Center for Family Policy and Practice

2004 Annual Report

New Name, New Opportunities; Same Purpose and Commitment
Mission
The mission of the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP) is to help 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 seeks to address the unique barriers affecting low-income fathers, including negative public perceptions. Through the provision of technical assistance, policy research, and public education, CFFPP will work to support low-income fathers and their families and develop public awareness of their needs.
Fundamental to this mission are the following principles:

• In order to preserve the well being of children, public policy must preserve the well being of children's parents and caretakers. However, when the needs of a child and the needs of parents conflict, those of the child must prevail.
• Public policy must actively and effectively promote the economic viability of families.
• Public policy must support individuals' efforts to create families of their own choosing.
• Low-income parents need accurate and comprehensive legal information and support to successfully negotiate the social service system.
• Public policy must be created and executed in a manner that ensures that individual family members feel secure and are safe from physical harm.

In summary, CFFPP seeks to foster public policies at every level that promote and contribute to the well being of children, parents, and families.

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Introduction
Since 1995 the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP), has been working to change the way policy makers nationwide think about vulnerable families. Conventional wisdom has it that the interests of noncustodial fathers are inherently at odds with the interests of women and children. Too often, this mindset has resulted in public policy and program management that fails the entire family. Fragile, low-income families find themselves at the mercy of welfare, child support, child custody and health care systems that are often punitive rather than supportive. These systems, for example, frequently incarcerate men with limited education and dim job prospects rather than help them improve their employment options enough to support their kids financially. They require mothers of infants to “earn” their welfare checks through make-work activities rather than help them care for their own babies at home. They prioritize the government’s desire to recover program expenses over the well-being of the very children these programs are supposed to benefit. CFFPP recognizes that these kinds of policies are misguided and counterproductive, and works to prevent and change them through research, public education and technical assistance. We seek to change laws and rules that penalize parents for being poor. We promote policies that support parents’ efforts to stay involved in the lives of their kids. And we protect the rights of parents treated unfairly by agencies ill-equipped to fully address low-income families’ strengths and challenges. Families today come in a variety of configurations, but all members—women, men and children alike—share the same basic needs: economic security, a network of caring friends and relatives, and access to responsive institutions and services. CFFPP advocates for policies and practices that address those needs.

2004 was a year of transition for CFFPP. The most visible change was our name. We closed the book on the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy, and became the Center for Family Policy and Practice, a name we feel better captures what the organization is about. The change does not reflect a change in our focus. We remain committed to the same issues we have been involved in since our inception; however, our new name more accurately conveys our emphasis on the entire family. This is particularly significant considering the changing face of the American family in all its variations.

It was a year of transition in other ways as well. We spent much of our time and energy bringing some projects to their conclusions, and seeking resources for new ones—in other words, tying up loose ends, while simultaneously looking for new strands in which to entangle ourselves.

<table>
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<th>2004 at a glance:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• The CFFPP web site received over 112,000 hits per month</td>
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<td>• The CFFPP policy brief was distributed to over 1,500 recipients monthly</td>
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<td>• CFFPP produced 15 new publications</td>
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<td>• CFFPP represented 56 clients in child support and birth cost recovery cases</td>
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Policy Advocacy

National

On the national level, the Center has continued to be involved in policy advocacy dealing with the reauthorization of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the Federal welfare block grant program. While Congress has delayed reauthorization for a second year, advocacy efforts have continued, as many of the proposed changes to TANF this year would have had serious consequences for families. The Center has been regularly involved in this process, through inclusion in national collaborations directly concerned with advocating for family-supportive policies under TANF. These coalitions have made specific recommendations regarding TANF and are likely to help shape the TANF reauthorization legislation that eventually emerges.

During the past year, Center staff attended and participated in national meetings and conferences addressing TANF and/or specific policies within TANF, and have provided educational information to numerous agencies on these matters. These include such forums as the SmartMarriages Conference, which addressed marriage promotion activities under TANF; the Association for Public Policy and Management, addressing the public policy implications of various TANF measures; the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development, addressing national policy initiatives affecting low-income men; and the Healthy Marriage Initiative in the African American Community, addressing TANF marriage promotion issues in the African American community. In addition, the Center provided advisory information to agencies on matters concerning low-income noncustodial parents in relation to TANF and other policy initiatives, e.g. to the Family Violence Prevention Fund on their work examining the intersections of fatherhood policies, TANF policies, and domestic violence; to the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community, examining how agencies that receive federal access and visitation funding provide services to different constituents and communities nationally; and to the Michigan Healthy Start Initiative on the intersection of child support policies and incarceration.

