USING LEARNING CYCLES TO STRENGTHEN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

An Introduction to the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) Study

OPRE REPORT 2022-62

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OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes activities in the first two years of the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) study (2019 to 2021). SIRF aims to identify and test approaches to improving programs' recruitment, engagement, and retention of fathers using rapid learning cycles. During the first two years, the study team identified challenges that fatherhood programs face in engaging men and promising approaches for addressing those challenges, selected programs to participate in SIRF, and began collaborating with those programs on research activities. In 2021, fatherhood programs began iteratively implementing and assessing promising approaches to addressing implementation challenges with the support of and in partnership with the SIRF team.

During the learning-cycle stage, SIRF is working for one year with nine Responsible Fatherhood grantees and one former grantee, each of which is testing an approach that falls into one of three broad categories:

- **Coaching.** Coaching techniques are employed in case management. Staff members use open-ended questions to talk with fathers about their goals and how to achieve them. This approach is designed to increase the number of fathers who complete the program.
- **Outreach.** Programs use innovative ways of conducting outreach and intake to enroll more fathers into programs and encourage more fathers to show up for initial workshops.
- **Peer support.** Program alumni or fathers with experience with the program serve as mentors to new fathers with the aim of increasing the number of fathers who persist through the program.

The sites began learning-cycle activities in July 2021; they will conclude after about 12 months. Final results from the study are expected to be released in 2023. They will include an assessment of whether the approaches improve fathers' enrollment and participation in programs and a description of the experience of implementing each approach.

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are the implemented approaches improving fathers' participation in the programs?

2. What aspects of the approaches were most challenging for programs to implement? What aspects did they implement most successfully?

PURPOSE

Federally funded Responsible Fatherhood programs work with fathers to promote healthy relationships and marriages, strengthen parenting practices, and help fathers attain economic stability. For programs to improve fathers' outcomes, they need to be able to recruit fathers, engage them in services, and keep them actively participating in program activities. However, it is challenging to achieve these participation goals. These implementation challenges also make it difficult to carry out rigorous tests of program services to determine whether they affect the targeted outcomes, and if so, how.

SIRF is designed to strengthen programs and build evidence on promising practices to improve the enrollment, engagement, and retention of fathers in program activities. Fatherhood programs are iteratively implementing and assessing promising approaches to addressing implementation challenges, with the support of and in partnership with the SIRF team. This report describes the study's activities in its first two years (2019 to 2021). Study activities during that time have included identifying challenges that fatherhood programs face in engaging men, along with promising approaches for addressing those challenges; selecting programs to participate in SIRF; and engaging those programs in research activities.

METHODS

SIRF involves a variety of methods based on the specific approaches and study designs at the various programs.

- Programs in the **outreach** and **peer support** clusters are using random assignment, where about half of its fathers receive the approach being tested and half receive a more standard version of outreach or support. The difference in outcomes between the two groups represents the effect of the approach being tested.
- The analysis for programs in the **coaching** cluster is comparing participation data before and after the approach is implemented and comparing participation in those programs with participation in similar Fatherhood grantees that are not in SIRF.
- A mixed-methods implementation study is collecting qualitative and quantitative data from program staff members and fathers associated with each program, across all of the rapid learning cycles. These data sources address questions about what it took to implement the approaches and how staff members and fathers experienced them.

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CONTENTS

OVERVIEW iii

LIST OF EXHIBITS vi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

Introduction 1

What SIRF Has Been Doing 1

Priority Challenges and Approaches 3

Conducting Rapid Learning Cycles 7

Programs Participating in SIRF 11

What Comes Next 17

APPENDIX

A Challenges and Promising Approaches to Serving Fathers 18

B Organization Descriptions 22

REFERENCES 25

LIST OF EXHIBITS

TABLE

1	Categories of Challenges and Promising Approaches to Serving Fathers	4
2	Profiles of Programs in the Coaching Cluster	14
3	Profiles of Programs in the Outreach Cluster	15
4	Profiles of Programs in the Peer Support Cluster	16
A.1	Examples of Challenges and Promising Approaches to Serving Fathers	19

FIGURE

1	Where SIRF Is and Where It Is Going	2
2	Learn, Do, Reflect Steps in Learning Cycles	8
3	Locations of Organizations Participating in SIRF, by Cluster	12

BOX

1	Criteria for Determining Priority Approaches	5

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, federal and state governments have funded programs aimed at improving the well-being of fathers with low incomes and their children. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has funded Responsible Fatherhood programs since 2006 to promote or sustain healthy relationships and marriages, strengthen parenting practices, and help fathers attain economic stability.[1] However, some programs have reported difficulty recruiting fathers, engaging them in services, and keeping them actively participating in program activities. Fathers cannot benefit if they do not participate. Further, low participation also makes it difficult to study whether different program services benefit fathers and their families, and if so, how.

To strengthen these programs and build evidence on promising practices to improve the enrollment, engagement, and retention of fathers in program activities, in 2019 the Administration for Children and Families engaged MDRC and its partners MEF Associates and Insight Policy Research to conduct the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) study. In SIRF, fatherhood programs are using rapid learning cycles. That means they are iteratively implementing promising approaches to addressing implementation challenges, working with the study team to assess whether the approaches are achieving their goals and how they could be strengthened, and then applying what they learn from those assessments. The study includes nine current grantees of the federal Fatherhood Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (FIRE) grant program and one former recipient of a federal fatherhood grant. Each program is testing an approach to improving fathers' enrollment, engagement, and retention in services that falls into one of three categories: case management that is guided by the father's goals and decisions about how to achieve those goals (referred to in this report as coaching), enhanced outreach to potential program participants, and peer support.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the study's activities to this point and introduce what future fatherhood programs may learn from this work. Study activities to date include identifying challenges that fatherhood programs face in engaging men, along with promising approaches to addressing those challenges; selecting programs to participate in SIRF; and engaging those programs in research activities.

WHAT SIRF HAS BEEN DOING

Figure 1 summarizes SIRF's approach, which has sought to include a variety of perspectives and to work collaboratively with the 10 programs that are participating in the study.

1. "Responsible Fatherhood programs" refers to recipients of federal grants for Responsible Fatherhood demonstration projects. For a description of the current Responsible Fatherhood grants, see www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/responsible-fatherhood.

