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Hearing to Review Responsible Fatherhood Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1995 as the policy arm of the *Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative*, the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP or the Center) examines the impact of national and state welfare, fatherhood, and child support policy on low-income parents and their children. 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. In particular, we concentrate on noncustodial parents who are in financial positions equivalent to custodial parents who qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other public assistance programs. These parents typically have very low earnings and have unstable and intermittent, if any, employment. While this scope may seem narrow, it includes large numbers of people, many of whom are African American and Latino men. Due to their status as noncustodial parents, these men are largely ineligible for social welfare services and support, despite sharing the same level of need as their children and their children's mothers. Furthermore, these noncustodial fathers comprise the majority of parents who are struggling with child support. A 2007 study of child support arrears commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services calculated that "70 percent of arrears were owed by obligors who had either no reported income or reported income of \$10,000 a year or less" (Sorensen et al. 2007). These men – extremely low-income, African American or Latino noncustodial fathers – comprise the majority of people who access, utilize, and benefit from responsible fatherhood program services.

PRELUDE

Earlier this week, I held semi-structured interviews with two men contending on a daily basis with the issues outlined in this testimony. They are both middle-aged African American noncustodial fathers with grown children and with grandchildren for whom they feel responsible. They are both unemployed and their unemployment benefits have recently run out. Both are actively seeking employment, desperately want to work, and are connected to employment programs, but neither has received a job offer. Despite his ongoing efforts, one has not had a job offer in eight years. The other is homeless and walks the streets at night, waiting for the bus service to begin running each morning to

take him to school. Both owe tens of thousands of dollars in child support – much of which is owed to the state in order to repay the government for public assistance their children received when they were young. One has lost his driver’s license and been incarcerated for nonpayment of child support, further hampering his ability to secure employment. Each day, both persevere.

SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY AND BARRIERS TO ECONOMIC STABILITY

Over the past 15 years, increasing attention has been given to the need for low-income noncustodial fathers to contribute financially to their children and their children’s mothers in order to increase household incomes and reduce poverty. Financial support from noncustodial fathers was central to welfare reform when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) was passed, placing a new emphasis on identifying fathers of children receiving public assistance, establishing their legal paternity, and, perhaps most critically, establishing and enforcing the payment of child support orders. The focus on fathers has continued since PRWORA, with the most recent welfare reauthorization legislation, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, addressing fathers through fatherhood-related programming aimed at increasing child support payments and through marriage promotion programs.

However, even as federal and state legislators and policymakers have begun to focus more readily on men’s financial contribution to their children as a key component of social welfare policy, the economic situations of many low-income fathers have been deteriorating (Holzer and Offner 2006, Mincy et al. 2006, Primus 2006). Recent research has shown that less educated men (i.e., those with a high school degree or less who are not enrolled in post-secondary education or training), and especially less-educated African American men, are in a vulnerable economic position that has only been exacerbated by the recent recession. A 2006 Urban Institute publication devoted to examining the situations of African American men reports that nearly half (46.2 percent) of less-educated young black men (ages 16 to 24) reported no earnings in 2001, compared to 27.7 percent of less-educated young men overall (Mincy et al.).

In contrast to white and Latino men, as well as to white, Latino, and African American women, the employment situation of African American men has deteriorated

over the past several decades – even during periods of overall economic growth (Holzer and Offner 2006). In fact, unemployment rates for people of color during good economic times have remained consistently higher than white unemployment rates during recessions (ARC 2009, Austin 2008). Prior to the official start of the recession in December 2007, African Americans as a whole had higher unemployment rates than other groups and approximately twice the unemployment rate of whites (ARC 2009, Cawthorne 2009, Weller and Logan 2009, Austin 2008). The lasting effects of the recession and jobless recovery have hit black men particularly hard. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an overall unemployment rate of 9.7 percent for May 2010. The rate is significantly higher for African Americans as a whole (15.5), and is particularly high for black men at 17.1 percent (after having reached a staggering 19 percent this past March). In comparison, the unemployment rate for whites (both as a composite and for white men) stands at 8.8 percent.