We continued our work with the Women of Color Initiative of the Ms. Foundation for Women. This initiative is designed to bring the experiences and perspectives of women of color to bear on national and state policy efforts.

In addition, the Center’s national policy briefing reached over 1,500 individuals through subscription. The policy briefing provides information on current policy, legislation, news and research on matters of relevance to low-income families and those advocating with them. An average of 2,759 additional requests to view the policy briefing on the Center’s web site were made each month, with a year’s high of 3,722 requests in March 2004.

State

At the state level, the Center continued to advocate for family-supportive policies through the Wisconsin Coalition for Low-Income Families (WisCLIF), which was founded by the Center in 2000 with several co-sponsoring agencies: the Urban League of Greater Madison, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and the
Institute for Wisconsin’s Future. During the past year, the Center participated in and sponsored activities that addressed a variety of family support matters:

Together with other WisCLIF agencies, the Center helped develop final child support guidelines for the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD). DWD has worked over the past two years to revise the state’s child support guidelines, with particular attention to how they relate to low-income families. The Center has been actively involved in this process since its inception and served on the advisory panel to the Department. During the past year, final guidelines were established and put into effect in January 2004.

The Center became a member agency of Community Shares of Wisconsin (CSW) in 2004. CSW supports progressive community agencies in Wisconsin through an annual workplace giving campaign, and brings member agencies together to share information and address a variety of community issues. Currently, Center staff are involved in a Madison-based campaign to involve community members in supporting low-income families. Our involvement with CSW has led directly to the development of other collaborations with member agencies. For example the Center is developing efforts to examine issues pertaining to incarceration and re-entry in collaboration with the ACLU and other organizations in Madison.

Over the past year, the Center has continued to work with the Urban League of Greater Madison to develop initiatives to assist low-income noncustodial parents within the community, with particular attention to the areas of financial literacy training, incarceration and re-entry, and the development of paid employment training. In developing these ideas, the Center and the Urban League have established relations with the Dane County Workforce Development Board, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, and several local employers and faith organizations who have expressed interest in supporting these efforts.

Over the past two years the Center has been very active in investigating and reporting on the intersection of incarceration and child support in the lives of noncustodial parents. As states increasingly incarcerate parents who are unable to pay child support, and as parents who are incarcerated for others reasons are unable to reduce their child support obligations while in prison, low-income noncustodial parents are finding themselves in increasingly precarious situations. During the past year, the Center has reported on many of these issues both nationally and locally, and has on a local level joined together with other agencies that are addressing issues pertaining to incarceration. In June 2004, the Center hosted a working meeting of the Incarceration Coalition in Madison, and later that month hosted a national forum in Chicago on the intersection of incarceration and child support.

During the past year the Center worked to develop local and state-specific aspects of our child welfare project. At this stage the Center is building relationships with other agencies involved in child welfare issues, and examining the ability of agencies to reach out to noncustodial parents when seeking out-of-home placement for children. The Center works very closely with the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the state’s foremost independent child advocacy agency, and has begun to develop relationships with such agencies as the Children’s Trust Fund, a quasi-state agency involved in child protective services in Wisconsin. In April 2004 the Center
participated in the Governor’s Call to Action Summit on child welfare, at which he unveiled his comprehensive agenda for improving child welfare in the state.

Over the past year and a half the Center has worked closely with ABC for Health on a project addressing Wisconsin’s policy of recovering Medicaid-paid birth costs from unmarried fathers.

In addition to working on the above state and local policies and issues, Center staff have also served on boards of local and state agencies, including the YWCA, the Wisconsin Women’s Network, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, Asha House (a Madison- and Milwaukee-based program serving victims of violence and their families), the Dane County Disproportionate Minority Confinement Project, Dads and Daughters, Inc., and the Children and Family Networks (a project that works to improve outcomes for children of incarcerated parents).

**Technical assistance to community organizations**

During the past year, the Center’s technical assistance efforts have been largely focused on the issues of incarceration and re-entry, and their specific implications for noncustodial parents. While noncustodial parents who are or have been incarcerated face many of the same issues as other current and former prisoners, they also face issues related to their role as noncustodial parents. Specifically, in addition to personal issues of maintaining and re-establishing relationships with their families and children, many of these parents face difficulties in fulfilling their child support obligations. Given the difficulty of finding employment upon release, many noncustodial parents face mounting child support debts, which, if the custodial parent has received TANF services, are frequently owed to the state rather than the custodial parent and child.

