





Center for Family Policy and Practice

# Enhancing Safety for Women

Communities of color, domestic violence,  
and social welfare services for low-income men

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*For Allen  
and every member of his family*

### **Acknowledgments**

The Center for Family Policy and Practice is indebted to the fatherhood practitioners and domestic violence advocates who are on the front lines, yet still make time to contribute to our work. Thank you for your ongoing partnership and for all you do to support individuals and families as they confront poverty, discrimination, and violence in their daily lives.

We are equally grateful to the women and men who have participated in CFFPP-led listening sessions over the years. We couldn't do our work without your voices, knowledge, and guidance.

Last but not least, thank you for continued support from the Office on Violence Against Women and especially our program officer, Latinisha Lewis.

## **Executive summary**

Over the years, the Center for Family Policy and Practice has consistently reached out to and worked with domestic violence advocates and listened to low-income women of color who are victims and survivors. Their knowledge and experience have helped guide and inform our work since the agency was founded in 1995.

Our work focuses on low-income communities and individuals who experience poverty as a chronic condition in their lives. This paper addresses the complex needs that domestic violence victims who live in impoverished communities often face, not the economic deprivation that can result from leaving an abusive relationship. As the following pages explore, this can be an important distinction that holds significance for providing domestic violence services to low-income women of color.

Victims – particularly those who are African American women – have asked that service providers and the advocacy community figure out how to promote women’s safety while simultaneously providing holistic services that address the economic needs of both women and men in low-income communities. This paper adds to a growing body of work that is striving to answer that request.

This paper also responds to advocates who are seeking more information about: social welfare programs that currently serve very low-income men and fathers; the implications of these services with regard to women and violence; and how some services for men might address an unmet need for victims and survivors.

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*It becomes an impossible task, in terms of meaning and practicability, to seek to eradicate violence from women's lives in the absence of attempts to end all manifestations of violence in our society.<sup>1</sup>*

— Gail Garfield —

## **Introduction**

Founded in 1995 as the policy arm of the Ford Foundation's Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative, the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP or the Center) provides analysis and education on the impact of national and state welfare, fatherhood, and child support policy on low-income parents and their children. In particular, the Center's work concentrates on parents who are in financial positions that would qualify them for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other public assistance programs. These parents typically have very low earnings (\$15,000 a year or less) and unstable, intermittent employment. Because of limited advocacy and policy analysis from the perspective of very low-income and unemployed men of color, the Center focuses on their perspective with regard to these issues.

While the Center's work concentrates on the unique barriers affecting no- and low-income fathers, throughout our history, CFFPP has also reached out to and worked with women's organizations and domestic violence advocates. The intent of this deliberate outreach has been to openly discuss the potential impact that encouraging father involvement<sup>2</sup> or providing services to low-income men could have on women and children in general, and on victims and survivors of domestic violence in particular.<sup>3</sup> The Center entered this discussion to provide additional education and information about the need for comprehensive social services – for both women and men – that promote safety and address the complex issues low-income families face.

Over the years, CFFPP has facilitated a number of dialogues and served as a bridge between community-based “fatherhood” programs (that provide voluntary educational, employment, legal, and peer support services to low-income men) and women's advocacy organizations (primarily domestic violence agencies and programs). Center-facilitated dialogues and cross-trainings have created opportunities for fatherhood practitioners and domestic violence advocates to learn more about each other's work and explore how greater mutual understanding may serve to increase the well-being and safety of all members of low-income communities of color.

In addition to conducting policy analysis and reviewing research literature, the Center’s work draws heavily from the knowledge, experiences, and expertise of service providers and the individuals who live in low-income communities. This paper is, in part, informed by a series of meetings and listening sessions CFFPP convened to discuss the complex challenges and barriers to achieving safety and economic security that members of low-income communities of color face. Between 2008–2011, the Center hosted: three meetings with national and

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local domestic violence advocates and experts; two national meetings with practitioners who provide social services to low-income men; and two sets of listening sessions. In one set of listening sessions, low-income African American men were invited to share their experiences and challenges with regard to employment, child support, and incarceration. Another more extensive set of listening sessions focused on domestic violence and social welfare services in low-income communities.<sup>4</sup> Participants included: low-income African American and Latina women who were victims and survivors of domestic violence; African American and Latina domestic violence advocates; and a variety of social service providers. The Center asked participants to discuss the kinds of domestic

violence and economic support services that are available to low-income women of color, barriers that get in the way of women utilizing services, unmet and outstanding needs, and the kinds of services that are available for men in the community. The details and results of these listening sessions appear in the report *Safety and Services: Women of Color Speak About Their Communities*.

This paper builds upon *Safety and Services* by further examining one of the outstanding needs that victims identify for their families and communities – social welfare services for men. It is important to note that listening session discussions about “men” focused on men in the community in a broad sense. These conversations explored the kinds of services that exist for all low-income men, not specifically or exclusively for men who have been victims or used violence themselves. Victims and survivors talked about the availability of economic and social support services for their brothers, fathers, sons, and so on. Overwhelmingly, women expressed that social welfare services for men are largely unavailable, but that such services – funded and structured in a way that does not take away from services for women and children – could benefit women who live in low-income



communities of color, including victims of domestic violence. Survivors suggested that providing support services for men would ease the economic burden that low-income women are shouldering, may have a positive impact on violence reduction, and could prove to be an effective prevention strategy. It is this possibility that the current paper seeks to investigate.