FIGURE 1. Where SIRF Is and Where It Is Going

1. **Listen to the field.** Beginning in January 2020, the study team cast a wide net to learn about the challenges faced by fatherhood programs and promising approaches for addressing those challenges. The team emailed and talked by phone with nearly 100 people including 27 federal staff members across different agencies, 5 staff members from state agencies, 5 developers of curricula designed to be used with fathers, 4 people from nonprofit funding organizations, 9 training and technical assistance providers, 17 researchers (including experts in iterative learning methods and program evaluation), and 30 program staff members at fatherhood programs. The team also reviewed 54 reports and peer-reviewed articles produced since 2015 related to services for fathers. The next section of this report summarizes the challenges and promising approaches identified through these efforts. A recently released brief also outlines these challenges and corresponding approaches.[2]

2. **Identify strong fatherhood programs to participate in SIRF and collaborate with them to design the approaches to test.** To find strong candidates for rapid learning activities, the SIRF team conducted a webinar to explain SIRF and solicit nominations of programs for the study. The SIRF team then reviewed these nominations, along with the grant applications of programs that received Fatherhood FIRE grants. From the list of programs, the team chose 10 to participate in SIRF based on each organization's stability, the population it served and how many fathers it served, the challenges it faced and their alignment with the SIRF priority challenges (described in the next section), the program's

2. Marano, Israel, and Quezada (2022).

interest in SIRF, and its infrastructure and organizational capabilities (as needed to participate in a research study). The SIRF team then collaborated with the programs to identify the approaches they would test. As noted earlier, the approaches fall into three clusters: (1) an approach to case management that emphasizes the father defining his own goals and deciding how to achieve the goals (coaching), (2) outreach to enroll fathers into services, and (3) peer support of fathers as they participate in the program. This report describes the 10 programs in its fifth section.

3. **Collaborate with programs on learning-cycle activities to strengthen implementation and refine approaches.** The learning cycles began in July 2021 and will continue for about a year. During this year, the SIRF team will work with participating programs to assess how well the programs implement their chosen approaches. In consultation with the programs, the SIRF team developed observation tools and surveys to inform programs about staff members' and fathers' perceptions of program implementation. Together, the SIRF team and programs will also determine whether their chosen approaches seem to improve enrollment, engagement, and retention in services. The fourth section of this report describes what is happening during the learning cycles.

4. **Share lessons with the field.** When the learning cycles are complete, the study hopes to identify interventions that can improve father outcomes by strengthening the implementation of fatherhood programs, and to share those lessons with the field.

PRIORITY CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES

Through the process described above, individuals submitted several hundred examples of challenges associated with recruiting fathers, engaging them in services, and keeping them actively engaged in services. The individuals also submitted several hundred examples of approaches to addressing those challenges. Table 1 summarizes eight categories within which the challenges and promising approaches fell. The categories are ordered from most frequently raised to least frequently raised.[3]

Appendix Table A.1 includes some examples of the challenges and promising approaches in each category. For example, a participation challenge associated with fathers' schedules is that fathers have multiple demands on their time and are unable to attend workshops at the established times. Promising approaches offered to address this challenge include having flexible attendance policies and providing materials outside of workshops so fathers do not miss the content.

To narrow the list of possible approaches to test in SIRF, the team engaged in a structured assessment process. The team first applied the criteria presented in Box 1 to the full set of

3. The examples of challenges and approaches submitted by one individual were often similar to examples provided by another, so it is not possible to present the number of unique examples accurately. The SIRF team sorted through more than 300 examples of challenges and more than 500 examples of promising approaches.

Table 1. Categories of Challenges and Promising Approaches to Serving Fathers

Category	Category Description	What Makes It Challenging and in Need of a Promising Approach
Program design	Program design includes the content of outreach messages, the structure of services (for example, whether fathers can start at any time or must start at the same time with a group of participants), schedule flexibility, and curriculum design (for example, skill-based or not). Funding may determine some elements of program design.	Elements of program design may influence a father's interest in enrolling and persisting in the program.
Fathers' basic needs	Basic needs include stable or affordable housing, access to reliable child-care, affordable or reliable transportation, proper clothes and hygiene, and access to mental health care, substance use care, or physical health care.	A father's unmet needs may make it difficult for him to enroll in or participate in a program.
Relationships with children's other caregivers or guardians (coparents)	Relationships with coparents may be complex. A parent may have children with more than one person, for example. Fathers and coparents may have low levels of cooperation, communication, or mutual respect, or be unable to overcome past conflicts.	A coparent who is not supportive of the father participating in services could influence his decision to enroll or participate. Also, a father's relationship with the coparent could make it difficult for her to agree to participate in services with the father or allow their child to do the same.
Fathers' schedules	Fathers' schedules may include work, parental responsibilities, or obligations to parole, probation, or other systems to which they must report.	Scheduling conflicts can make consistent program participation difficult.
Child support and access to children	Many fathers involved in fatherhood programs are noncustodial parents and must navigate the complex child support system to have access to their children. Some fathers have negative associations with the child support enforcement system.	Fathers might not enroll or participate in programs that do not help them navigate the child support system or reach agreements with their children's mothers. Other fathers may not want to enroll in a program associated with the child support system.
Staffing	Staffing refers to a program's efforts to hire and train staff members.	Staff members may be overburdened, lack the right experience, not be the right fit for the program population, or not have sufficient training, all of which could make it difficult for them to connect with fathers in a way that encourages participation.
Partnerships	Programs develop partnerships with other organizations or systems in their communities to aid in their recruitment efforts and to serve fathers.	Programs can struggle to recruit enough fathers without referral partners in the community. Without partnerships they may also not be able to provide access to needed services, keeping them from supporting fathers as fully as they might.
Systemic issues	Systemic issues involve societal prejudices, biases, and systemic barriers that individuals may face.	Fathers' experiences with systemic issues may discourage them from enrolling in or participating in fatherhood programs.

NOTE: The categories in this table are ordered from most frequently raised (darkest shading) to least frequently raised (lightest shading).

Box 1. Criteria for Determining Priority Approaches

Applicability: Is the approach suitable for adaptation in different contexts? Does it require a specific program structure or target population?

Measurability: Is it possible to measure whether the planned change has the intended outcome?

Data sources and availability: Does measuring outcomes require data that are easily accessible?

Feasibility: Is it possible to implement the approach and the rapid learning study design under the Fatherhood FIRE grant within the approximate 12-month time constraint of the project?

Relevance: Will the approach help increase the enrollment, engagement, or retention of participants?

Suitability for rapid learning cycle strategies: Will the intervention yield outcomes that can be measured within one to three months so it can be iterated upon quickly?