Several researchers have undertaken efforts to investigate the underlying reasons black men experience higher rates of unemployment. For one, there has been a sharp increase in the rate of incarceration of low-income African American men in recent decades. This trend has widened the disparity in incarceration rates between African American men and other men in the U.S. and reduces the employment prospects of African American men in general, regardless of their personal involvement with the criminal justice system. In two pivotal studies, Pager found that employers are more likely to call back job applicants who are white men *with* criminal records than black men *without* records (Pager and Quillian 2005, Pager 2003). Pager further discovered that (1) employers who self report that they would not discriminate based on criminal record are not more likely to hire an ex-offender in practice and (2) discrimination regarding criminal records is further compounded by race (Pager and Quillian 2005). These studies did not find that the employers were overtly racist, but rather that hiring decisions and actions are informed by implicit bias against African American men.

Additionally, there is growing consensus among scholars who study declining employment trends among young African American men that the child support enforcement system itself has critical implications for the economic situations and prospects of these men. A significant proportion of low-income African American men

are noncustodial fathers who face barriers that are not typically recognized or understood by most social service providers. One report identifies nearly one-quarter of less-educated young African American men as nonresident fathers (Nightingale and Sorensen 2006), and approximately 50 percent of less-educated African American men are fathers by age 34 (Haskins 2006). It is not well known that when their children have received public assistance, low-income fathers typically owe substantial amounts of money to repay state and federal governments for those services. These charges are included in their child support bills and are coordinated and enforced through the child support enforcement system and local child support agencies. It is not uncommon for extremely low-income men to owe tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to the government as reimbursement for benefits their children have received, and nonpayment can lead to harsh enforcement measures, including incarceration, which only compounds their future challenges to securing employment (see Sorensen et al. 2007 for further discussion of child support debt). For noncustodial and/or nonresident fathers, child support enforcement measures pose barriers that can prohibit them from developing personal and familial economic stability and security.

Again, it is important to note that these men who face substantial barriers to obtaining and sustaining employment, with low levels of educational attainment, high rates of incarceration, and extreme debt burdens, are the fathers most likely to access and benefit from responsible fatherhood program services.

TYPICAL RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAM SERVICES

While fatherhood programs are difficult to categorize given the diversity of services they provide, community-based programs that specifically target low-income fathers often exhibit a similar program structure and focus. Such programs may be created for different reasons and with various intents (e.g., as an expansion of a federal program or as a program component within a community center), but over time they frequently provide similar kinds of services in response to the needs of the fathers accessing the programs. As stated above, the majority of clients are frequently African American and Latino men, and many programs address the complex array of issues affecting low-income men of color in the U.S., including the impact of racial

discrimination, high levels of economic deprivation and debt, and the disproportionate impact of the criminal legal system on their lives. While many of the services relate to parenting issues, others derive directly from the economic and social needs of clients and their families and, in one form or another, represent poverty-reduction efforts. The goals and objectives of many responsible fatherhood programs are to directly address – for each individual man – the barriers and concerns of poor, unemployed (or underemployed) men and their children. Therefore, typical programs provide education services, employment and training services, peer support, assistance with child support and other legal matters, parenting and healthy relationship skills classes, and assistance with food, housing, health, and transportation.

It has been shown that there are two essential services fatherhood programs must be able to offer low-income men. One is peer and mentoring support for men (particularly men of color) facing the issues of discrimination, lack of education and training, unemployment, and intractable poverty. At least one study of responsible fatherhood programs has shown that peer support is the most successful element these programs offer. The other essential service focuses on employment: including job training, referrals, and placement. Fatherhood programs in low-income communities of color were originally designed to provide these two services.

While community-based fatherhood programs serving low-income men may attempt to foster positive co-parenting approaches among noncustodial and custodial parents, the primary concern of many has been to address the economic barriers that interfere with a father's ability to maintain positive involvement with his children. This focus on addressing the needs of low-income parents and their children, both within TANF and fatherhood programs, shifted significantly with the introduction of the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002-2003 and the reauthorization of TANF in 2006. Since then, national and state emphasis on fatherhood and "fatherhood responsibility" has largely created policy and law to support the government perspective on these issues (e.g., child support enforcement and collection, marriage promotion). There have been government directives to agencies to maximize father involvement and an emphasis on the importance of biological fathers in children's lives. This emphasis has also been tied to marriage promotion efforts.

Research on these various social policy approaches to addressing the needs of low-income fathers and their families have confirmed the importance of employment and job training services and the profound positive impact of peer support groups.

RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS AND WOMEN

Throughout our 15 year history, CFFPP has provided policy analysis from the perspective of very low-income men of color while simultaneously foregrounding the interests and welfare of women and children. We strongly support providing comprehensive social services that address the complex issues low-income families face – issues such as poverty, violence, employment insecurity, and discrimination – so that parents are able to make their desired contributions to their families and communities. And we recognize that within these efforts, service providers must be mindful at every step of promoting the safety of women.

