathers and Families (CCFF) which was created during the first year of the FRPN planning grant. With ongoing support of the Lexington Leadership Foundation (LLF), the recipient of the FRPN planning grant, CCFF team members have refined and advanced a strategic plan and are pursuing corporate and foundation funding and legislative support for CCFF.

Michigan's planning team continued to explore the options of creating a commission or a network and in identifying a legislative champion for any entity that they create. Drawing on FRPN resources, team members prepared a brief urging the use of surplus TANF funds for fatherhood and submitted it to the TANF Program Manager. Although he is sympathetic, the decision is made by the State Budget Office which has indicated there are no uncommitted funds, a situation that is only expected to worsen in the wake of COVID-19. In a separate effort, the child support agency pursued a successful collaboration with the Department of Workforce and Development to create and fund a child support payer Employment Program (see Multi-agency Coalition Building). The child support agency also drafted and successfully managed to pass and implement partial child support pass-through legislation so that TANF families receive some of the child support paid monthly. The agency is currently working to pass legislation to abate, by operation of law, child support when a payer is incarcerated more than six months. Finally, although interrupted by the pandemic, the **Michigan** child support agency is creating a parent advisory board to elicit the input of parents served by the program, including fathers. A comparable board already exists in the foster care program.

Fatherhood Summits & Conferences

The 21st Annual New England Fathering Conference (NEFC) scheduled for March 2020 was cancelled due to the pandemic. **Connecticut** and **Rhode Island**, as part of the NEFC Planning Committee along with Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and ACF Region I, worked with the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse to offer a series of three webinars about serving fathers during the pandemic to support providers during this challenging time.

Pennsylvania hosted its 4th Annual Child Well-Being Symposium on December 1st, 8th, & 15th, 2020, in collaboration with The Strong Families Commission, Incorporated, Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), and the Dad's Resource Center. The Symposium focuses on child welfare with an emphasis on the need for greater father family involvement.

Kentucky held a fatherhood summit on October 19, 2019 which attracted approximately 200 participants including numerous state agency representatives, legislators and fatherhood program practitioners. Patricia Littlejohn, the director of the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families (SCCFF), which is the FRPN planning grantee in South Carolina, was the keynote speaker. In addition, members of the Kentucky planning team did an exploratory peer visit to the SCCFF to look at their model and program and have forged a relationship with them. The 2020 Summit took place virtually on October 27 - 29, 2020. The conference theme was Engagement, Empowerment, Economic Stability, and Equity.

In **Michigan**, the Michigan Action Plan for Fatherhood Involvement (MAP-FI) organized and conducted a three-day virtual summit on July 28-30, 2020, which was well received and attracted approximately 100



unique registrants. At the meeting, MAP-FI coordinators disseminated the results of interviews and focus groups conducted during the first year of the planning grant including barriers to father involvement in various state agencies and programs. The summit was also an opportunity to highlight how fatherhood programs and child support agencies can collaborate, resources for parenting time, and engagement of fathers in prenatal and postpartum services.

Applying for Department of Health & Human Services Funds

Seven FRPN planning sites were actively involved in applying for fatherhood funding through the Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (Fatherhood FIRE) initiative. Under the competitive grant program, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) was projected to make approximately 69 awards ranging from \$500,000 to \$1,500,000 per year for five years (2020-2025) to support responsible fatherhood promotion activities. Allowable activities include services to promote healthy marriage and relationships, including coparenting, strengthen positive father-child engagement, and improve employment and economic stability opportunities for fathers including employment and job skills development. Although the FIRE awards do not explicitly authorize policy activities, several FRPN planning grant applicants proposed to use FIRE grants to help build the fatherhood infrastructure in their states in addition to providing direct services to fathers.

In **Rhode Island**, the Parent Support Network (PSN) proposed a statewide infrastructure for direct services with a strong evaluation component as well as funding for a statewide coordinator. **Washington** proposed to build a technical assistance hub for community providers using the Nurturing Fatherhood Program curriculum. **Connecticut** submitted an application for the *Fatherhood FIRE* grant, hoping for a successful outcome to support community-based programming in their state. The **Kentucky** planning team worked "quasi-cooperatively" with a handful of organizations that applied for the FIRE Grant. Similarly, there were multiple applications submitted by organizations in **Michigan**, including one submitted by a county-level child support enforcement agency in cooperation with a community-based fatherhood organization. In **Colorado**, the Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Early Childhood (OEC) submitted a grant application due to their continued interest in increasing fatherhood work in early childhood programs (including home visiting). As part of their application, they proposed to fund a fatherhood practitioner network and to fund a position in the Office of Economic Security (OES) dedicated to fatherhood programming with duties that include embedding child support training and education, and fatherhood curriculums into all OES programs, developing fatherhood-focused, child support training and educational materials for customers, child support professionals and other OES program partners, and working with local county child support programs and other local OES programs to create a pathway for completing referrals into the OEC Fatherhood Program. Finally, in **South Carolina**, the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families (SCCFF) submitted a FIRE Grant application. The SCCFF has been a recipient of OFA fatherhood grants since the inception of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grant program in 2005.