It is necessary to acknowledge that, for a very long time, people have been intervening on behalf of women who experience violence at the hands of their intimate partners, providing them with needed support and sanctuary. In recent decades, efforts to respond and bring an end to violence against women have grown ever more organized and have gained institutional support from the U.S. and state governments in the form of both funding and legislation. The anti-violence against women movement has continually strived to improve upon available services and, as a result, has developed innovative advocacy approaches at the individual, community, social, and policy levels. Further, our knowledge and research on intimate partner violence has greatly expanded over the years. This growth has brought a clearer understanding of the factors that place women at heightened risk of violence (e.g. young age, previous exposure or experiences of violence, living in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, a partner's use and abuse of alcohol or other drugs, social marginalization, etc.). It has also provided insights into why men use violence, the benefits of culturally relevant and responsive services, and the creation of a variety of intervention and prevention strategies directed at victims, youth, and those who use violence. Countless lives have been changed and saved by this work. However, despite decades of resisting, responding, and organizing to end violence against women, advocates know only too well that women continue to live in a state of crisis and fear.

The crisis is real. Women are at risk in their own homes, living in fear of what their husband, boyfriend, or partner might do, in danger of being hurt or even killed. The responses to domestic and sexual violence that exist are absolutely necessary. And, at the same time, the work must continue to evolve. We know that a fraction of the women who are victims of violence call the police or contact a domestic violence or sexual assault program. We also know that women's experiences of violence differ, not every victim will benefit from the same service approach, and women from marginalized communities face different challenges to accessing services and achieving safety. Race and class matter, and both are relevant to the development of intervention and prevention strategies. This work is complex, and there is no

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one response or single prevention strategy that will be effective for everyone. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to refine our efforts and develop new approaches that address the needs of victims who do not currently access services.

It is in this spirit that a handful of anti-domestic violence advocates and practitioners who provide social services to very low-income men have come together to discuss ways they might work to increase women's safety in their communities, particularly the safety of low-income women of color, who are known to be at high risk of experiencing violence. The intent of this work is to augment and complement existing services. It may be difficult to consider that services for men could hold any potential as a response to violence against women, and just thinking about this kind of work can raise multiple legitimate concerns. Despite the challenges, many advocates are finding this to be a positive, holistic approach to promoting safety for women of color from low-income communities.

This paper aims to address several current realities. Foremost, it responds to victims and survivors who are low-income women of color who have asked that we develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the complexities of life in communities where most residents experience chronic economic insecurity and racial discrimination. Victims have expressed that social welfare services are needed for all members of their communities and that it is important to figure out how to provide comprehensive services – including social welfare services for men – while simultaneously attending to women's safety. Secondly, community-based fatherhood programs exist, and – while most of the men in these programs do not engage in domestic violence – many practitioners want more information about intimate partner violence and assistance addressing disclosures. Practitioners have expressed their grave concerns about domestic violence and their fears of saying or doing the “wrong thing.” While domestic violence intervention and prevention is not the focus of these programs or part of their agencies' missions, many fatherhood practitioners recognize that they are in a unique position to make a positive impact and possibly reduce violence against women. Further, as they develop and conduct their services, programs that receive federal Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood or Healthy Marriage grants are required by law to partner with domestic violence programs. Therefore, the information in this paper can be useful to advocates who are interested in, curious about, or invited to work with programs that provide social welfare services to low-income men. Whether it is simply knowing the landscape of services in the community, trying to help fatherhood programs be better equipped to respond to domestic violence, or exploring more reciprocal ways of working together to promote women's safety, advocates (and the women they serve) will benefit from a greater understanding of fatherhood programs and agencies that provide social welfare services to men.

The remainder of this paper:

- responds to the request from low-income women of color that their experiences of domestic violence be considered within the fuller context of their lives;
- explores issues that residents in low-income communities frequently experience, particularly with respect to economic needs that women and men share and some of the unique challenges that men face;
- examines common concerns regarding social welfare services for men;
- presents information on “fatherhood” programs, including the typical services that they provide; and
- demonstrates that knowing about or working with a community-based fatherhood program can respond to an unmet need for low-income African American and Latina victims and may serve as a prevention strategy.

*In a society where violence intersects our most basic needs, interests, and aspirations, I find it difficult to isolate women’s experiences of violence and the significance it holds for their lives from the experiences of their children and the men that they love.<sup>5</sup>*

— Gail Garfield —

### **Shared Needs (or, “Why are we discussing services for men?”)**

*Safety and Services: Women of Color Speak About Their Communities* provides more detailed information on the perspectives and experiences of low-income women of color with regard to domestic violence, economic support services, and outstanding need. It is worth briefly highlighting here that the people who participated in CFFPP’s Safety and Services listening sessions expressed that there is a significant amount of work being done on behalf of low-income women and their children. Domestic violence shelters, programs, and advocates provide crucial services to women who have experienced violence. Moreover, government-sponsored and community-based programs are available to address some of the economic needs that families in poverty face. Despite these services, however, low-income women of color continue to encounter tremendous levels of outstanding need for both safety and economic security.

Women who participated in these listening sessions expressed that they experience extensive ongoing need when it comes to basic economic stability. Family-sustaining employment, affordable housing, food security, health care, reliable transportation, quality child care, mental health and addiction treatment programs, and individual and community safety are all sought and desired, but difficult to secure or maintain. Significantly, women (including victims and survivors) identified that this list of needs does not apply solely to themselves, but to all members of their communities. They shared stories of their own challenges

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Stability, in many forms,  
often proves elusive.

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as mothers with few economic resources who are struggling to make ends meet for their families, and also expressed how difficult and tenuous the situation is for the men in their communities. In listening to women, it became clear that when men are in economic need and do not have access to employment, income, or

social welfare services, it further increases the burden on women. Women are stretching what little they have to ensure that the men in their communities are also fed and sheltered.