More and more father-focused policy organizations and fatherhood programs that serve low-income fathers acknowledge the fact that domestic violence needs to be addressed within the context of providing services to men, particularly in light of state and federal policies that place increasing pressures on low-income custodial and noncustodial parents and force interaction between them (e.g., through cooperation requirements). Obviously, only a fraction of men use violence in their intimate relationships, however it is beneficial for the safety of all low-income women that fatherhood programs incorporate protocols for responding to domestic violence into their services.

There is some ongoing confusion around the goals and agendas of the different entities which describe themselves with reference to fatherhood: 1) community-based fatherhood programs in low-income communities (i.e., those discussed above), 2) fatherhood programs structured around child support payment or marriage and based on government policy and funding, and 3) father's rights organizations that use and pay for legal representation with regard to issues around child support and custody. Father's rights organizations are the most easily distinguished from the other two, but there are no bright lines of demarcation among these three, and there can be some overlap in activities and objectives. Confusion is understandable. However, in the context of the intent of both

men and women in low-income communities of color to support their families, and their communities as a whole in light of the realities of poverty and discrimination in their lives, we believe that it is incumbent on those who provide services in the community to work together to support both the men and women in those communities.

In particular, domestic violence experts can collaborate and work with fatherhood programs to address the issue of domestic violence within the program, practitioners from programs for low-income fathers can work with batterer programs to inform them of the issues low-income men of color confront, and domestic violence advocates are increasingly seeing the benefits of having a partnership with a responsible fatherhood programs to which they can refer women who are still in contact with partners who have used violence.

One of the challenges to the success of these types of collaborations is the perception that each group tends to have of the other. The experience of many domestic violence advocates with fatherhood groups has been primarily with “father’s rights” organizations. These organizations are specifically focused on family court proceedings (such as contested custody and visitation cases) involving men with resources and connections. Many battered women’s advocates’ perception of “fatherhood groups” may further be negatively associated with recent government programs that were organized primarily around the promotion of marriage. Another challenge to the development of collaborative efforts is that this growing discussion about the need for safety around father involvement programs has been interpreted by some fatherhood practitioners and others as an implication from domestic violence advocates that all men are violent, or – more specifically – that all poor men of color are violent.

In regards to both fields (i.e., fatherhood and domestic violence), the confusion of sometimes-overlapping and sometimes-conflicting agendas is real and understandable. However, the most important issue to consider is the possibility of creating adequately responsive services and positive outcomes for the families being served. The central objectives of this type of collaboration are enhanced parental support and furtherance of domestic violence prevention and intervention. The rationale for such collaborations includes the fact that many custodial mothers want their children to know and interact with their fathers, and that both parents and their children are likely to benefit from a safe

and positive environment where parents can share the emotional and financial burden of child-rearing. Further, unmarried or separated parents in a healthy parenting relationship can pool their resources to take care of themselves and their children. Finally, in the context of the intent of both men and women to support their families and their communities, and given that in many cases they must confront societal realities such as poverty, violence, and employment insecurity, we believe that it is incumbent upon those who provide services in the community to work together toward the creation of a more holistic social support structure.

CONCLUSION

Over the past year, I have held listening sessions with low-income African American and Latina women, some of whom are victims and survivors of domestic violence. In these sessions, women have shared their need for safety in conjunction with their need for greater economic security, social welfare services, and social justice. Many want to move past the romantic relationship with their former partners, and at the same time, these women shared the view that the men in their communities also need social welfare services. They expressed many reasons for their belief that social service provision for men in low-income communities is essential. However, one of the most important reasons they gave was that under current social welfare policy, men cannot do their part. They cannot make their equal contribution to their families. They cannot support themselves or their children. Of course, when men are not in a position to provide this support, the burden on women becomes even greater. They suggested that personal responsibility is one important factor in this regard, but they said that the issue goes deeper than that and touches on the discrimination and stereotyping that men of color experience in American society.

Women across listening sessions felt that men must be held accountable when they choose to use violence and, simultaneously, women expressed that they strongly favor community-based social services that would help *all* men in their communities with education, employment, and health services. Many of them expressed a belief that such support services would alleviate some of the stress and feelings of hopelessness the men

experience, and by reducing this pressure, services for men could increase women's safety.