Moreover, if a noncustodial parent has a child support order while s/he is incarcerated, it is extremely difficult to have that obligation suspended while the parent is in prison or jail, which causes many parents to have exceptionally high child support arrears accumulate while they are imprisoned. Facing such high debts—sometimes in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars—upon release makes the re-entry process even more difficult, particularly as states have increasingly begun to incarcerate people for nonpayment of child support. Thus, in addition to the pressures of finding employment and establishing stability, parents who face these debts are under constant and continued threat of re-incarceration if they fall behind in their child support payments.

Over the past several years the Center has addressed these issues through its incarceration project. During the past year we have focused on creating materials and informational presentations that can be of use to community programs and others who are serving incarcerated parents and their families. To this end, we developed and hosted a Youth Leadership Roundtable, hosted several forums and developed several publications specifically on child support and incarceration. We also conducted a series of focus groups and wrote a series of reports on issues of incarceration, probation/parole, and noncustodial parents on behalf of DWD.
In Fall 2003 the Center hosted the second in a national series of three meetings sponsored by Aid to Children of Incarcerated Mothers (AIM) and Children and Family Networks (CFN) for youth who have a parent or family member who is or was incarcerated. Center staff attended the second meeting, which was held in New York City in July 2004 and subsequently hosted the October 2004 meeting in Madison. The meeting brought together over 30 youth from around the state and country to discuss issues of importance to them as they contend with the incarceration of a family member. Topics included such issues as how youth can advocate for themselves in a school setting; media representations to youth; how to advocate for changes through the political and policy-making process; and public speaking skills. In addition to the youth participants, the roundtable included representatives from AIM, CFN, Prison Moratorium, Visionary Minds, Inc., Directions For Our Youth, the East Madison Community Center, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the Latino Community Center, the Milwaukee Chapter of Public Ally, the Dane County Job Center, Dane County Human Services, the Learnfare Program of Dane County Human Services, the Office of the Dane County Executive, and staff for U.S. Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin.

The two-day roundtable was extremely successful and led to the development of informal collaborations and regular exchanges among many of the participants and their organizations. Based on this experience the Center created a technical assistance manual on behalf of AIM for community agencies that plan to host a similar event, titled *AIM Manual: Creating a Youth Leadership Roundtable* (David Pate).

The Center conducted a series of focus groups for DWD on the intersection of incarceration and child support and on the needs of former prisoners as they return to different communities in the state. Based on these focus groups, the Center has prepared the following reports for DWD: *Barriers to Successful Re-entry: A Report on Focus Groups in Wisconsin* (Rebecca May); *Barriers to Participation in Programs and Services for Noncustodial Parents* (Rebecca May); and *Recommendations to Encourage Participation of Noncustodial Parents in Programs and Services* (Rebecca May).

The Center also continued to provide technical assistance in a variety of forms to programs throughout the country upon request. Assistance from the Center may entail consultation by phone, attendance at meetings, site visits and trainings, provision of policy analyses, networking of different agencies, or a variety of other measures. A few examples of the kinds of technical assistance Center staff have provided include: (1) attending a forum and providing policy information on fatherhood and TANF policy to the Philadelphia Fatherhood Network; (2) providing information and technical assistance on fatherhood policy and parenting issues to the Marin Foundation in Marin County, CA, which is interested in developing a child welfare initiative that incorporates fathers; (3) providing assistance on issues affecting low-income fathers and fatherhood policy to SPIN-USA, which is developing a father-to-father parenting curriculum to support new parents; and (4) providing assistance on fatherhood issues and policy to the 21st Century Foundation, which is developing an initiative to address concerns of low-income African American men and boys.
In addition to these technical assistance efforts, the Center completed its more general Technical Assistance Publications Series, which is directed at programs serving low-income noncustodial fathers and their families. The titles in this series, which are available both online and directly from the Center, include: *Fatherhood Programs and Domestic Violence* (Marguerite Roulet); *Organizational and Resource Development Lessons for Not-for-Profit Organizations* (Julie Putterman); *Fatherhood Programs and Public Policy* (Jacquelyn Boggess); *Incarceration, Criminal Legal Records, and Employment Barriers* (Marguerite Roulet); and *Child Support Handbook* (Jacquelyn Boggess). The Center agreed to a request by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence to have the publication *Fatherhood Programs and Domestic Violence* included on their web site.

