Family Policy Practice

a year of achievement and change

2003 Annual Report
Mission

The Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy seeks to create a society in which low-income parents - mothers as well as fathers - are in a position to support their children emotionally, financially, and physically. CFFPP addresses the unique barriers affecting low-income noncustodial parents and their families through the provision of technical assistance, policy research, and public education, and develops public awareness of their needs.

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A Year of Achievement and Change

With a long and dynamic list of activities and achievements, and a small but strong staff, the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy surprises many in the field. We are not ever willing to compromise the best interests of low-income families in the interest of following a trend. We are to a person committed to enabling the poorest among us to overcome barriers and at the same time choose for themselves the best way to form families and optimize resources. We have had the word “fathers” in our name, but we do not concern ourselves only with the interests of fathers. We work with and are trusted by many women’s organizations but do not believe social policy should relegate fathers to a diminished role in their families. Moreover, we relish a challenging issue and are often at the forefront of identifying critical consequences of policy for families. Perhaps most surprising is the number of activities and projects carried out by our small organization.

We have just completed one of our most exciting and challenging years. Exciting because we have made major inroads in policy and practice, and have seen many of the linkages we have worked to develop pay off in better services to families. Challenging because the need for humane policies is becoming greater and families are struggling in an economy with fewer jobs and shrinking services.

The scope of our work over the past year reflects recent dramatic changes in welfare policy and practice. As low-income families are increasingly required to fulfill work obligations and repay the government for public benefits, we have investigated practices, educated communities, and advocated for policy change. This is demonstrated in, for example, our Medicaid reimbursement project where we are partnering with a local health policy organization to draw attention to the practice of holding the noncustodial parent responsible for repaying birth costs when the mother receives Medicaid. Our incarceration project goal is to ultimately change policies that lead to the arrest of extremely poor noncustodial parents for nonpayment of child support, only to lead to escalating debt - most of which is owed to the government as repayment of welfare costs.

Our technical assistance work seeks to ensure that as resources become more scarce and targeted to marriage initiatives, low-income noncustodial parents can find services to help overcome significant employment barriers, and be in a position to help their families as welfare benefits shrink. We have been designated as the technical assistance provider on fatherhood programs and issues to the child welfare systems of each state in a promising contract that will allow us to further the understanding of these issues among child welfare workers nationally.

We have a very full year ahead of us with new and continuing projects, and with an ever-growing need for attention to our issues. We thank our donors for their steadfast support. It makes our work possible, and we are privileged to be able to pursue this vital effort on your behalf.

Gratefully,

David Pate
Introduction

The Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy (CFFPP) is a national nonprofit organization that provides policy advocacy and public education as well as technical assistance to promote the well being of low-income noncustodial fathers and their families. The Center fills a void in welfare policy and social services by providing a unique but crucial perspective on the barriers faced by low-income noncustodial parents as they attempt to become financially stable and to develop or maintain healthy relationships with their children. Our projects cover a broad range of activities but with a singular focus on finding policies and practices that will improve the quality of life for all members of low-income families.

From providing information on child support policies to community organizations to speaking at national gatherings of welfare policy-makers and publishing reports that are highly respected in the field of welfare policy and research, we maintain an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of the poorest families. We are particularly proud of our growing reputation for providing technical assistance to community-based organizations, of our critical public education on child support issues and of our growing body of work based on information we gather directly from noncustodial parents.

As a reflection of our increased presence on issues relevant to all family members, we are excited to announce a name change for our organization. Beginning next year, our Center will become the Center for Family Policy and Practice. The change reflects the fact that we are committed to all family members, but will not affect the nature of our work. It is a better fit with changes in family dynamics – increasing numbers of mothers are becoming noncustodial parents and facing those sets of challenges, and it reflects our increasing level of work with programs providing direct services to families. It also conveniently allows us to maintain the same acronym and thus the same website!

www.cffpp.org

Averaged 76,000 hits per month this year.
It is critically important to have the perspective of low-income families inserted into current policy conversations wherever possible, even when political winds shift the policy trends and debates. To that end, we are continually engaged in national policy (particularly related to welfare reauthorization and child support) where debate has been dominated by marriage, fatherhood, and the removal of supports to the poorest Americans.