This begs the question: what circumstances and challenges are very low-income men of color facing that often lead other adults in their communities to help support them? Similar to women, most men want to be gainfully employed, have stable housing, provide for their children, and make their full and desired contributions to their families and communities. However, stability, in many forms, often proves elusive. Like women, it is difficult for men in low-income communities to secure and maintain living-wage employment, particularly in an economy that offers few jobs outside of the low-wage service sector to people with limited formal educations. African American men, in particular, face additional barriers to securing and maintaining employment, including discrimination in the hiring process, high child support debt, and/or a criminal record.<sup>6</sup>

The unemployment rate for African Americans has historically been twice that of white Americans,<sup>7</sup> and African American men commonly experience the highest rate of unemployment of any adult demographic. Every year since the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking employment by race,<sup>8</sup> the unemployment rate of black men has greatly exceeded that of white men and white women. While the difference is much narrower between African American men and women, over the last three decades, black men have also consistently had higher rates of unemployment than black women.<sup>9</sup> Low-income African American women who participated in CFFPP's Safety and Services listening sessions shared that they see these economic figures reflected in the lives of their friends, family, and neighbors. Despite the challenges that low-income women of color face in securing and maintaining employment, they considered it to be even more difficult for the men in their communities to find and keep a job. As one woman said, "I actually think it's easier for a female to find a job than it is for males. It's way harder for them. It's hard for us, but if you're an African American man, it's almost impossible to get a job."<sup>10</sup>

Additionally contributing to income insecurity, men typically have very limited access to welfare or income support services. To be eligible, most economic support programs require able-bodied adults to have custody of a minor child. Since low-income fathers often do not have legally-recognized custody of their children, they are frequently ineligible for economic support services.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, women who do not have children or who are noncustodial mothers are ineligible for the majority of social welfare services and face comparable challenges to achieving income security and meeting basic needs.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the economic support services that are available to low-income parents with children are insufficient to meet the level of economic need that families are experiencing. For those who receive income support, TANF benefits are too low to lift families above the poverty line. Benefit levels are less than one-third of poverty in 30 states, and, "...even the combined

TANF and food stamp benefit is below the federal poverty level in all states, and less than 75% of the poverty line in over 40 states.”<sup>12</sup> Yet these meager resources are being stretched to care for family and community members. Low-income women (both with and without custody), as well as the men in their communities, would benefit from expanded social services that better respond to basic needs and increase economic security.

Without stable, secure income, a range of other issues become more difficult to budget and balance, including safe, affordable housing, food security, and health care. In CFFPP-led discussions focusing on the circumstances of men in low-income communities of color, fatherhood practitioners and low-income African American men identified four areas of urgent need: employment, assistance with child support debt, housing, and medical care. Each of these topics warrants a lengthy examination, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, to better understand the position of victims who are African American women from low-income communities, it is necessary to also appreciate the complex intersection of issues that create and contribute to these urgencies in the lives of men.

Research, service providers, and residents all report the following realities about life in low-income communities of color. Foremost, there is a scarcity of jobs. Combined with the fact that many adults have low educational attainment (as the result of both underfunded, lower-quality schools and high dropout rates), residents of low-income areas have few employment options – and even fewer chances for

stable, living-wage jobs. Income prospects for African American men are further limited by discrimination in hiring and disproportionate rates of incarceration. Moreover, being unemployed and having a criminal record makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a lease. As a result, the available housing options for low-income men are commonly restricted to high-risk, violent areas and/or staying with family, friends, and partners in tenuous, oftentimes temporary living arrangements.

Although all parents need to and most parents want to fulfill their responsibilities to their

children, low-income men frequently owe large amounts of child support debt – not to their children or to the mothers of their children – but to the government as reimbursement for public assistance that their children received. As with most income support programs, medical assistance also commonly requires able-bodied adults to have custody of a child. Therefore, many men are not eligible for badly needed health services. Despite high rates of undiagnosed and untreated trauma,

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mental health and addiction treatment services are often not available or accessible in low-income communities of color.

Women similarly encounter a complex array of difficult circumstances. All adults in low-income communities of color share some of the same challenges to economic stability and well-being, while some barriers are unique to men or women, noncustodial or custodial parents. Economic need is such that all adults – both women and men – and their communities would benefit from additional opportunities and supports. Since women in very low-income communities are slightly more likely to have employment income or to receive social welfare benefits (as a result of living in a gendered society in which they are more likely to be caretakers and have custody of children), women are sharing what limited resources they have with the men in their communities. Victims and survivors expressed to CFFPP that they are interested in men receiving services, not least because they care about the men in their families and communities, but also because it would help ease their own economic burden.

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### **Safety and Services for Underserved Victims**

Without question, safety is and must remain advocates' primary concern. Developing an understanding of the needs of low-income men of color is not intended to and should not supersede or supplant our focus on the challenges and risks that victims face. Rather, such knowledge can add greater depth and complexity to our understanding of women's lives, and thereby respond to the request from low-income women of color that their experiences of violence be considered within the fuller context of their lives, families, and communities. This awareness can also help inform the development and provision of culturally relevant, victim-centered services that address currently unmet needs.

Many victims do not access domestic violence programs because they do not want to end their relationship, and they believe that services are not available unless they sever contact with their abusive partner. Or, sometimes a victim who remains in contact may meet with an advocate and express interest in connecting her partner to social services (e.g. employment assistance, AODA treatment, etc.) because she believes it will improve her situation and reduce his violence towards her. Although addressing his social welfare needs is not likely to achieve the ultimate goal of ending the violence, it may, according to her assessment, make things better.<sup>13</sup> Advocates can play a pivotal role supporting victims in this situation by 1) knowing about local programs that provide voluntary (i.e. not mandatory)

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social welfare services for low-income men; 2) helping her to identify a range of available options, including the possible pros and cons of suggesting social services to him; and 3) providing ongoing advocacy and safety planning within the context of her relationship. This strategy can respond to a currently unmet request from victims, is victim-centered, and has the capacity to increase the number of victims who access and benefit from safety planning and other domestic violence services.