Pertinence to common challenges: How often was the challenge mentioned in the literature review and in interviews?

promising approaches. The criteria eliminated many approaches that could be valuable for the fatherhood field, but that were not feasible for SIRF or the programs selected for the study or were narrowly defined approaches that would apply only to some fathers. Two examples of approaches that were eliminated were hiring a staff attorney to help fathers gain access to their children and buying bicycles for fathers to use as transportation. The team narrowed the list to 17 approaches.[4]

The team worked with programs interested in participating in SIRF to further reduce the number of approaches to be tested. An important feature of this step was a process called "customer journey mapping," which helps a program map the steps in its service flow to identify where the process of enrolling and engaging fathers in program activities can be improved. Customer journey mapping can help programs develop a deeper understanding of their users'

4. Since most conversations about challenges and approaches occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic or in its early days, the SIRF team also reviewed the approaches to ensure they were appropriate for an environment in which services were not primarily delivered in person. The conversations about challenges and approaches also occurred before the protests and increased national conversation about systemic racism that followed the murder of George Floyd. In response, the SIRF team re-reviewed the approaches with study advisers and program operators in the summer of 2020 to reconfirm that the priorities identified in early 2020 would still appeal to fathers in the changed social dynamics and local contexts of 2021. This review did not result in any major changes to the list of 17 approaches.

perspectives and identify implementation challenges and ways to strengthen service-delivery strategies. For SIRF, team members worked with the programs interested in participating in the study to develop the persona of a typical program participant and walked through each interaction he could have with the program, highlighting places in the process that could present challenges for him.[5]

Through the customer journey mapping process, programs identified participant challenges and subsequent approaches of interest. They fell most frequently within the three clusters described above.[6] As a result, the team decided to focus on these three clusters. Each results in some form of program-level design change that is broad enough that it could appeal to all fathers. Each also includes opportunities to address fathers' basic needs and other challenges identified in Table 1 that may prevent fathers from engaging in services and persisting in them. The three broad approaches are discussed below, and their application in SIRF is discussed in the later section on programs participating in SIRF.

Coaching

Strong, stable relationships between participants and staff members are a key to retention.[7] Using a coaching approach to case management—helping fathers set and achieve specific goals—can build strong relationships by better aligning services with fathers' needs and personal goals. A coaching approach is led by the father: The father, with staff support, defines his own goals and how to achieve those goals, rather than a staff person telling him what he should do (which is an approach in typical case management). The coaching approach is informed by a growing literature in neuroscience and cognitive behavioral psychology that focuses on helping participants understand and address emotional control, task initiation, persistence, stress tolerance, time management, and other skills so that they can better reach their goals. The approach is intended to motivate fathers to achieve the goals they set. Programs involved in the coaching cluster are aiming to use the approach to increase the number of fathers who attend program workshops.

Outreach

Programs struggle to recruit fathers into and engage them in services. For example, fathers might be reluctant to enroll because they distrust programs or do not see the services as relevant to them. Some programs have tried to address these challenges by forming partnerships with organizations in the community and engaging credible messengers, such as mothers or part-

5. Customer journey mapping is described in more detail in a separate issue focus. See Behrmann, Heilman, Nugent, and Wharton-Fields (forthcoming). Customer journey mapping served two purposes. As described here, it helped the SIRF team to determine the three clusters of approaches selected for the SIRF study, but it also helped the SIRF team to determine which programs interested in participating were ready for the commitment SIRF required.

6. The hundreds of submitted ideas were narrowed down to 17 approaches before customer journey mapping began. They were organized into five clusters, the three that were ultimately chosen for SIRF plus two others: *develop staff capabilities* and *deliver flexible services*.

7. Kazis and Molina (2016).

ners.[8] Another approach is to use recruitment and communication practices that are intended to build immediate connections with fathers in order to improve program attendance.[9] These practices can include new outreach and recruitment messages that are informed by behavioral science and new social media strategies. For example, they may publicize deadlines to increase the likelihood of people enrolling and attending meetings.[10] Programs can also encourage fathers to participate in program activities by tailoring their outreach to address fathers' interests and needs, and by offering the opportunity for additional one-on-one services that meet those needs.

Peer Support

Previous research suggests that program alumni and seasoned father participants can encourage fathers to participate in program services by providing testimonials, encouragement, empathy, and role modeling.[11] Outside of the fatherhood-program context, literature suggests that structured peer support programs may improve short-term well-being and other outcomes.[12]

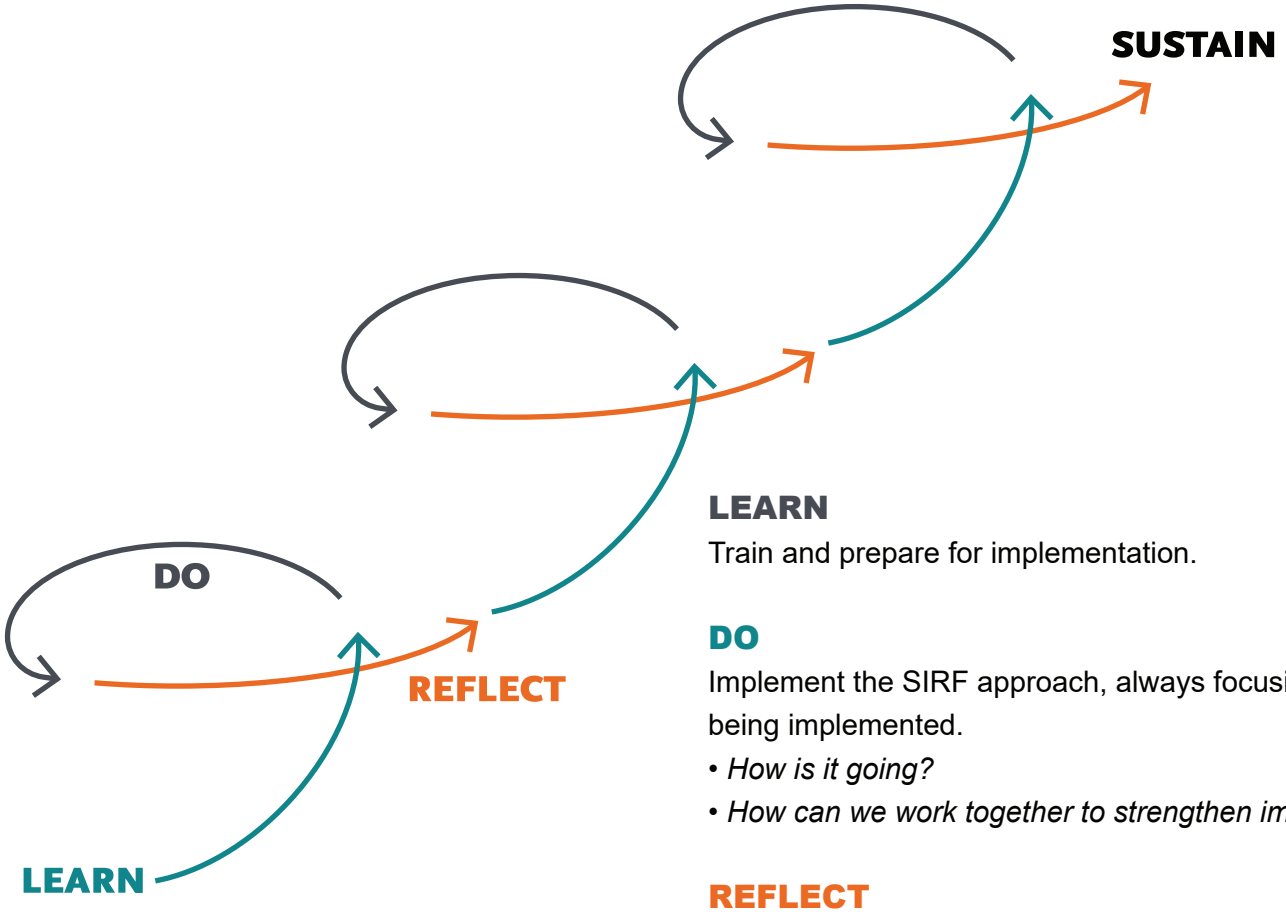
The next section provides more details on the structure and implementation of the SIRF learning cycles; this information is followed by more detail about the 10 participating programs and the specific approaches they are testing within the three broad clusters.