In October 2020, ACF posted notice of FIRE awards. The **Colorado** Department of Human Services, Office of Early Childhood Education and **South Carolina's** SCCFF both received five-year grants with annual award levels of approximately \$1.5 million.



Initiating NCP Employment Programs

Several sites were in the process of planning and/or implementing new programs to improve employment opportunities for un- or under-employed noncustodial parents behind in their child support payments. Pursuant to a legislative appropriation of long-term reserve TANF funds in 2018, **Colorado** will be launching the Improved Payments and Child Success (IMPACS) program in early 2021, funding three vendors to work with local child support services programs to implement NCP employment programs, which are expected to include fatherhood and parenting programming.

Wyoming was finalizing the WIN Initiative, an employment services initiative for unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents funded with unspent TANF dollars and sponsored by the Department of Workforce Services and the Child Support Program. The state was building an automated module into the Department of Workforce Services' current system to allow child support workers to make referrals and workforce staff to record actions taken in shared cases held by the two agencies without duplicate data entry. Staff were being trained on how to work with noncustodial parents and the barriers they face and how to provide effective case management.

Finally, the **Michigan** child support agency began to collaborate with its Workforce Development Agency (WDA) to pursue a Section 1115 waiver from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) to develop a child support payer Employment Program. WDA agreed to provide the required local match of 34 percent to draw down 66 percent in federal funds. The resulting program will offer payers opportunities for intensive workforce services and supports to enhance their ability to obtain and retain employment and pay child support.

Challenges

COVID-19

The pandemic presented the most significant challenge for all planning teams. Momentum was slowed by the inability to meet in-person, the closure of state legislatures, agency and court shutdowns, and the overwhelming need for service providers in the public and private sectors to shift to remote forms of service delivery. Thus, the **Pennsylvania** team needed a different strategy – relaunching its effort to pass a bill establishing the Pennsylvania Commission on Greater Father Family Involvement to a remote format, postpone its in-person 2020 conference to 2021, and suspend meetings of the state's newly formed child support advisory board after a single session.

Facing the prospect of being unable to offer an in-person summit in 2021 and thereby generating the funds required for its financial survival, the **Minnesota** Fathers and Families Network (MFFN) was exploring the feasibility of conducting a remote summit using a pay-per-view option. **Connecticut** temporarily suspended meetings of the CT Fatherhood Initiative (CFI) Council and CFI Strategic Plan Domain Committees, as state and local level CFI partners were required to focus on core functions for their service populations and shifting business processes in response to the pandemic. The Council reconvened in October and reconvening of the Committees is expected to begin in January 2021.



North Carolina cancelled an annual fatherhood conference normally held in June: **Colorado** conducted a virtual Strengthening Colorado Families and Communities Conference with a few sessions on fatherhood but abandoned plans to have a full fatherhood track. The pandemic also left planning team members feeling less certain about “the viability of a fatherhood commission from a budget and legislative standpoint”.

North Carolina perceived that a proposal to the governor regarding a fatherhood commission had stalled in the wake of the pandemic. In addition to delays in legislation and new programming, the Parent Support Network of **Rhode Island** reported difficulty collaborating with various state agencies regarding father engagement “since no one is meeting.” Although **Kentucky** planned to conduct its 2020 summit virtually, planning team members projected limited attendance by policy makers and limited access to the Governor to discuss the Commonwealth Center for Fathers and Families (CCFF) since “all administration energy has been consumed” with the pandemic. **Michigan** reported being able to quickly pivot to a virtual format and conduct a well-received online summit that attracted about 100 practitioners, although attendance by fathers at evening sessions was low.

A few planning teams reported that the pandemic had led to some positive developments. **Minnesota** used print formats to disseminate information on fatherhood and began putting “a daddy book” in newborn baby bags for new families to make sure that “education for new fathers is still going on”. Although COVID-19 forced the SCCFF to postpone the community forums it had planned to hold in **South Carolina**, the agency moved forward with a statewide marketing campaign that included billboards, social media posts, and Internet ads intended to reach people as they “drive around and do online shopping.” **Washington** reported that that virtual formats adopted post-pandemic for its statewide Fatherhood Council had improved attendance, consistency, and geographic representation, although there was less opportunity for relationship building and was difficult for new members. Finally, practitioners at several sites noted the benefits of virtual programming with fathers. These include: the ability to record sessions and coach facilitators through feedback, engaging fathers who might otherwise not have been willing or able to participate, and improving retention due to the convenience of virtual formats.



Other Challenges

Planning teams continued to report challenges associated with keeping fatherhood in the forefront. Planning teams at some sites were weaker due to attrition of key team members and/or organizations (**Colorado, North Carolina, Wyoming**), changes in state government or agency administration (**Connecticut**), and organizational communication issues (**Minnesota, North Carolina, Rhode Island**). **Washington** was frustrated by the lack of father-focus across state programs and agencies. Despite conducting small pilot programs encouraging father engagement, "there has been no culture shift to build sustainability and infiltrate other funding streams." The planning team also wished there was more communication and connection between and among the Fatherhood Council and the State's 2Gen and its Poverty Reduction Initiatives.