While marriage and “responsible fatherhood” issues have been the dominant focus of welfare proposals that will impact fathers, child support policy has remained a constant priority for low-income noncustodial parents and their families. We have a long history of working on child support policy, and have put it to use in the past year to educate low-income parents, their advocates, and the public on the unintended consequences of child support policy on individuals in low-income families, bringing our expertise to a variety of venues. For example, we participated in welfare reauthorization activities sponsored by the Center for Community Change and Wisconsin State Senator Russ Feingold’s Welfare Reauthorization Workgroup, and we were invited to be a part of a welfare rights strategy meeting sponsored by the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). We also presented on child support policy and low-income families as part of a panel of experts at the annual conference of the National Child Support Enforcement Association in August, and at the annual conference of the Council on Contemporary Families. Our Executive Director, David Pate, was asked by the Board of Directors of the Ounce of Prevention Fund to talk about how fatherhood issues intersect with those of low-income families and welfare reform, and the Minneapolis Foundation invited us to present to their Board of Directors on low-income families and fatherhood work in October. We were also tapped by the Ms.

Our monthly Policy Briefings, begun in 1999, continue to grow in popularity and now reach more than 1,500 subscribers each month in addition to being a popular item on our website. The briefings provide summaries of current research, policy development, and practice in the fields of welfare, child support, criminal justice and many others. Our emphasis in choosing items and highlighting them is always on what could be most useful in advocacy for low-income families. Many of our readers are practitioners with little time to follow legislation or research on such a variety of issues, and the concise but thorough summaries contained in the briefings allow readers to become informed without needing to track down the reports

Organizations with whom CFFPP has collaborated

ABC for Health (Madison, WI)
Aid to Children of Imprisoned Mothers (Atlanta, GA)
Alliance of Concerned Men (Washington, DC)
Building Partnerships for Comprehensive Solutions (Hartford, CT and Des Moines, IA)
Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (Baltimore, MD)
Center for Impact Research (Chicago, IL)
Center for Third World Organizing (Washington DC)
Con Los Padres (Los Angeles, CA)
The Employment Project (New York, NY)
Family Violence Prevention Fund (San Francisco, CA)
GROWL, CWTO
Legal Action Center of New York (New York, NY)
Men Overcoming Violence (San Francisco, CA)
Midwest Center on Workforce and Family Development (Racine, WI)
Minnesota Community Action (Minneapolis, MN)
National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (Washington DC)
National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning (New York, NY)
National Women’s Law Center (Washington, DC)
Next Door Foundation (Milwaukee, WI)
NOW Legal Defense Fund (Washington, DC)
Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law (Chicago, IL)
Southeast Ministries of the District of Columbia (Washington, DC)
Urban League of Greater Madison (Madison, WI)
Vera Institute for Justice (New York, NY)
Wisconsin Council Against Domestic Violence (Madison, WI)
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (Madison, WI)
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development
themselves to get the information. In 2002, we also completed our two-year state-specific series of policy briefings for California that allowed us to focus on issues particular to that state. The response to that series has encouraged us to consider producing other state-specific series in the future.

The year also was a time when many other progressive organizations were feeling overwhelmed with the current direction of welfare policy. In the belief that the current climate makes it more important than ever to build relationships with other progressive organizations that are also struggling to work against the current political tide in efforts to improve circumstances for poor families, we held a national forum, Meeting for Change: Toward a Progressive Agenda, in Madison in November 2002. Forum participants included 16 national organizations, all concerned with the potential direction of social welfare policy. Our discussions had a particular emphasis on the impact of marriage and fatherhood policies with regard to the issues of race, class, and gender. The forum represented a rare opportunity for progressive advocates to share strategies and exchange ideas across disciplines in a nonconfrontational setting. We received overwhelmingly positive feedback and created many continuing relationships because of the forum. Several subsequent advocacy initiatives were undertaken by forum participants that derived from contacts and discussions at the forum. We hope to continue to meet and collaborate with these inspiring groups in the coming years.