CONDUCTING RAPID LEARNING CYCLES

As noted earlier and illustrated in Figure 2, each program is going through multiple learning cycles, each of which has three phases: learn, do, and reflect. In each cycle, the study team helps program staff members prepare to implement the specific approach being tested (learn), the program implements the approach and works with the study team to assess whether the intervention is being implemented as intended (do), and the study team and program discuss whether the approach has improved the intended participation outcome and how it could be improved (reflect). At the end of each learning cycle, the team and program decide together on what comes next: continuing to operate the approach as implemented, improving its implementation, enhancing the approach, or halting the test and identifying a new approach to test.

8. Sandstrom et al. (2015); Osborne, Bobbitt, and Michelsen (2017); Child and Family Research Partnership (2019).
9. Osborne, Bobbitt, and Michelsen (2017); McDonald (2017).
10. Dechausay, Anzelone, and Reardon (2015).
11. Holcomb et al. (2015); Alamillo and Zaveri (2018).
12. Abbott, Landers, and Pratt (2019); Wasserman et al. (2019); Bauldry and McClanahan (2008); Lynch et al. (2018); Gardenhire and Cerna (2016); Rhodes and DuBois (2008); Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010); Visher, Butcher, and Cerna (2010).

Figure 2. Learn, Do, Reflect Steps in Learning Cycles



LEARN
Train and prepare for implementation.

DO
Implement the SIRF approach, always focusing on how well the approach is being implemented.

- *How is it going?*
- *How can we work together to strengthen implementation?*

REFLECT
Take stock.

- *Did the approach seem to have an effect on the intended outcomes of recruiting fathers, engaging them in services, or keeping them actively participating?*
- *What could you change that might improve the intended outcomes of the approach?*

Learn: Preparing to Implement the Approach

At the beginning of each learning cycle, the study team trains program staff members to deliver the approach being tested. Before the first cycle, for example, the team conducted three training sessions. First, staff members across all SIRF programs attended a 90-minute session that introduced the study and associated activities. Second, each program's learning-cycle manager—a position funded through SIRF whose incumbent will be responsible for facilitating all the program's SIRF-related activities—attended a 90-minute session about the role. Finally, all program staff members involved in implementing the chosen approach attended four to six hours of training on that topic.

Do: Implementing and Assessing the Approach

During the "do" phase of the learning cycle, staff members at each program implement the approach for which they were trained. The SIRF team and staff members at each program use a combination of three methods to assess how well the programs are implementing the desired approach. First, staff members and supervisors record their observations on specific components of the approaches.[13] Second, staff members and enrolled fathers complete web-based forms about their experiences with the program and how the program could better support fathers. Finally, the SIRF team is helping programs understand how their participation data can guide management practices to improve program implementation.

The "do" phase of each cycle also includes opportunities for the programs to learn from the SIRF team and from one another. For example, topics raised by program staff members and observations by study team members are incorporated into the team's regular guidance bulletins, which include tips, suggestions, and reminders to help program staff members implement study procedures. In addition, the SIRF team provides virtual learning sessions for staff members across multiple programs. These sessions vary with the phase of the learning cycle, the approach being tested, and the interest of program staff members. During these cross-program sessions, staff members share their successes and challenges, small groups discuss best practices for implementing specific approaches, and the SIRF team provides additional training as needed.

Reflect: Shifting from Cycle to Cycle

As a program moves from one learning cycle to the next, it might make changes to the approach being tested based on the strength of its implementation and whether it appears to be improving enrollment, engagement, or retention outcomes.

13. As a federally funded study that involved collecting data from more than nine research participants, the work was subject to guidelines under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995. The research team submitted a study justification and data-collection instruments for review and approval by the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the Executive Office of the President of the United States. All data-collection instruments were approved under OMB Control No. 0970-5631. As with all such reviewed material, the documents are available through Reginfo.gov.

During a structured call with the SIRF team near the end of each cycle, program staff members reflect on the strengths and challenges they have encountered, drawing on information collected through the observations and reflection forms described above. This conversation can point to appropriate changes for the next cycle.

To assess whether the implemented approaches are improving fathers' participation in the programs, the study team is analyzing data collected through the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) system, a performance-management data-collection system used by federal Responsible Fatherhood grantees.[14] Outcome measures include the number of fathers enrolled (for the outreach cluster), the number attending the first workshop session or number with at least one contact with program staff members (for the coaching and peer support clusters), and the number attending one or more workshop sessions (for the coaching and peer support clusters).[15]

Programs in the outreach and peer support clusters are randomly assigning fathers to receive different versions of the approach being tested. Fathers in the peer support cluster may receive, for example, either father-initiated or mentor-initiated mentoring. In the outreach cluster, one approach might provide basic information on the benefits of the workshop to all fathers while a different approach would assess each father's needs in order to tailor a discussion of how he will benefit from the workshop. Apart from that difference, fathers in both groups would be eligible for the same services.