Expanding the range of available strategies or services that respond to domestic violence requires an openness to innovation, which may feel uncertain or even downright scary. Most importantly, however, the careful, thoughtful development of new tools and resources will create possibilities for working with victims who are currently navigating abusive relationships without the support of an advocate. To be clear, this work is not about advocates providing services to or working with men who have used violence, nor is it about encouraging women to stay in abusive relationships. Advocates need to continue to fill their crucial role of providing information about safety planning options and services to victims. At the same time, additional services are needed to help enhance safety for women who choose to stay. In this vein, understanding the circumstances of low-income men of color and the community-based programs that attend to their social welfare needs is emerging as a promising practice.

In addition to safety, the inadequacy of funding for both economic support programs for women and children, and domestic or sexual violence services for victims poses another legitimate concern when it comes to discussions about social welfare services for men. Low-income communities will not benefit from providing services for men at the expense of women and children. Rather, adequate economic support and safety services for every member of low-income communities are necessary. Although low-income mothers are struggling economically, they also contribute to supporting many of the men in their communities. Therefore, the additional provision of income support services for men – funded and structured in a way that does not take away from women and children – would ease the burden on women by adding to the overall resources that are available within low-income communities. The goal is to provide such services to all community members while simultaneously attending to women’s safety.



## Community-based “Fatherhood” Programs and Services for Men

It is critical to keep in mind that many, if not most, of the men who participate in “fatherhood” programs do not engage in domestic violence. These programs and their services are voluntary (i.e. not mandated), and practitioners often do not know which, if any, of the men in their programs have used violence. While violence in intimate relationships is a critically important issue for practitioners to address, this section of the paper focuses solely on the kinds of services that many fatherhood programs provide.

At a June 2011 meeting, CFFPP asked a room of practitioners who provide social services to men (also commonly referred to as “fatherhood programs”) to discuss their clients’ typical circumstances. The practitioners related that most of the men they serve are 17–35 years old and are commonly (but not exclusively) African American or Latino fathers. Due to inconsistent employment, their incomes range between zero and \$15,000 per year. These practitioners work with men who experience high urgency with regard to meeting immediate, basic needs; who often have no lease or stable living situation, no bank account or credit; and who commonly have extensive barriers to employment, high child support debt, a criminal record, and additional debts associated with supervision, restitution, and court fees. The men rarely have (nor are they seeking) legal custody of their children. Some programs specifically work with men who are re-entering the community from prison or jail. In general, practitioners work with men who need, but lack access to medical care and mental health services. In other words, this group of fatherhood practitioners primarily provides services to men like those who share communities, families, and lives with the women who participated in CFFPP’s listening sessions on domestic violence and economic security.

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In another set of focus groups, CFFPP asked African American men from low-income communities to discuss their lives and circumstances. Participants in these groups shared a number of common experiences with regard to employment, incarceration and the police, and, more generally, being a black man in America. One participant said, “No matter what, we are viewed as drug dealers, the worst of the worst... They believe that we all steal. You know – every black person you see. If you walk in the store, the first thing, the security is on us.” Across a wide spectrum of indicators, low-income men of color have largely been “alienated and disenfranchised,”<sup>14</sup> criminalized, and relegated to the margins of American society.<sup>15</sup> Understanding the circumstances and barriers to well-being that low-income African American and Latino men encounter (including unemployment, racial discrimination,

physical violence, and other challenges to their personhood) is foundational to the services that community-based fatherhood practitioners provide.

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The primary purpose of fatherhood programs is to meet the economic and social welfare needs of low-income men of color.

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Most men, when they first walk into a fatherhood program, are in a state of crisis; securing income and housing are significant, pressing challenges; and, initially, a practitioner's top priority is to help the men become more stable. The primary purpose of fatherhood programs is to meet the economic and social welfare needs of low-income men of color.

Oftentimes, the underlying principle is to support and provide services to men so that they can contribute to their children's financial and emotional well-being and to the overall health of their communities. As one practitioner said, "It's about strengthening communities and developing capacities for our families."

To this end, fatherhood programs often provide a wide array of services. While there is no formal set of services that constitutes a "fatherhood program," many provide some combination of:

- initial or up-front needs assessment;
- employment services, such as job readiness and, "soft skills" training, job search assistance, job placement referrals, and/or job skills training;
- access to a computer lab and/or basic computer skills training;
- adult basic education and/or GED preparation;
- support services for men re-entering the community from prison or jail;
- child support information, legal clinics, and/or driver's license recovery;
- financial literacy and budgeting classes;
- ongoing and follow-up case management and employment retention services;
- peer support groups;
- life skills training, including parenting classes or parent education groups, healthy relationship classes and workshops, and/or rites of passage programs;
- leadership development; and/or
- referrals to other support services in the community.

In addition to collaborating with a wide variety of social service agencies throughout their communities, fatherhood program practitioners also commonly

develop partnerships with employers. These working relationships often make it possible for practitioners to connect their clients to needed services and jobs.

Without question, employment is a top priority for fatherhood programs, and helping men navigate the child support system is another. In fact, a common program goal is to help men find employment so that they can become current with their child support orders. While the majority of low-income fathers want and try to provide economic support to their children, they are frequently unable to do so due to chronic un- and underemployment.<sup>16</sup> In a series of CFFPP listening sessions, low-income African American men expressed that during times when they were employed, they provided money to the mothers of their children, helped pay rent, and bought food and clothes for their children. Their situations and their ability to take care of themselves and their children invariably became more difficult during spells of unemployment.