We also continued our work focused on low-income fathers, fatherhood programs and domestic violence. We are very proud of the associations and relationships we have formed over the years with organizations that advocate for victims of domestic violence, and in our work this year we continued that outreach. Over this past year, it has been particularly important to follow the policy discussions around fatherhood and marriage policy in this regard, and to continue to talk with advocates for battered women. We have been a participant in many related venues, including meetings on these issues convened by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Office of Violence Against Women in New York. We also worked closely with the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community.

In addition, we were invited to present at the member training conference of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV) in our home state of Wisconsin, where we provided members of WCADV updates on the possible changes to TANF legislation, and the impact of that on men and women.

We also presented at the collaborative Building Comprehensive Solutions in Chicago in October. The presentation allowed advocates for battered women to have a very rare account of what goes on in fatherhood programs and to discuss the need for the services that fatherhood programs provide to low-income men. It was typical of the kind of role we fulfill – allowing for more understanding between advocates so that poor families can advocate for better policy in tandem.

From May to July 2003, we participated in an 8-week on-line discussion series of the collaborative Building Partnership to End Men’s Violence, providing a case study and participating in an interview. The two resulting documents served as the basis for the on-line discussion Building Bridges between Responsible Fatherhood Programs and Programs Working to End Men’s Violence. Participants contributed to the discussion by reading the case studies and the interview and by posting their responses to those documents and each other to the list.

We have focused on domestic violence issues as part of our technical assistance services as well, and published a report, Fatherhood Programs and Domestic Violence, as part of our publications series.

Also, the second installment of the Reaching Common Ground project, Dollars and Sense: Improving the Determination of Child Support Obligations for Low-Income Mothers, Fathers, and Children, was published in July. The project is a collaborative project of the Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy and The National Women’s Law Center.
One of our central activities has always been to provide technical assistance to community-based organizations working with low-income fathers. In the last three years, we have refined our ability to provide targeted technical assistance, while at the same time reaching out to provide services to organizations working on a broad set of issues including domestic violence, criminal justice, health policy, and many others. Our expertise is typically called upon to help advocates understand child support issues that their clients or constituencies are facing, but we have also become recognized as a resource for evaluating programs in a qualitative, thorough manner.

With primary funding from the Public Welfare Foundation, we were able to hold discussions from 2000-2002 with over thirty organizations on the specific challenges of providing services to low-income fathers, while also helping to identify effective means for engaging fathers as participants in community-based programs. In order to ensure that the knowledge gained from our ongoing relationships with these organizations could reach a wider audience, we produced five technical assistance publications to be released in this fall. The reports provide valuable information on the topics of public policy and fatherhood organizations, incarceration and employment barriers, the intersection of fatherhood programming and domestic violence, and a resource guide focusing on organizational development. A related technical assistance publication was the development of a child support manual for community-based programs working with welfare recipient families.

Other technical assistance and consulting consisted of working on the Safe Return Initiative with the Vera Institute of Justice for their re-entry project, and conducting the third year of a process evaluation of the Fatherhood Project for the Next Door Foundation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and providing our expertise on issues of child support, welfare reform and fatherhood programs to the Minneapolis Foundation.

In addition to regular informal contact with countless community-based organizations, we have implemented more formal yet easily-accessed means of staying in communication. One is our list-servs, which are available for organizations to share issues, concerns and information. We also communicate with our partners via our Policy Briefing, which provides timely information on poverty-related topics each month.

Another form that our technical assistance took this year was the provision of more in-depth, individual consultations with several programs around the country. These consultations were driven by the needs of each organization and so each was quite distinct. We helped one organization develop expertise and media messages on policy-related topics that affected their consumers, provided specific information on child support policy, and helped another organization improve its fund-raising and organizational development methods.