Michigan felt that it needed to connect with state legislators about father issues but needed to explore the best method for doing that. **North Carolina** felt that coordination had waned since the end of the planning grant but anticipated that its plan to hire a father coordinator within the child support agency would provide more continuity in outreach and fatherhood planning at the state level. **Rhode Island** reported that the current budget climate was forcing agencies to use monies targeted for program enhancements (such as fatherhood) for core functions.

South Carolina is waiting to see if the SCCFF TANF fund could be increased to restore previous cuts. **Wyoming** continued to struggle with the lack of fatherhood programs outside of core urban areas. Finally, several planning teams were wrestling with the issue of sustainability. **Rhode Island** was concerned about building sustainability and continuity of its fatherhood work amidst change and turnover in state staff in multiple agencies and programs. While the Fatherhood Council in **Washington** is currently funded with TANF dollars, the planning team was also working to strengthen the connections and synergy between and among the Fatherhood Council and the State's 2-Gen and Poverty Reduction work.

New Issues

Black Lives Matter

Several planning teams felt there was a connection between the Black Lives Matter movement and fatherhood. **Pennsylvania** noted that "once people get beyond the pandemic and the social unrest, fatherhood issues and stronger families are going to attract people's attention as they help to build a stronger society." In **Minnesota**, a recent forum held by Elders for Infants, "introduced the notion of fathers and racism into the prenatal conversation and connected historical and current events." **Connecticut** noted that fatherhood is "a difficult field because of implicit bias around black men...and who is deserving of services." **Kentucky** reported that anti-racism work will be a key theme at their upcoming summit and has always shaped and influenced their fatherhood work. The workgroup has formed strong relationships across several University of Kentucky colleges and is initiating efforts to research the intersectionality of fatherhood engagement and structural racism. **Michigan** hopes that there is a sustained focus on anti-racism work and stated that "understanding what it means to do anti-racism work in the context of a fatherhood program



is really important and should be further explored and expanded." They note that fatherhood programs should be one of the central initiatives and "on the list of good investments" when thinking about restorative practices and helping communities.

In **South Carolina**, a local energy company honored the SCCFF for their long-term work in social justice. They noted that "fatherhood is a place to elevate social justice" but it is important to emphasize that while father absence impacts the Black community more, it is not a racially driven issue.

Measuring Father Engagement

Planning grant sites favored the development of objective ways to measure father engagement across state agencies and were frustrated by their inability to do so. **Minnesota** planned to include the development of quantitative metrics of father engagement in their upcoming Design Lab with University of Minnesota researchers. **Connecticut** hoped that the Memorandum of Understanding that they have with ten state agencies would lead them to start asking men whether they are a father even though such a question is not a required field. Ideally, they would like programs and agencies to ask two questions: "Are you a father? Do you live with your children?" **Rhode Island** felt that it will be necessary to add measures on the number of referrals that child support workers make for workforce or fatherhood services to the child support agency's core performance measures in order for fatherhood to be taken seriously and not treated as an "extra." **Washington** reported that it had been like "pulling teeth to get the data to establish a baseline on father services and gauge differences over time in state agencies and programs." **Wyoming** noted that "they try to track performance, but it is hard." One tracking example they cited was the addition of a field on their automated system allowing workers to indicate whether they used motivational interviewing in certain child support cases. It will clearly take more concerted effort by human services agencies and programs across each state to design, track, and record measures of father participation and engagement in a systematic and an accessible manner.



Conclusions

The FRPN planning initiative illustrates how small grants combined with technical assistance and support by a trusted intermediary can stimulate policy development dealing with fatherhood at the state level. Although regular meeting activity by interagency planning teams waned in about half the funded states following the end of FRPN funding and regular site meetings with the FRPN co-directors at the end of 2019, father engagement activity continued in virtually all planning sites. And while COVID-19 has slowed some legislative enabling and funding initiatives, both continue to be pursued.

Promising accomplishments at the two-year mark included the following:

- Development of legislation to create a fatherhood commission with bi-partisan support in one site.
- The award of federal FIRE grants to support fatherhood services and some state-level fatherhood coordination activities in two sites.
- The use of TANF funds to create NCP Employment Programs--one to be operated state-wide and one to be operated in three counties--in two sites.
- Plans to apply for OCSE Section 1115 funds to create a child support payer Employment Program for child support payers with the state workforce agency providing the required local match in one site.
- The use of regular child support funds to create a new position to coordinate with fatherhood programs throughout the state in one site.
- The creation of an advisory board to elicit parent input into the programs and policies of the child support agency in one site and plans to create such a body in another site.

While it is impossible to know what would have happened in the absence of the FRPN initiative, the sites credit it with getting policy work started. In the words of planning grant leaders in **South Carolina**, the FRPN grant was the "seed to grow a bigger tree. It allowed us to build a bigger network and pursue diversified funding by bringing so many people and agencies to the table." FRPN will continue to monitor developments at the planning grant sites and to support their efforts.

