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NRFC Tips for Fatherhood Professionals

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BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: WHAT'S IMPORTANT FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS?

Background

Community partnerships can help ensure that fatherhood programs have the financial, organizational, and human resources they need to support practitioners and meet the needs of families.ⁱ Additionally, successful fatherhood programs often work with community leaders, agencies, and other organizations to increase community support for fathers and their families.^{ii,iii} Strategic community partnerships are part of a comprehensive approach to support fathers participating in fatherhood programs. This brief discusses the benefits of community partnerships and provides tips to practitioners for identifying and leveraging such partnerships.

What Are Community Partnerships?

A **community** is a group of people and/or organizations connected to each other through common interests, such as providing neighborhood services, or common characteristics, such as geographical location.¹

Community partnerships refer to formal or informal relationships between a fatherhood program and another organization, group, or individual. Programs might partner with individuals, families, schools, non-profits, corporations, religious organizations, or colleges and universities, among others. Community partners may support fatherhood programs by contributing any of a variety of resources: *physical resources* such as rent-free space or supplies, *social resources* such as prior relationships with fathers in need of services, *intellectual resources* such as grant-writing expertise or job search and training experience, and *financial resources* such as donations or other funding opportunities.⁴

How Can Community Partnerships Benefit Fatherhood Programs?

When the community is involved in programs sponsored by social service providers, research has shown that both the community and the program benefit.

- Fatherhood programs can improve their recruitment efforts by partnering with organizations that work with a similar target population.^{iv}
- Fatherhood programs can augment program services and better meet the wide-ranging needs of fathers by creating community partnerships. For example, one fatherhood program partnered with a variety of community organizations in order to offer participating fathers free health screenings, clothing, and housing assistance.^v

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

- Community partnerships allow individual organizations to work toward a common cause or goal while maintaining their own agenda. They allow for the community to engage in activities beyond the reach of any singular organization or individual.^{vi}
- Communities that engage in activities with families tend to be stronger and better able to promote healthy parent-child relationships as well as parent well-being. When families are supported by their community, children are more likely to grow up happy and healthy, free from the risk of maltreatment.^{vii}
- Broad-based partnerships that work across systems are necessary in order to create lasting change in how communities think about prevention and support families. Partnering with other community organizations creates opportunities to identify strategies for ensuring that fathers and families have the skills, supports, and resources they need to care for their children.^{viii}

How Can Your Program Identify Valuable Community Resources?

Follow these steps to make building a network of community involvement and support systems manageable.

STEP 1: Conduct a community asset assessment and generate a list of potential supporters.

- *First, consider existing partnerships that can be developed further.*^{ix} The organization that is providing meeting space for your program may agree to offer other in-kind donations, such as food or supplies. The business that has donated money may be interested in an employee volunteer program.
- *Next, walk around the neighborhood, look through the phone book, and use the Internet.* Take note of businesses, schools, social service agencies, and other organizations that may be interested in improving the lives of fathers and their families. Check your city Web site and the Web sites of companies located in your area. Many public and private organizations have Web sites that list the contact information of someone who can point you in the direction of resource opportunities, answer questions, and field proposals.

STEP 2: Conduct a needs assessment and target community members who might be able to help.

Before contacting potential supporters, assess and prioritize the resources that your program needs in order to best support its participants and fulfill its mission. What resources are needed right now? What can wait? Look over your list of potential supporters and identify those who might be able to help address priority needs. For example, if a program finds that jobs are a priority, the local community college offering technical or vocational training courses would be a good community organization to contact first.

STEP 3: Develop a strategy for engaging the support of qualified community members.

In preparing to approach community members, consider the following questions:^x

- *Are the mission and overall vision of this organization aligned with your program's mission and vision?* Although not all community partners will have a similar mission statement, those who understand and believe in your program will be more likely to partner with and support you in the long run.

- *What are your expectations for a relationship with this partner?* Develop clear expectations of what you would like before asking for support. At the same time, remain open to suggestions.
- *What resources will this partner bring to the relationship? How will you ensure the quality of these resources?* Ultimately, it is the quality, not the quantity, of the partnerships that matters most, which underscores the need to be especially thoughtful about deciding on a partner. Find out if community members have partnered with social service providers in the past and look into how these partnerships worked out. Additionally, ask the necessary questions. How will the church guarantee that its community room will be made available to you at a certain time each week? How will mentors be trained and monitored?
- *What will your program bring to the relationship?* Do not assume that the community members you are targeting know what your program is or what it does. Highlight your successes and share your plans for the future. In addition, highlight how the relationship will benefit both partners. If approaching a business, for example, note that developing an employee volunteer program can help the business by increasing employee motivation and workplace pride, as well as by demonstrating the business's stake in its community.^{xi}

What Strategies Can Your Program Use To Leverage Community Resources and Build Supportive Partnerships?

