



STATE OF CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Public Hearing Testimony Human Services Committee February 23, 2021



To: Sen. Marilyn Moore, Chair
Rep. Catherine Abercrombie, Chair
Sen. Eric Berthel, Ranking Member
Rep. Jay Case, Ranking Member
Distinguished Members of the Human Services Committee

From: Vanessa Dorantes, Commissioner
Department of Children and Families

Re: Raised SB 912, An Act Concerning Funding and Oversight of Fatherhood Initiatives

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has developed robust fatherhood programs to ensure active engagement by fathers in their children's lives. While the Department's focus has been on children in the care of DCF, the programming extends well beyond those committed to the Department, seeking to prevent the separation of families and strengthen the father's and paternal family's role in a child's life.

The Department's fatherhood work has been building steadily over the past decade. In 2019, DCF was determined to be a front-runner amongst several jurisdictions vying for participation in a national collaborative sponsored by Mathematica, a social policy consulting firm, and funded by the Administration for Children and Families. The Connecticut team just completed a yearlong initiative with the six chosen child welfare agencies. This national recognition enabled DCF to share with other states the practice enhancements that have been implemented to identify and engage fathers and paternal relatives in order to improve placement stability and permanency outcomes for children.

The Department's Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES) anchor this work as the key initiative designed to increase a father's role in the life of his child. Six contracted providers, one for each DCF region, provide statewide coverage and work with fathers to strengthen their positive parenting skills. Through intensive outreach, case management services and 24/7 Dad© group programming that includes support groups and organized events, fathers are brought together. The program's current capacity is 290 fathers per year, with a six-month involvement. FES also includes teams that engage fathers in correctional facilities, to maintain the paternal relationship during incarceration and assist with reunification upon release.

Additionally, a federal grant has been awarded to DCF and the Department of Correction to support a pilot program called Families Supporting Reentry - A 2-Gen Approach (FSR). This program expands the service array for fathers incarcerated at the Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution Re-Integration Center. FSR targets fathers of children involved with DCF due to child protection issues. The project is designed to reduce recidivism and improve negative outcomes linked to parental incarceration, which include financial strain, unstable and insufficient housing, family disconnection, poor child behavioral health and education outcomes and juvenile delinquency. Engagement Specialists guide fathers through the child protection case process, ensuring their involvement in case planning to remediate the issues posing risk to the children. The Specialist mentors and assists fathers with navigating the expectations of multiple systems; and provides linkages to services for basic needs, employment, housing, advocacy, mental health and substance abuse needs. Services continue to be provided to support the entire family following reentry.

DCF has also reexamined how we interact with fathers, which has led to new practice models for struggling fathers. An example is the Fathers for Change initiative that is offered through the Department's Intimate Partner Violence Family Assessment and Intervention Response program. DCF began using the program in 2015. It has an annual capacity to serve 320 families per year. A team consisting of a clinician and a "family navigator" works with the DCF social worker and the family to assess the severity of the violence in the home as well as the presence of mental health and substance use issues that may require support services. The assessment also includes an evaluation of the children's needs. The clinician offers treatment addressing the violence, and the family navigator handles assistance with basic needs and referrals to other needed services. The program typically lasts four to six months but can be extended based on family needs. A recent study published in the *Journal of Family Violence* showed the program is effective. The completion rate for fathers was 70 percent, compared to a more typical program completion rate of 30 to 50 percent. Participant mothers reported a significant reduction in domestic violence on an Abusive Behavior Inventory completed before and after treatment. Improvements were also seen in a father's emotional regulation and anger, and in parental levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

Each DCF Region has a Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (FELT) that consists of dedicated individuals including DCF staff and community leaders, committed to increasing the overall engagement of fathers and their families and communities. These teams have instituted creative practices to empower fathers. Successful practices are then implemented statewide by other FELT teams.

FELT teams also host local "Dads Matter Too" events to highlight the importance of fatherhood in the community and promote available resources for families. Regional FELT teams have sponsored:

- Mentoring programs for DCF staff on engagement with the contracted Fatherhood Engagement Services providers;
- Community Field Days and Food Truck Festivals, having softball games and other outdoor events to promote fathers and their children spending valuable time together;

- 5K road races, fishing derbies and provider fairs disseminating fatherhood specific information to communities;
- Racial justice discussions focused on engaging fathers of color; and
- Prior to the pandemic, a unique father/child clinical programming partnership between the Department's Solnit Center and Wilderness School facilities. Therapeutic group activities supported individual fatherhood work and culminated with outdoor education excursions reinforcing the paternal bonds.

DCF's Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM) involves participants this year that have offered change initiatives regarding fatherhood engagement. One initiative brings together FES providers with Intensive Family Preservation (IFP) staff on high risk cases. The goal is to have FES staff guide and mentor IFP staff, in order to enhance the father's engagement and role within the family during these critical times, reduce risk, and promote children remaining safely at home. Another initiative is aimed at increasing the involvement of paternal relatives early on in case planning when supports are most critical after abuse and/or neglect has been identified.

A large segment of our services stem from the CT Fatherhood Initiative (CFI). DCF was a founding partner in CFI and has been a motivator behind several programs that connect fathers to their children. The Department hosts annual Fatherhood Conferences, in collaboration with the Department of Social Services, CFI and community providers, that focus on specific topics and areas of interest regarding the Department's fatherhood work. Legislators have attended the conferences and participated in panels sharing their experiences, either with their own fathers or through being a father.

From the testimony above, it is clear that DCF is well ahead of the curve when it comes to fatherhood engagement and support. The Department would appreciate the opportunity to participate in any legislatively approved body to offer our experiences but also to learn from the expertise of others around the table.