We are happy to be working closely with two new partners this year, Aid to Children of Imprisoned Mothers, (Children and Family Networks Group, a project of AIM,) and the National Resource Center on Foster Care and Permanency Planning (at Hunter College). Our work with AIM springs from our legal assistance project. We initially provided AIM with information on issues specific to fathers, and created a Question and Answer booklet on child support for imprisoned mothers. This publication is set to be released in the Fall of 2003. We have also been involved with the Children and Family Networks, a project of AIM, Inc. The Children and Family Networks (CFN) is a national collaboration of government and private agencies and individuals working together to improve outcomes for children and youth with incarcerated parents. We have served on the steering committee for CFN and provided expertise on the issues that affect children and fathers when they are faced with poverty and a parent is incarcerated.

We have also forged a new technical assistance and consulting relationship with the National Resource Center for
Foster Care and Permanency Planning (at Hunter College School of Social Work) that will allow us to further our expertise on child welfare issues while providing the child welfare field with much-needed information on noncustodial parents, and fathers in particular. Through our contract with NRCFCPP, we will be available to the forty states with whom they have contracted to provide legal and policy expertise as states attempt to better understand the position of fathers whose children are in the child welfare system, and to advocate for the inclusion of fathers in permanency planning efforts.

National Legal Assistance Project

The National Legal Assistance Project (NLAP) is a direct outgrowth of our mission: to create a society in which low-income parents are in a position to support their children emotionally, financially, and physically. We have found that a lack of access to legal representation and information prevents families from securing a healthy outcome when facing family court or the child support system. NLAP provides a basis for improving the odds for unrepresented family members when they must contend with these systems.

Through NLAP, we provide direct representation of individuals, guidance for clients without attorneys, and we educate courts and the public on legal issues that impact low-income families.

Direct Representation

NLAP represents clients in court when the case has the potential to:

- Influence the courts and benefit a wider group of parents
- Reveal court interpretations of law that could be challenged
- Have relevance to state or national policy, or
- Assist in improving outcomes for other similarly-situated poor families.

Our most notable case outcomes this year have resulted from cases that involve the recovery of Medicaid birth costs in Wisconsin. Thirty-eight states have statutes that allow the child support agency to charge and enforce the repayment of Medicaid payments for birth costs by the father. In the past year, we have represented 25 low-income fathers who were unable to afford to reimburse the government for these birth costs, and have been successful in 23 of these cases.

Published Materials

A critical component of NLAP is the production of materials that can be provided to parents and caseworkers who must navigate court and government systems when contending with child support issues. This project component was developed in the knowledge that full legal representation would provide the most critical service to low-income families, but was not an attainable goal given its cost. The materials are designed to provide easily comprehended information on complex legal issues to an audience that would otherwise face courts with very little reliable legal assistance.

We completed in 2002 the Child Support Handbook, a comprehensive guide to the child support system that explains law and policy so both parents and social service professionals can better negotiate the system. Low-income families receive very little explanation of such processes and so are at risk of receiving a harmful outcome in court. Its national focus and detailed explanations make it

CFFPP provides a unique contribution by including the needs and perspectives of low income men of color in progressive proposals to reform welfare policy to benefit low income families.

– MARK TONEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR THIRD WORLD ORGANIZING
CFFPP gives voice to the compelling circumstances of low income fathers. It has a respected role in the public policy arena. CFFPP’s monthly Policy Briefing publication is a terrific resource for practitioners and policymakers interested in improving policies that impact low income fathers.

— VICKI TURETSKY, SENIOR STAFF ATTORNEY (FAMILY POLICY), CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY

useful for community-based organizations throughout the entire country.

Continuing our successful state series of guides that contain more specific information on the child support system, we completed question and answer handbooks for Minnesota and Georgia in 2002. We have now produced 19 state-specific handbooks. The response to the series has confirmed that it fills an important void in legal resources for parents. Our website has received well over 2,000 hits per month by individuals accessing these state-specific handbooks, and we have sent hundreds to mothers and fathers who have directly requested them. In addition, we receive continual requests from community-based organizations seeking the handbooks.

We have not been content to maintain the handbook series as is, without responding to needs that we have discovered in our other projects. For example, discussions with low-income mothers for our domestic violence project showed that there is a tremendous need for mothers to understand the child support system. Responding to this need, we have expanded the handbooks to not only explain the child support system for noncustodial parents but also explain it for custodial parents. The extremely positive response of mothers enrolled at Community Action of Minneapolis showed the enormous need for both custodial and noncustodial parents to understand the child support system.