Social service programs often rely heavily on public funding and donated facilities, materials, and time from volunteers. Therefore, fostering strong, mutually beneficial partnerships with community members is vital to building and maintaining a successful program. The following are strategies that programs can use to leverage community resources:

Strategy 1: Consider working with the courts.

Fatherhood programs sometimes serve fathers who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Although working with the courts can be challenging, there are strategies that program can use to help meet fathers' legal needs.

Strategy 2: Consider working with the media.

Working with the media can help fatherhood programs dispel negative perceptions of fatherhood and increase community support for fathers and their families.

Strategy 3: Seek out partners that can contribute to program sustainability.

Partners that contribute to sustainability are essential; because it can take time to develop a strong working relationship, such partnerships should be sought out and forged as soon as possible.

Strategy 4: Vet all potential partners.

It is the quality of the partnerships and not their quantity that is most important. Partnerships that cannot deliver the needed resource, whether it is high-quality staff training or an effective fidelity assessment, may not be worth the time and effort it takes to build a strong relationship.

Strategy 5: Maintain clear channels of communication.

All program partners, whether they are the lead organization in an initiative or serve as consultants, should maintain clear and regular channels of communication. Although some partnerships are more formal than are others, roles and expectations of all partners should be made clear from the beginning, and changes in expectations should be communicated as soon as possible.

Strategy 1: Consider working with the courts.

Fatherhood programs sometimes serve fathers who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Consider employing the following strategies in working with the courts:^{xii}

- Provide information, tools, and training about protective factors to judges and others involved in making best interest determinations for children.
- Promote a better understanding of the challenges faced by those who come before the court by creating substantive roles for parents and community stakeholders in the juvenile dependency court system.
- Develop referral systems that direct parents to legal service providers in the community.
- Create support groups involving parents currently in the legal system.

Strategy 2: Consider working with the media.

Working with the media can help fatherhood programs dispel negative perceptions of fatherhood and increase community support for fathers and their families. Consider the following strategies:^{xiii}

- Develop a clear communications plan that includes your initiative's key messages, communication objectives, and targeted outreach to media outlets.
- Plan a community-wide campaign that gives increased visibility to community partners and families being served by the community partnership. Consider inviting media representatives to participate in your community-wide effort, and keep them informed regularly of your progress and challenges.

Strategy 3: Seek out partners that can contribute to program sustainability.

Because it can take time to develop a strong working relationship, such partnerships should be sought out and forged as soon as possible. Consider the following systems-level sustainability strategies:^{xiv}

- Do not depend on one source of financial support. Diversify your base by reaching out to multiple potential partners.
- Team up with other community organizations in order to access federal and state funding.
- Increase visibility through the creation of task forces, advisory committees, or other collaborative structures.
- Cultivate key champions within the community and/or government.
- Collect and communicate results.

Strategy 4: Vet all potential partners.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Child Welfare Information Gateway

The Child Welfare Information Gateway provides access to print and electronic publications, websites, and online databases covering a wide range of topics from prevention to permanency, including child welfare, child abuse and neglect, adoption, search and reunion, and much more. Information is available at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/aboutus.cfm>

Fathers and Families Coalition of America

The Fathers and Families Coalition of America (FFCA) provides access to resources that allow fathers to meet in fellowship and develop skills and services to effectively serve in their communities and in their own homes. FFCA has conferences, local chapters and national boards that offer professional developmental training for fathers around the country. Information is available at: <http://www.azffc.org/>

Father Involvement Research Alliance

The Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA) provides access to research about different types of fathers as well as best practices for serving fathers and their families. Information is available at: <http://fira.ca/>

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^v Ibid.

^{vi} National Fatherhood Initiative. (2002). *10 ways to stay involved with your children during deployment*. Available online at: <http://www.fatherhood.org/military-fams.htm>.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Walter, Caplan, & McElvain. (2000).

^x Walter, Caplan, & McElvain (2000).

^{xi} Bouffard. (2006).

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^{xiii} Ibid

^{xiv} Sandel, K. (2007). *Snapshots of sustainability: Profiles of successful strategies for financing out-of-school time programs*. Washington, DC: The Finance Project.