The analysis for programs in the coaching cluster is comparing participation before and after the approach is implemented and comparing participation in those programs with participation in similar Fatherhood FIRE grantees that are not in SIRF. Fathers were not randomly assigned because staff members who are trained to use coaching might find it difficult to stop using coaching principles when they interact with fathers assigned to a control group.

At the end of each cycle, the SIRF team and each program will use the information described above to choose one of three actions together:

1. **Continue to test the same approach.** This action might be appropriate if results look promising, but more time is needed to gain confidence that the approach improves enrollment and program participation.

14. Because it is not a Fatherhood FIRE grantee, Connections to Success would not normally have access to nFORM. However, OFA is allowing the program to use nFORM so the study can collect information on program participation from a consistent source across the 10 participating programs.

15. In its oversight of the FIRE grants, OFA defines attendance in four tiers: "initial attendees" show up to at least one workshop session; "halfway attendees" complete 50 percent of planned primary workshop hours; "completed participants" complete 90 percent of planned primary workshop hours; and "fully finished participants" complete 100 percent of planned primary workshop hours. The SIRF analysis of nFORM data will follow these definitions.

2. **Strengthen the intervention before testing it again.** This action might be appropriate if results suggest the approach has little effect and the SIRF team and participating program have identified a way that the intervention could be strengthened.

3. **Try a new approach.** This action might be appropriate if the current approach appears to have little effect and there is not an obvious and feasible way to strengthen it or its implementation. A new approach might also be appropriate if the intervention is clearly improving program participation and the team and grantee have identified an additional promising approach that the program could test.

PROGRAMS PARTICIPATING IN SIRF

Having identified the 10 participating programs, the SIRF team consulted with each program to reconfirm that the priority approaches identified in early 2020 still fit in each local context in 2021 and would appeal to that program's fathers. During these discussions, the SIRF team asked program staff members—some of whom were former participants themselves—to consider fathers' perspectives regarding potential barriers to participation and unmet needs; they also asked staff members to consider the program's structure and potential challenges. In specifying the details of each approach, program staff members from each cluster joined a workshop where they focused on working collaboratively to develop a prototype of their proposed approach and received suggestions for improvement from their cluster peers. In the weeks following this workshop, each program refined its ideas, working with the SIRF team to define the approach as it would be implemented in its first learning cycle.

The 10 programs participating in SIRF are shown in Figure 3, as are the clusters with which their interests best aligned.

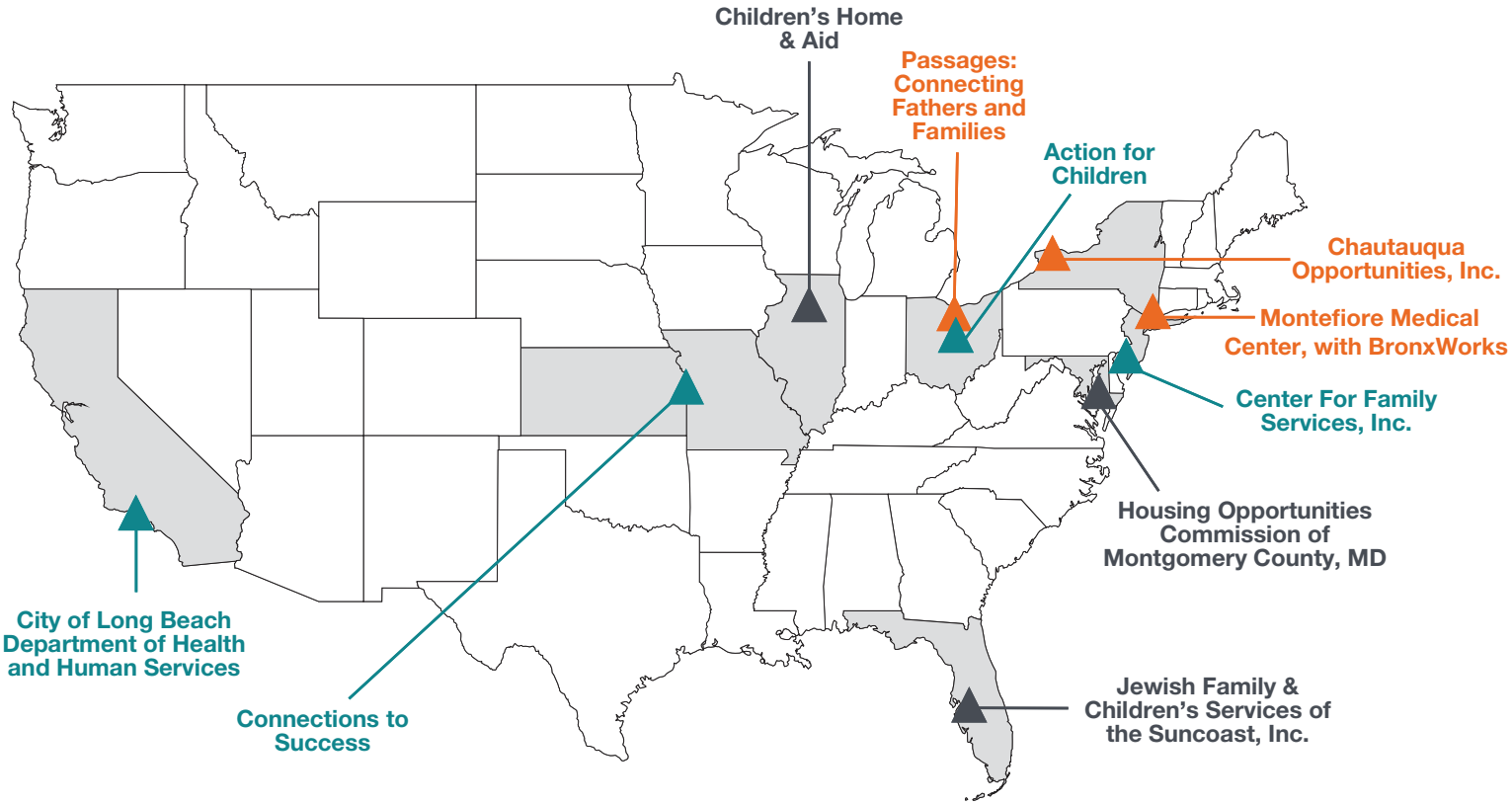
The remainder of this section introduces the programs by cluster and provides information about the participating organizations, their fatherhood program structures, and the program-specific solutions they are testing in the first SIRF learning cycle.