Some select cases before various Appellate Courts led us to broaden the NLP in an unexpected way in 2002, by writing Amicus Curiae Briefs. These briefs provide unique perspectives coming from our direct interaction with low-income families and our extensive child support policy experience. The briefs were written to the United States Supreme Court, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, and the Michigan Appellate Court. The issues covered included: whether a father convicted of failing to pay child support could be prohibited from having more children while on probation; whether a financially impoverished prisoner could modify his child support while in prison, and whether the state discriminates on the basis of gender in requiring only unmarried fathers to pay the government back for birth costs. These briefs highlight our growing concern about the increasingly punitive methods used to require financially impoverished noncustodial parents to repay the government as a priority, and only secondarily to support their children.

Incarceration Project

With our incarceration project, we are emerging as a nationally recognized resource on issues related to incarceration and child support. Building on years of investigation into child support practices and their sometimes debilitating impact on poor families, it became clear to us that some of the most critical barriers are faced when a parent is incarcerated — an all-too-frequent event among our country’s poorest families. In most cases, a parent who is incarcerated will have child support debt grow while in prison — and will leave prison with insurmountable child support debt that becomes a critical barrier to successful re-entry. We have conducted numerous focus groups and interviews and have analyzed policy and research to formulate recommendations that would bring relief to every member of the family when a parent is incarcerated. And we have provided information to countless parents through trainings in child support policy and the inclusion of incarceration issues in our child support “Question and Answer” booklets.

While dramatic growth in incarceration rates has received a degree of public attention, the growth in arrests for nonpayment of child support has not. As our research and analysis has documented, states are increasingly turning to incarceration as a means to drive home the importance of paying child support. This would be an admirable development were it not for the fact that those arrested are disproportionately poor and of color. The project has set to work investigating both law and practice in this area. Because there is so little available information, we began by creating a compilation of state statutes for nonpayment of child support, documenting for the first time that every state in the union has laws that make nonpayment a criminal offense. The comprehensive chart is currently available on our website. At the same time, we have solicited first-hand stories across several regions from parents who have been arrested for nonpayment, and are documenting the impact of the practice on families. Last year was the
first in which we began to systematically seek information from state and local corrections agencies on the rates and demographics of arrests. Look for briefings on this in the coming year. A full report, based on this work, is complete and will be published in 2004.

An additional aspect of our work related to incarceration and re-entry was incorporated into our technical assistance activities in 2002. As part of our technical assistance conference and series of conference papers, we highlighted the issues that low-income noncustodial ex-offenders face when re-entering the community. The paper relates the experiences of professionals, caseworkers and parents in a way that can be useful to others who are working to find employment or provide services to ex-offenders.

We also forged new relationships with partners in the

State Coalition-Building

We have replicated our national coalition-building efforts at the state level with the creation of the Wisconsin Coalition for Low-Income Families (WisCLIF), a coalition of grassroots and community organizations, social service providers, and policy advocates interested in furthering the well-being of low-income women, men, and children in Wisconsin. In August 2000, we organized an introductory conference in Madison, which we co-hosted with the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Urban League of Greater Madison, the Institute for Wisconsin’s Future, and the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. The purpose of this conference was to bring together advocates who serve diverse constituencies to develop ideas for working together to create comprehensive and holistic public support policies and social service practices to more effectively serve Wisconsin’s low-income families. The forum was highly successful and led to the development of WisCLIF, which incorporates a broad spectrum of community and policy advocates, including advocates on issues of child welfare, legal services, domestic violence, low-income women and mothers, and low-income men and fathers. We created and coordinate activities of WisCLIF.

In FY 2003, the work of WisCLIF paid off for poor families when several of its most pressing objectives were accomplished. One critical achievement was the revision of Wisconsin’s child support guidelines for low-income families. Since 2001, an advisory committee appointed by the State Department of Workforce Development had been charged with the task of reviewing and recommending changes to the current state guidelines on child support. The presence of members of WisCLIF on the committee led committee members to direct attention to the needs of low-income families and the impact of current guidelines on their lives. Revising the standard for these families became one of the priorities of the committee, and after several years of research and effort, a new standard was developed, based largely on a model created by WisCLIF, that will go into effect in January 2004. When the new guidelines are implemented, poor families will benefit from child support orders that more accurately reflect their income and prevent the accumulation of insurmountable debt.