Men's efforts to support their children can also become more complicated when custodial mothers receive cash assistance. Although such assistance is necessary, applying for TANF sets the automated child support system into motion, which poses unique challenges for very low-income noncustodial parents. Child support orders for no- and low-income adults are often based upon a calculation of what a noncustodial parent could earn if they had a job – regardless of actual employment status. Every month the order cannot be paid in full adds to the child support debt they owe. As a result, very low-income noncustodial fathers (i.e. earning \$15,000 a year or less) commonly owe child support debt, despite their inability – not an unwillingness – to pay. Furthermore, for this group of noncustodial parents, child support debt is often not owed to their children or to the custodial parent, but to the government as reimbursement for welfare payments their children received. Any contribution a noncustodial parent makes directly to the custodial parent or children does not count toward their official child support obligation. Further complicating the situation for noncustodial parents and the well-being of

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Further complicating the situation, some child support enforcement mechanisms actually make it more difficult for low-income men to meet their child support obligations.

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This relationship between practitioners and participants – solidly grounded in respect, trust, and understanding – may be the most important aspect of the services that fatherhood practitioners provide.

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their children, some child support enforcement mechanisms actually make it more difficult for low-income men to meet their child support obligations. For example, driver's license revocation and incarceration for nonpayment are common enforcement measures that compound the difficulties low-income men of color have in securing and maintaining employment, which obviously has a negative impact on their ability to support their children.

In CFFPP-led focus groups, men who were unemployed, struggling to make ends meet, and in debt to the state for the reimbursement of cash assistance their children had received, shared their perspectives on the child support system. They expressed wanting to meet their responsibilities as parents, searching for work, knowing that the child support they paid went to the state rather than their families, and understanding the penalties for nonpayment.

It's not that I didn't want to pay [child support]. The problem was that I was laid off.

...we tell [child support], look I'm unemployed. And if they check my background they see I done had multiple jobs, good paying jobs – railroad, road construction, carpentry, construction. I get paid well, they just never last long... [The child support agency] didn't take none of that into consideration, that, you know, most of my work is seasonal. I can do anything. I can cook or whatever. But if people are not going to hire you, what are you supposed to do?

Well, I think that what [child support agencies] are doing is trying to make sure that the money that went out there and covered [the child(ren)'s needs] when the man has no job, they try to force them to pay it even though they don't have it. If you don't pay it, you gotta pay the consequences. The consequences is – get locked up or get your license suspended.

Fatherhood program practitioners understand the circumstances low-income men of color are facing and attempt to respond to the needs and well-being of noncustodial fathers and their children by helping men secure employment and navigate the child support system.

Establishing strong, consistent relationships with the men who come to their programs is fundamental to fatherhood practitioners' work. As one practitioner said, "You have to continually reach out to these men. They don't reach out to anyone because no one really wants to accept them." This relationship between practitioners and participants – solidly grounded in respect, trust, and understanding – may arguably be the most important aspect of the services that fatherhood practitioners provide. It enables programs not only to connect men to necessary services, but also creates space for practitioners to hold high expectations of the men and demand responsible behavior from them, particularly with regard to their families and communities.

As one example, a fatherhood program asked participants to commit to the following pledge:

In response to President Obama's call for a national conversation on responsible fatherhood and healthy families, I pledge to renew my commitment to family and Community. I recognize the positive impact that fathers, mothers, mentors, and other responsible adults can have on our children and youth, and pledge to do all I can to provide children in my home and throughout my community the encouragement and support they need to fulfill their potential.

This approach is common to the work of community-based fatherhood practitioners. The goal of most programs is to attend to the needs and challenges that low-income men of color face so that they can make their full, desired, positive contributions to their families and neighborhoods. Fatherhood programs are one of the few agencies where low-income men of color receive this recognition and support.

### **Domestic Violence and Social Services for Men**

There are multiple ways that domestic violence advocates can use the knowledge of fatherhood programs to address unmet needs for underserved victims and increase safety for low-income women of color. This section explores a range of promising practice options. Domestic violence programs are encouraged to determine the best approach for their community and tailor any potential strategy to fit local needs and strengths. This section also highlights some important aspects of fatherhood programs to keep in mind for advocates who consider pursuing any of these approaches.

Most simply, domestic violence programs can learn about the agencies in their communities that serve low-income men. Developing an understanding of the services that are provided, meeting with or getting to know some of the

people who work at the agency, and learning about the organization’s underlying philosophy or guiding principles can be useful, in and of itself.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, this knowledge can help advocates determine whether a local fatherhood program would make an appropriate addition to their resource list.

Beyond learning about local services, advocates may decide that it could be helpful to share information about a particular fatherhood program with some of the victims they serve. As with all referrals, advocates would, in the process of

## PROMISING PRACTICE STRATEGIES

Advocates are encouraged to develop the most useful strategies for promoting the safety of underserved victims in their community. Not every approach is relevant for every community, nor are they relevant for each victim. As always, victim safety comes first.