Coaching

Three programs are incorporating a coaching stance into their existing case management practices. Case managers in SIRF programs use open-ended questions, provide affirmation and reflection of the father's statements, use other methods to encourage the father to talk about his needs, let the father lead the process of setting goals, and use motivational interviewing techniques.[16] In this approach, staff members communicate with fathers using phrasing such as, "I'm here to listen to and support you," "You're in the lead," and "Tell me more." The approach differs

16. Rubak, Sandbæk, Lauritzen, and Christensen (2005). Motivational interviewing is defined as "a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence." See Miller and Rose (2009). It is viewed as a particularly important technique when working with clients who are resistant to changing their behaviors. See Iannos and Antcliff (2013).

Figure 3. Locations of Organizations Participating in SIRF, by Cluster



from more traditional case management approaches that may emphasize providing advice and directive guidance. Table 2 provides a brief introduction to the programs implementing coaching approaches.

Though the nature of learning cycles means that the SIRF approach will change over time in response to observed successes and challenges, during Learning Cycle 1, staff members are using coaching techniques in all one-on-one interactions with participants. They are doing so before enrollment, including during the recruitment process, and throughout the program period. The programs can receive continued training from coaching experts to improve implementation.

Outreach

Three programs are using a two-pronged approach to conducting outreach to enroll more fathers and encourage more fathers to attend initial workshops. The first prong includes new outreach and recruitment messages. The second prong is comparing two different ways of encouraging fathers to participate in program activities: Some fathers are receiving an "ease-of-intake" approach focused on making it easy to attend the first workshop session, while others are being offered a "personalization-led" approach that includes the opportunity for additional one-on-one services—for example, case management or assistance setting goals—before the workshop starts.

People with outreach responsibilities include outreach coordinators, case managers, facilitators, past program participants, staff members at partner agencies, local public figures, and local celebrities. These individuals aim to pique a father's interest in the program by sharing messages about incentives and about the benefits of building a fatherhood community, improving skills, getting basic needs met, and getting help to find a job. Programs will conduct outreach through frequent communication with referral sources and potential participants and in group and community events. Table 3 describes selected aspects of the programs implementing outreach approaches.

Before the first learning cycle, the SIRF team provided training for programs testing outreach approaches that focused on social media and behavioral science techniques. Each program will begin to apply these techniques during Learning Cycle 1, with a goal of attracting new referrals and potential participants.

Peer Support

Four programs are testing peer mentoring as a form of peer support, with the aim of increasing the number of fathers who attend program services. The mentors—intended to be program alumni or seasoned participants—are brought on board to share their experiences, encourage participants, and serve as an additional link to the program. Mentors are not expected to replace services already being provided by program staff members. They might engage fathers through brief presentations, check in through text messages and phone calls, and meet one-on-one, in person. Table 4 describes some characteristics of the programs implementing peer support approaches.

Table 2. Profiles of Programs in the Coaching Cluster

Organization; Program Name; Organization Type; Grant Status	Target Number of Fathers Enrolled/Year[a]	Primary Workshop Structure	Program-Specific Approach in Learning Cycle 1	Additional Context
Children's Home & Aid; Thriving Fathers & Families; Community-based nonprofit; First-time Responsible Fatherhood grantee	120	12 weeks 1 day per week 2 hours per day	The program's "navigators" handle both workshop facilitation and one-on-one case management. The coaching techniques will be used by navigators while they are working with fathers before, during, and after workshop participation.	Children's Home & Aid has substantial experience serving fathers. In addition to the primary workshop, each cohort (group of fathers enrolling together) is offered a 12-week secondary workshop. New cohorts begin approximately every six months.
Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County, MD; Fatherhood Initiative; Government; Returning Responsible Fatherhood grantee	250	3 weeks 5 days per week 3 hours per day	The program will focus on the new goal-setting strategies in its work with fathers, and revise some of the language it uses in discussing the program to highlight the coaching techniques being used.	Only fathers who live in Montgomery County, who have low incomes, and who do not have primary custody of their children are eligible to receive program services.
Jewish Family & Children's Service of the Suncoast, Inc. (JFCS); Ignite; Community-based nonprofit; First-time Responsible Fatherhood grantee round.	250	12 weeks 1 day per week 2 hours per workshop	This program's approach includes taking a coaching stance in regular one-on-one case management meetings, starting with a focus on motivational interviewing and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) goals in early sessions. It has incorporated techniques that include OARS (open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, summarizing), environmental modifications, short-term personal incentives for motivation, and cognitive rehearsals. (In cognitive rehearsals, participants are asked to create mental images of the behaviors that they will engage in to complete action steps or reach goals.)	JFCS is a past and current grantee through OFA's parallel Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education grant program.

NOTE: [a]In some cases, program enrollment goals may be lower for Fatherhood FIRE grant year 1, due to a planned start-up period. The figures in this table represent goals for grant years 2-5, when programs are expected to be operating at full capacity.

Table 3. Profiles of Programs in the Outreach Cluster

Organization; Program Name; Organization Type; Grant Status	Target Number of Fathers Enrolled/Year[a]	Primary Workshop Structure	Program-Specific Approach in Learning Cycle 1	Additional Context
Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.; Fatherhood FIRE; Community-based nonprofit; Returning Responsible Fatherhood grantee	210	6 weeks 2 days per week 2 hours per day	An "ease-of-intake" approach focused on enrollment and workshop attendance, and included earlier integration of case management and goal setting (what the program called the Family Development Plan).	In addition to the community-based fathers served, the program enrolls approximately 130 incarcerated fathers per year. The program operates in a more rural area than the other SIRF programs.
Montefiore Medical Center, with BronxWorks; HERO Dads; Community-based healthcare; First-time Responsible Fatherhood grantee (with BronxWorks a third-time grantee as subcontractor)	350	4 weeks 4 days per week 1-2 hours per day (6 hours per week) of workshops (24 hours total)	Outreach coordinators will manage all interactions in the ease-of-intake, or "Quick Start," approach, with case management occurring only to address any emergency needs. This approach emphasizes starting the workshop as quickly as possible. A personalization-led, or "Intake Start," approach includes one-on-one services and contacts with a parent coach and career coach to provide tailored support in discussing needs, goals, and enrollment steps before workshop attendance. This approach emphasizes building a relationship with the client first.	HERO Dads focuses on serving fathers who do not have primary custody of their children. The program is a collaboration between clinicians from a health care organization (Montefiore Medical Center) and employment specialists from a multiservice, community-based organization (BronxWorks). Program services are based at BronxWorks, though outreach responsibilities are shared jointly between the two.
Passages: Connecting Fathers and Families; STEPS; Community-based nonprofit; First-time Responsible Fatherhood grantee	200	Day cohort: 4 weeks Up to 4 days per week 2 hours per day Evening cohort: 7 weeks Up to 2 days per week 2 hours per day	An ease-of-intake approach was the organization's existing practice; it requires little time commitment before the workshop begins. A newer, personalization-led approach focuses on the earlier integration of individual assessments, case management, and services organized around an individual development plan.	Many enrollees have recently been released from incarceration.