The voice of the CFFPP is critical to national discussions of fatherhood initiatives. CFFPP is an important ally in framing policy considerations for families in poverty and those affected by violence against women. CFFPP approaches its work from a concern for the dignity of families and individuals who will be affected by government policies and practices. Any entity engaged in public policy work would be well advised to emulate the orientation of this organization.

– MARY R. LAUBY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WISCONSIN COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
WisCLIF members have also begun to address Wisconsin policies pertaining to adoption and the termination of parental rights. As in other states, these processes have become more frequent as state child welfare agencies respond to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which accelerated the permanency planning process for children under state care. We are currently in the process of examining this issue within the state by attending legal training clinics on Wisconsin adoption and termination of parental rights law, participating in a legislative task force on adoption, and by gathering information through focus groups in the community with individuals who have been affected by these policies. This project is in its initial stages but will be further developed over the coming years.

In addition to policy advocacy work, WisCLIF provided outreach to grassroots and community groups to enhance their understanding of specific state family policies and their impact on members of the families they serve. For example, in July 2003, together with other members of WisCLIF, we hosted a meeting for neighborhood organizations that serve primarily low-income families in Madison. Representatives from seven organizations were involved, and several participants from community organizations in Milwaukee attended. The meeting was successful in developing a deeper understanding of existing family policy and in forging connections between agencies doing parallel and complementary work. This meeting in turn led to several subsequent meetings involving WisCLIF members and other agencies (such as the United Way of Dane County’s Community Solutions Team) and to additional collaborations, including our youth leadership conference in Madison held in October 2003.

Medicaid Project

In the spring, we initiated a collaborative project to address Wisconsin’s policy that requires unmarried parents to reimburse the government for Medicaid-supported costs related to the birth of a child. In Wisconsin, much of what is collected is taken from households of parents – some unmarried, some subsequently married – who are living together as families and many of whom are struggling to raise their children in poverty. The enforcement of this obligation is a clear hardship on families with no benefit to children. In addition to advocating for families on this issue through our National Legal Assistance Project, we have developed a second project to further evaluate the problem.

Together with ABC for Health (Advocacy and Benefits Counseling for Health), a Wisconsin-based statewide, nonprofit public interest firm dedicated to ensuring health care access for children and families, we are working to create a variety of products that will help families and community-based social service providers understand and negotiate this system. During the current year we have been pursuing this effort through several means, all with the ultimate aim of making this policy and its enforcement understandable and manageable to families.

First, we have conducted a survey of the state agencies that implement the policy, in an attempt to gauge consistency in policy interpretation throughout the state.
and examine variations in practice across counties. In addition we are conducting surveys of public health and social service agencies, to determine whether they confront this issue as they serve clients. Again, one of the purposes of this survey is to gauge whether there is variation in implementation across counties. Finally, we are interviewing several families to determine how they have been affected by implementation of this policy.

Based in part on these surveys and interviews, and on state statutes and policy directives, we have developed a question and answer handbook to assist families in negotiating this process. This handbook follows the model of similar handbooks that we have created through our Legal Assistance Project, with a series of questions that clients or families might ask, each of which is followed by an easily accessible and understandable answer that either fully explains existing law or policy or directs clients to further sources of information or support. The question and answer handbook will be published following a final focus group with representative families to ensure that it is understandable and sufficiently comprehensive. It is expected to be available statewide in early 2004.

While this project currently focuses on Wisconsin policy and practice, we believe that its successful completion in Wisconsin will encourage similar projects in other states. A federal advisory committee on health policy recommended that states cease pursuing reimbursement of Medicaid supported birth costs; it is our belief that this project will help shape national policy and lead to either federal statutory changes or changes at the state level to remove one of the financial burdens on low-income families that detracts from their overall well-being.