Identify local agencies that provide social services to low-income men\*

- learn about the services
- meet people who work there
- learn about the agency’s mission and philosophy

When appropriate, share program information and safety plan with victims around:

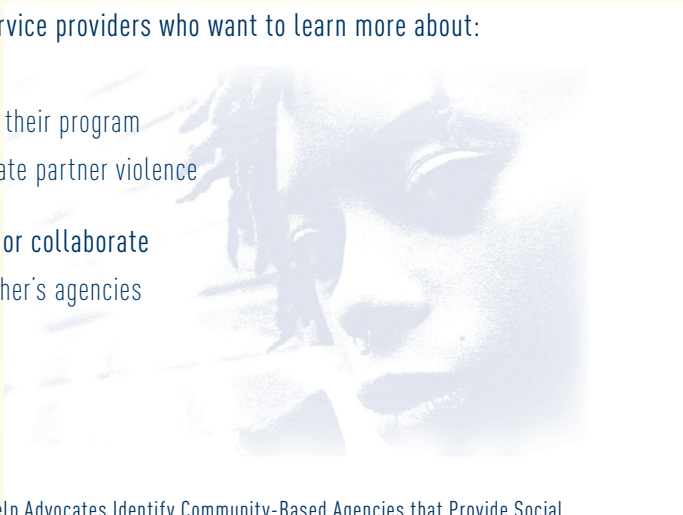
- how will she tell her partner about the agency
- where will they have the discussion
- what escape routes will be available
- what will signal that she should stop the conversation

Provide technical assistance to local service providers who want to learn more about:

- domestic violence dynamics
- promoting safety in the context of their program
- responding to disclosures of intimate partner violence

Explore further opportunities to partner or collaborate

- conduct cross-trainings at each other’s agencies
- develop MOUs
- provide referrals to one another
- design prevention strategies



\* See CFFPP’s “Enhancing Safety: A Guide to Help Advocates Identify Community-Based Agencies that Provide Social Welfare Services to Low-Income Men” for more guidance.

listening to each individual victim's needs and concerns, identify when it is relevant to provide her with information on social welfare services for men. Most often, this will be in response to a victim who specifically asks where her partner can go, for example, to receive help finding employment. Advocates who currently use this strategy remain mindful of victims' safety and work with each woman to decide how to pass the referral information along to her partner. Together, they develop a safety plan around that discussion – what it will look like, where it will take place, what escape routes will be available, what she might say, and what words or actions from him will signal to her to stop the conversation or leave. In this way, currently underserved victims who are low-income women, who are still in contact with their partners, and who want to help him find resources (e.g. assistance looking for work, addressing his drinking, etc.) can receive victim-centered advocacy that responds to her particular situation and promotes her safety.

Aside from providing referrals, advocates may find that a local fatherhood program is interested in receiving technical assistance on domestic violence. Many fatherhood practitioners would like to have a better understanding of domestic violence dynamics, how to promote safety within their programs, and especially, how to respond when a man discloses that he has used violence against his current or former wife, girlfriend, or partner. Again, many (if not most) of the participants in fatherhood programs do not use violence against their partners. At the same time, practitioners are often aware of the fact that some participants do. Despite wanting to play a positive role in enhancing women's safety, practitioners commonly lack confidence in addressing domestic violence and express that they would benefit from the assistance and expertise of a local domestic violence advocate.

As advocates and practitioners get to better know one another and their respective services, they may discover further opportunities to partner or collaborate. Agencies may choose to work together, for example, to conduct cross-trainings at each other's programs (e.g. on each other's services, clients, roles, etc.), create memorandums of understanding, develop processes for providing mutual referrals (i.e. from a fatherhood program to a domestic violence agency and vice versa), and/or design new prevention strategies.

While implementing any of these approaches requires additional time, each draws upon skills that advocates already possess. Over the years, the advocacy community has broadened its scope and, in some cases, bridged philosophical divides in order to work with other professions and promote women's safety. Advocates have spent years developing relationships, learning about, educating, and partnering or collaborating with law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, health care providers, schools, faith communities, and other systems and institutions. The advocacy community has a solid foundation for working across professions.

Learning about or engaging with fatherhood programs would serve to expand the number and types of partners in this work.

Each domestic violence agency must determine the most useful and relevant approaches for promoting the safety of underserved victims in their community, which may or may not result in a working relationship with fatherhood practitioners. Just knowing who the practitioners are and what they do, or being able to answer a victim's request for information about where her partner can go for help with his search for employment may be the extent of what is needed or possible in a given community. Advocates are encouraged to utilize and build

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Even when fatherhood programs do not directly address domestic violence or have working relationships with advocates, many already increase women's safety and help prevent incidents of abuse.

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upon their knowledge and strengths to assess the extent to which relationships, partnerships, or collaborations are feasible and, from there, develop the most useful strategies for their community.

It is worth noting that even when fatherhood programs do not directly address domestic violence or have working relationships with advocates, many already increase women's safety and help prevent incidents of abuse. Certainly, practitioners have expressed that they would benefit from working with advocates who understand their programs and the population

they serve. At the same time, just having an abusive partner connected to support services and/or getting him out of the house for a few hours can provide respite and increase safety for some women. Early in the development of fatherhood programs, intake processes commonly asked about domestic violence, and men who had used violence were screened out and could not participate. Over time, however, fatherhood practitioners and domestic violence advocates came to learn that turning men away from services is often not the best way to promote women's

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Nonviolence and responsibility to self, family, and community are expected from the men.

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safety. Further isolating men who are already marginalized (by race and class) and possibly removing their one chance at social support services can increase the likelihood that he will use violence against his partner. Instead of asking men about domestic violence at intake, it now appears that first developing a strong relationship with practitioners holds greater potential for

promoting women's safety. Practitioners commonly form mutually respectful, trusting relationships with program participants. Nonviolence and responsibility to self, family, and community are part of the expected standard. Although



fatherhood practitioners rarely know when they are working with someone who has used violence and they do not provide batterer intervention services, experiences of violence may be disclosed over time. Further, practitioners do create an environment of accountability. While they may not call it such, “accountability,” defined as: actions toward or involving others that reflect the integrity of the person that you want to be,<sup>18</sup> is precisely the standard that is developed within fatherhood programs. All participants are expected and supported to live up to this principle.