NOTE: [a]In some cases, program enrollment goals may be lower for Fatherhood FIRE grant year 1, due to a planned start-up period. The figures in this table represent goals for grant years 2-5, when programs are expected to be operating at full capacity.

Table 4. Profiles of Programs in the Peer Support Cluster

Organization; Program Name; Organization Type; Grant Status	Target Number of Fathers Enrolled/Year[a]	Primary Workshop Structure	Program-Specific Approach in Learning Cycle 1	Additional Context
Action for Children; All in Dads!; Community-based nonprofit; First-time Responsible Fatherhood grantee	215	5 weeks 2 days per week Between 2 and 2.5 hours per day	The mentors are fathers recruited from the community or with experience with the organization's previous fatherhood program.	All in Dads! was brand-new in 2021 but based on earlier success with Father Factor, a previous (less intensive) fatherhood program developed in the early 2000s.
Center For Family Services; Framing Fatherhood; Community-based nonprofit; First-time Responsible Fatherhood grantee	265	13 weeks 1 day per week 2 hours per day	The program is beginning with a very small number of mentors who participated in the program just before SIRF launched.	Framing Fatherhood is a newly established program, but builds on the organization's long history of parenting programs.
City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services; Fundamentals of Fatherhood; Government; Returning Responsible Fatherhood grantee	400	10 weeks 1 day per week 2 hours per day	Mentors will reach out to fathers at limited points during the primary workshop period and will make presentations to all workshop participants at designated workshop sessions.	Fundamentals of Fatherhood has an existing alumni network (the Fatherhood Action Network) associated with its fatherhood program.
Connections to Success; Pathways to Success; Community-based nonprofit; Previous, but not current, Responsible Fatherhood grantee	300	2 weeks 5 days per week 6 hours per day[b]	Mentors were recruited from a pool of previous program participants; most came from the Kansas City location, so some mentors may provide cross-location, virtual mentorship.	Connections to Success is the only program in SIRF that is not a Responsible Fatherhood grantee. It has three main service areas: the St. Louis, Kansas City, and Columbia, Missouri regions.

NOTE: [a]In some cases, program enrollment goals may be lower for Fatherhood FIRE grant year 1, due to a planned start-up period. The figures in this table represent goals for grant years 2-5, when programs are expected to be operating at full capacity.

[b]In October 2021, the program shifted from a three-week/12-day primary workshop to a two-week/10-day primary workshop. This change aligned with the beginning of SIRF Learning Cycle 2. These workshops are based in the Kansas City and St. Louis locations. The Columbia, MO, location operates on a condensed, one-week workshop schedule.

Program participants are being randomly assigned to receive either mentor-initiated mentorship or father-initiated mentorship. Mentors make contact with those in the mentor-initiated group at times designated by each program—for example, before the workshop starts, at set intervals during the workshop period, and after a missed workshop session. Mentors do *not* reach out to those in the father-initiated group, but fathers can initiate contact with mentors at any point during their program participation. All participants have an opportunity to meet with mentors during the program orientation and enrollment process.

WHAT COMES NEXT

As noted earlier, the SIRF learning cycles began in July 2021 and are expected to continue for one year. When this report was written, programs were at different points in their learning-cycle timelines because the size and frequency of program services dictated that programs went through a different number of cycles over the course of a year. When the cycles have completed, the study will release findings about which approaches appeared to be the most effective. It will also share lessons with the field about conducting rapid learning activities and about which aspects of the approaches appeared to be the most challenging for programs to implement, and which they implemented most successfully.

APPENDIX A

Challenges and Promising Approaches to Serving Fathers

Appendix Table A.1. Examples of Challenges and Promising Approaches to Serving Fathers

Category	Category Description	Challenge Examples	Examples of Approaches
Program design	The content of outreach messages, the structure of services (for example, whether fathers can start at any time or must start at the same time with a group of participants), schedule flexibility, and curriculum design (for example, skill-based or not) could all influence a father's interest in enrolling and persisting in the program. Limited or unstable funding may determine what programs are able to do.	• **Program** has limited or unstable funding that restricts activities. • **Program staff members** do not invest enough in building relationships. • **Fathers** need both flexibility and consistency in services.	• **Programs** offer services for multiple generations. • **Program staff members** use father-led motivational interviewing. • **Fathers** contribute to program design and planning.
Fathers' basic needs	Fathers may have trouble participating in the program if they cannot meet needs such as stable or affordable housing, access to reliable childcare, affordable or reliable transportation, proper clothes or hygiene, or mental health care, substance use care, or physical health care.	• **Programs** need to connect participants more effectively to employment opportunities. • **Program staff members** have contact information for fathers that is unstable, which can indicate instability in meeting other basic needs . • **Fathers** have a wide range of needs and require help to get support to meet them.	• **Program** partners with other organizations to provide access to resources. • **Program staff members** address fathers' needs first, before they start the program. • **Fathers** take advantage of training opportunities provided.
Relationships with children's other caregivers or guardians (coparents)	Relationships with coparents may be complex. A parent may have children with more than one person, for example. Fathers and coparents may have low levels of cooperation, communication, or mutual respect, or be unable to overcome past conflicts. Such relationships could make it difficult for the mother to agree to participate in services with the father or allow their child to do the same. Coparents may not be supportive of fathers' participation in the program.	• **Programs** need help including mothers who discourage fathers from participating. • **Program staff members** have trouble understanding the complexity of parenting relationships in families with children from multiple parents. • **Fathers** need help managing relationships with children's grandparents and with their peers too.	• **Program** provides diapers and formula. • **Program staff members** teach parents to talk with children about coparenting relationships. • **Fathers** challenge the status quo that the mother is assumed to do everything.
Fathers' schedules	Scheduling demands and conflicts can make regular program participation challenging.	• **Program** locations may be limited. • **Program staff members** may know fathers' schedules are challenging, but still not provide flexible offerings. • **Fathers** may not attend when they are caring for their children.	• **Programs** have a flexible attendance policy. • **Program staff members** provide materials in other ways if a father misses a session. • **Fathers** tell the program what times work for better for them.

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Category	Category Description	Challenge Examples	Examples of Approaches
Child support and access to children	Navigating the complex child support system or having limited access to their children can frustrate fathers and discourage them from participating in programs that do not aim to help them with the system or to reach agreements with mothers. In contrast, some fathers may not want to enroll in programs associated with the child support system because they have had negative experiences with it.	• **Programs** are inconsistent in how they engage the child support system. • **Program staff members** are not able to help participants get more access to their children. • **Fathers** need assistance navigating legal and child support processes.	• **Programs** partner with child support agencies to offer child support incentives for program participation. • **Program staff members** help establish parenting-time, visitation, and custody agreements. • **Fathers** take advantage of incentives from the child support system.
Staffing	Staff members may be overburdened or not the right fit for the population. It may be challenging to hire people with the right experience and training may be insufficient or unavailable, which may make it difficult for staff members to connect with fathers and support them.	• **Programs** have too few staff members or high turnover rates. • **Program staff members** have insufficient training. • **Fathers** find that staff members do not share their life experiences.	• **Programs** hire people who can build rapport with fathers. • **Program staff members** have access to training to improve their work with fathers. • **Fathers** tell the program how staff members could improve.
Partnerships	It takes an investment of time to build and sustain relationships with community partners and systems. But those relationships may be critical for reaching enrollment targets and providing enrollees with access to services they need.	• **Programs** find that lack of communication within and across organizations make partnerships difficult. • **Program staff members** have trouble finding time to invest in partnerships. • **Fathers** encounter different approaches and ability levels in different organizations.	• **Programs** share data and coordinate services with partners. • **Program staff members** identify opportunities to connect with local organizations informally. • **Fathers** relay the importance of fatherhood to other individuals and organizations in the wider community.

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Category	Category Description	Challenge Examples	Examples of Approaches
Systemic issues	Many fathers endure societal prejudices, biases, and systemic barriers. These experiences may discourage them from enrolling in or participating in services.	• **Programs** contend with a societal emphasis on fathers' role as financial providers. • **Program staff members** work with populations who face incarceration/parole/legal issues. • **Fathers** don't feel "seen" within systems/services.	• **Programs** consider services that take into account fathers' traumas and that address systemic issues. • **Program staff members** conduct assessments for racial disparities and biases they may not recognize consciously. • **Fathers** counteract societal biases and norms by creating a culture of respect for men's fathering commitments and their unique contributions and strengths.

NOTE: The categories are in order from most frequently raised (darkest shading) to least frequently raised (lightest shading).

APPENDIX B

Organization Descriptions

COACHING

Children's Home & Aid: Thriving Fathers and Families

Children's Home & Aid seeks to improve the lives of children and families throughout Illinois. Established in 1883 as an organization that would care for children in need, Children's Home & Aid now serves over 30,000 children and families each year, providing support in areas including, but not limited to, parenting, adoption, foster care, substance abuse, childcare, and education.

Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County: Fatherhood Initiative

The Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (Maryland) seeks to address the local need for affordable housing. Established in 1974, the Commission is authorized to acquire, own, lease, build, renovate, and operate housing, and to arrange for needed social, residential, and childcare services.

Jewish Family & Children's Service of the Suncoast, Inc.: Ignite

Jewish Family & Children's Service of the Suncoast, Inc., is a mental health and human services agency in Florida. Established in the 1970s, it serves all ages and offers a range of services, including assistance with employment, housing, and finances; life-skills training; and support groups.

OUTREACH

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.: Fatherhood FIRE

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. has been in operation as a Community Action Agency since 1965.[1] It aims to help people with low and moderate incomes in Chautauqua County, NY, achieve economic stability. Its services are grouped into the following divisions: Health and Family Services, Early Care and Education, Housing and Community Development, and the Chautauqua Child Care Council. It is a registered charity in New York State and has licenses to provide home care, childcare, and shelter for young people who are experiencing homelessness.

Montefiore Medical Center, with BronxWorks: HERO Dads

Montefiore Medical Center is a nonprofit corporation and a large academic medical center comprising 12 hospitals. The fatherhood program is within the division of Montefiore Medical Center that takes responsibility for community-based behavioral health and workforce development initiatives. The main subcontractor is BronxWorks, a multiservice organization focusing

1. Community Action Agencies are local private and public nonprofit organizations that carry out the federal Community Action Program, which was created by the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act.

on homelessness prevention, supportive housing, and workforce development. BronxWorks serves 60,000 people with low incomes each year, one-third of whom are immigrants. It has a long history of serving the Bronx, and has run fatherhood programs since 2007.

Passages: Connecting Fathers and Families: STEPS

Passages, established in 1998, delivers community-based family resiliency services in three locations in the greater Cleveland, Ohio, area: Lorain County, Portage County, and Cuyahoga County. The organizational mission is "to inspire and empower families to thrive" through workforce development, parenthood enrichment, personal development, and advocacy.

PEER SUPPORT

Action for Children: All in Dads!

Action for Children was founded in 1972 to help strengthen local childcare services in Franklin County, Ohio. The organization currently serves as a childcare resource and referral agency, and it provides supportive services for both mothers and fathers.

Center for Family Services: Framing Fatherhood

Center for Family Services was founded in 1920 to support individuals and families in need. Providing services throughout New Jersey, the organization helps children and families through therapy, education, counseling, shelter, support, and advocacy, and through services related to addiction and recovery, workforce development, and early childhood.

City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services: Fundamentals of Fatherhood

The City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services is one of three health departments in California that are run at the city level. Its mission is to "improve quality of life by promoting a safe and healthy community in which to live, work and play."[2]

Connections to Success: Pathways to Success

Connections to Success began as the first St. Louis–area location of Dress for Success, a program designed to provide women with low incomes professional clothing for job interviews. Over time, the founders identified other needs in the community and expanded to meet them, offering accessible meals, childcare services, and other forms of family support. In 2001, the organization merged various services being provided and formed Connections to Success, which now operates in three locations.

2. From the organization's 2020 application to the Office of Family Assistance for a Fatherhood Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (Fatherhood FIRE) grant.

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