Promoting women’s safety is a positive, but unintended outcome of fatherhood programs. Domestic violence is outside of their mission and core services. They are not designed to be prevention programs, nor do they provide batterer intervention or fathering beyond violence services. At the same time, most programs do promote “responsible” fatherhood, which includes the message that good fathers are, by definition, nonviolent. Furthermore, in peer support groups, men have the opportunity to wrestle with ideas of masculinity and discuss how, for very low-income men of color, the traditional route of performing masculinity – being the breadwinner – is often out of reach. Practitioners spend time talking with the men in peer support groups about the fact that a man’s worth does not come from his income. They discuss ways of being a responsible man and father when you don’t have economic resources (e.g. by caring for and spending quality time with children). They also talk about the fact that, for men who do not have access to employment or a steady income, violence is often the mechanism for proving manhood. They contrast this with the definition of a “real man,” which includes nonviolence. Peer support groups provide unique opportunities for low-income men of color to address and challenge social norms in culturally relevant and responsive ways.

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Lastly, fatherhood service providers’ ultimate role is to help men gain and maintain economic stability through employment. Therefore, practitioners make the very practical point that choosing to use violence will negatively impact multiple areas of men’s lives. Domestic violence adversely affects not only their children, their partners, and their relationships, but can also interrupt efforts toward achieving employment, education, and career goals.

Regardless of whether a fatherhood program directly addresses domestic violence, nonviolent expectations and norms are often promoted within the agency. In this way, fatherhood programs may increase the safety of women who

are partnered with the low-income men who access their services, even for women who are victims but may never approach or be connected with a domestic violence advocate. One of the challenges facing fatherhood practitioners, therefore, is not necessarily being able to accurately identify which participants do or do not, have

or have not, will or will not perpetrate domestic violence, but rather, how to work with all of the men in the program to increase the safety of all women in the community.

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Fatherhood programs are also places where men support and challenge one another to be responsible men and fathers, which requires being nonviolent with their partners and/or the mothers of their children.

Men in fatherhood programs often hold each other accountable.

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It is important for advocates who are interested in working with local programs that provide services to low-income men to be aware that some practitioners will not have any understanding of domestic violence. It may not be on their radar or they may not believe that any of their participants have ever engaged in violence against women. Furthermore, some advocates might feel uncomfortable with the kinds of services, the language, or the environment of fatherhood programs. This discomfort is not necessarily a signal to avoid working with a program or exclude it from an advocate's resource list. Fatherhood programs are not structured to be feminist organizations.

Practitioners often focus on promoting men's responsibility as fathers. Many programs offer anger management or healthy relationship classes and address men's issues around child support, access, and visitation. These issues alone can potentially scare off advocates. However, fatherhood programs are also places where men, as they come together, support and challenge one another to be responsible men and fathers, which requires being nonviolent with their partners and/or the mothers of their children. In other words, men in fatherhood programs often hold each other accountable. The language that participants and practitioners use will not sound like it comes from the anti-violence against women movement, but that does not mean fatherhood programs cannot or do not promote women's safety, prevent violence, and change social norms.

*In the absence of other resources, many men rely heavily upon violence for achieving manhood privileges... that is, violence becomes one of the simplest ways of doing masculinity, of expressing manhood “rights,” and of asserting male power, control, and dominance over others – especially over lesser men and weaker women and children.<sup>19</sup>*

— Gail Garfield —

## **Conclusion**

Anti-violence against women advocates have historically and continue to develop prevention and intervention services based on the lives, experiences, and needs of victims and survivors. One promising approach to addressing an unmet need for low-income women of color is to learn about and/or work with local programs that provide social welfare services to low-income men.

Women and children in low-income communities of color face a wide range of challenges to securing income stability and personal safety. At the same time, women often share limited resources with the men in their communities. One innovative way to work with underserved communities is to understand the role that social welfare services for men can play in supporting and promoting the safety of low-income women of color. It is crucial that such services be funded and structured in a way that does not take away from women or children, but that adds to the overall resources available in low-income communities.

African American and Latina women have approached domestic violence programs seeking help for their current and former partners who have used violence. Sometimes, they are looking for a place where he can go to get assistance looking for employment and being connected to other services, or to be supported in a community of other men who understand his position in American society. Although limited, such community-based services exist. “Fatherhood programs” can be found across a range of agencies – as small programs housed within neighborhood centers, services provided within other nongovernmental organizations, or as stand alone programs that are dedicated to addressing the needs of low-income men, predominantly men of color. And practitioners at these programs are often receptive to the information and expertise advocates can provide.

Equipped with information about the kinds of services that are frequently available at fatherhood programs, advocates are better positioned to understand the potential for working together and responding to the needs of low-income women

of color. Victims have expressed that service providers can and must figure out how to comprehensively address the economic needs of all community members while simultaneously promoting women's safety.

It is not being suggested that programs that provide services to low-income men become more like batterer intervention programs, nor that domestic violence advocates stray from their crucial work of providing safe havens and advocacy for victims of violence. Rather, developing a greater understanding of the issues that low-income women and men face and the kinds of services that each type of program provides will have a positive effect on service delivery and women's safety. It is important that each agency follows the mission of its work. There are clearly defined roles for each type of service provision, and the services each provides address a critical need. In the end, achieving economic, racial, and gender justice for low-income women of color will require that the needs of the whole community be addressed.

*I honestly think that some of the men may be stressed out like we are about not getting assistance. I'm thinking that if they got some assistance, like to help them get a job and help them get housing to get on their feet, then maybe it may cut down on domestic violence against women.*

*And maybe all of this would slow down some kind of way.*

*— Domestic violence survivor at a CFFPP listening session —*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gail Garfield (2005) *Knowing What We Know: African American Women's Experiences of Violence and Violation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- <sup>2</sup> CFFPP was founded during a time when social welfare policy began to seriously consider and focus on increasing low-income men's financial contributions to and physical presence in their children's lives. We take very seriously the potential risk posed to low-income mothers by this kind of social policy.
- <sup>3</sup> CFFPP's work with regard to domestic violence focuses on violence against low-income women of color, particularly African American and Latina victims. Therefore, throughout this paper, victims are referred to as women.
- <sup>4</sup> As part of this grant project, OVW-approved funds were used to hold meetings and listening sessions with domestic violence advocates, experts, and victims/survivors. Meetings and listening sessions with men and fatherhood practitioners were supported by other funding sources.
- <sup>5</sup> Gail Garfield (2005) *Knowing What We Know*.
- <sup>6</sup> Devah Pager (2003) "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology* 108(5): 937-975; Devah Pager and Lincoln Quillian (2005) "Walking the Talk? What Employers Say Versus What They Do," *American Sociological Review* 70: 355-380; Maria Cancian, Carolyn Heinrich, and Yiyoon Chung (2009) "Does Debt Discourage Employment and Payment of Child Support? Evidence from a Natural Experiment," Institute for Research on Poverty; Harry Holzer, Paul Offner, and Elaine Sorensen (2004) "Declining Employment among Young Black Less-Educated Men: The Role of Incarceration and Child Support," The Urban Institute; and Vicki Turetsky (2007) "CLASP Policy Brief No. 2: Child Support Series: Staying in Jobs and Out of the Underground: Child Support Policies that Encourage Legitimate Work," Center for Law and Social Policy.
- <sup>7</sup> Andy Kroll (July 5, 2011) "The 60-Year Unemployment Scandal," webcast at: *TomDispatch.com*, [http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175413/tomgram\\_percent3A\\_andy\\_kroll\\_percent2C\\_the\\_60-year\\_unemployment\\_scandal/](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175413/tomgram_percent3A_andy_kroll_percent2C_the_60-year_unemployment_scandal/) [Accessed: 10/18/11].
- <sup>8</sup> In 1972, the Bureau of Labor Statistics began reporting separate unemployment rates for white Americans and African Americans. Before this time, the unemployment rate was one aggregate number. Currently, monthly unemployment rates are available for the racial categories of "White," "Black or African American," and "Asian" and for the ethnicity "Hispanic or Latino."
- <sup>9</sup> Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey Historical Household Data, <http://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm>.
- <sup>10</sup> In a different set of listening sessions, CFFPP asked low-income African American men to describe their employment experiences. While every participant had a work history, many were unemployed at the time of the listening sessions. The men shared common experiences with regard to looking for work:
- Who wants to be without work? Who's going to sit around? I mean, you may have some people who would do that, but how could you live if you're not working? You get frustrated because you go out here and you put in these job applications... But if people are not going to hire you, what are you supposed to do?
- [Employers] don't want to give nobody no chance to show them, like, you know, man, we can look past this background. I just want to show you my work.
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on African American men's exclusion from employment and social welfare programs, see Jill Groblewski (2010) "Comprehensive Advocacy for Low-Income African American Men and Their Communities," CFFPP.
- <sup>12</sup> Legal Momentum (April 2011) "Welfare Reform at Age 15." For more information on CFFPP's analysis of TANF, see "Written Testimony on TANF and Welfare Reform Goals" (2011).

- <sup>13</sup>See Jill Davies (2011) “Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact with Current or Former Partners, A Guide for Domestic Violence Advocates,” Futures Without Violence. <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/documents/advocacybeyondleaving/advocacybeyondleavingpdf.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup>Jessica Pearson and Nancy Thoennes (2000) “OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Early Implementation Lessons” in Carmen Solomon-Fears (2010) “Fatherhood Initiatives: Connecting Fathers to Their Children,” Congressional Research Service.
- <sup>15</sup>William Julius Wilson (2009) *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company; Waldo Johnson Jr., David Pate Jr., and Jarvis Ray Givens (2010) “Big Boys Don’t Cry, Black Boys Don’t Feel” in Christopher Edley Jr. and Jorge Ruiz de Velasco (eds.) *Changing Places*, Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley School of Law; Alice Goffman (2009) “On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto,” *American Sociological Review* 74: 339-357; Ronald Hall, Jonathan Livingston, Valerie Henderson, Glenn Fisher, and Rebekah Hines (2007) “Post-modern Perspective on the Economics of African American Fatherhood,” *Journal of African American Studies* 10: 112-123; Kevin Roy (2006) “Father Stories: A Life Course Examination of Paternal Identity Among Low-Income African American Men,” *Journal of Family Issues* 27(1): 31-54; and Jill Groblewski (2010) “Comprehensive Advocacy.”
- <sup>16</sup>For more information on low-income men of color, unemployment, and child support, see Jill Groblewski (2010) “Comprehensive Advocacy” and Jacquelyn Boggess (2011) “Low-Income Fathers and Child Support Debt” and “Child Support Basics,” CFFPP.
- <sup>17</sup>For more information on identifying and getting to know local programs, see CFFPP’s “Enhancing Safety: A Guide to Help Advocates Identify Community-Based Agencies that Provide Social Welfare Services to Low-Income Men.”
- <sup>18</sup>Jeffrie Cape and David Garvin (2009) “Operationalizing Accountability: The Domains and Bases of Accountability,” webcast at: *Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County*, [http://www.csswashtenaw.org/ada/Operationalizing\\_Accountability\\_Cape\\_Garvin.pdf](http://www.csswashtenaw.org/ada/Operationalizing_Accountability_Cape_Garvin.pdf) [Accessed: 6/20/11].
- <sup>19</sup>Gail Garfield (2010) *Through Our Eyes: African American Men’s Experiences of Race, Gender, and Violence*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.





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