**Incarceration/Child Support Project**

In addition to providing technical assistance to programs on these matters, the Center further examined the intersection of incarceration and child support from a variety of perspectives. While there is some awareness of the significance of this issue among service providers and families, many policy-makers remain unaware of its widespread impact. Over the course of the year, we have conducted a national survey on every state’s statutes regarding criminal nonsupport and have compiled this information in a chart, *Criminal Statutes for Non-Payment of Child Support by State*, which can be accessed on our web site. In addition, we assessed the enforcement of criminal nonsupport laws by examining actual rates of incarceration for nonsupport at the county level, with a focus on different counties in Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. We also explored the impact of these laws on low-income noncustodial parents, by conducting qualitative research and site visits at community-based organizations serving these fathers in Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC.

Over the course of the year, the Center hosted two forums addressing the intersection of incarceration and child support. The first of these, held in June, was directed locally at the Incarceration Coalition, a group of progressive agencies in Madison and Wisconsin that are addressing various aspects of incarceration. The purpose of this meeting was to help define and prioritize common areas of advocacy within state and the community. The second forum was directed at local, state, and national agencies that in some manner address the intersection of child support and incarceration. Participants included representatives from child support agencies, pre- and post-release prison programs for incarcerated parents, prisoner advocacy organizations, and programs serving low-income noncustodial parents. The purpose of the forum was to bring together agencies that have initiated specific measures to address some of the common barriers faced by low-income noncustodial parents who have been incarcerated, and to share information on how one might address these issues on a policy and program level, e.g., through employment assistance programs, policies allowing for the suspension of child support orders during incarceration, prison programs that provide information about and assistance in addressing child support for prisoners, etc..

The Center is producing several publications associated with our work in this area, all of which are intended to educate policy-makers, community programs, their clients, and the general public.
about the severity and extent of this problem and possible policy and program solutions. The publications include

- *The Effects of Child Support and Criminal Justice Systems on Low-Income Noncustodial Parents* (Rebecca May),
- An overview of this issue across the country with a particular focus on how it plays out in specific states including Wisconsin, Michigan, and Missouri, and
- An overview of recommended policy and program options to address the issue.

**National Legal Assistance Project**

The Center’s Legal Assistance Project has continued to provide community-based organizations with services and products designed to help them assist clients with the paternity establishment and child support processes by providing question and answer handbooks and training sessions. In the past year these products have been developed for custodial as well as noncustodial parents. In addition, during the past year the Center developed legal assistance products pertaining to the intersection of child support with incarceration for the state of Georgia and to Medicaid birth cost recovery policies in Wisconsin. Along with developing new products, the Center maintains accessibility to its existing question and answer handbooks for individual states on its web site. Similarly, Center staff continue to provide child support and paternity establishment trainings both in conjunction with the development of new handbooks and upon request. For example, staff provided training to Wisconsin-based community organizations on the state’s new child support guidelines when they went into effect in January 2004.

During the past year Center staff also provided legal representation in 30 cases on paternity and child support matters and 26 cases on Medicaid/birth cost recovery matters in Wisconsin. In 54 other cases staff handled questions from parents seeking information about their legal matters. In addition, staff provided legal assistance at the Dane County Family Law Assistance Center. These cases have helped not only meet the needs of the individuals receiving assistance, but have also informed the Center’s policy efforts in these areas.

**Medicaid/ birth cost recovery project**

Over the past year, the Center has worked to address a Wisconsin policy requiring unmarried parents to reimburse the government for Medicaid supported costs related to the birth of a child. Federal and state laws preclude recovery of birth related costs from mothers who receive Medicaid. However, currently more than half of the states, including Wisconsin, have statutes allowing the state to recover these costs from a child’s father if the parents are not married. 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 poor. While policy changes were put in place over a decade ago to mitigate the burden on low-income families, many inconsistencies remain, and families struggle to both understand and comply with current policy.
Together with ABC for Health, a Wisconsin-based statewide, nonprofit public interest firm dedicated to improving health care access for children and families, the Center created a variety of products to help families and community-based social service providers understand and negotiate this system. First, we 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. We also conducted surveys of public health and social service agencies, to determine how frequently they confront this issue as they serve clients. Finally, we spoke with families to determine how they have been affected by implementation of this policy. In addition, the Center provided legal representation on a pro bono basis to 26 families in Wisconsin in their efforts to appeal decisions. In 24 of the 26 cases, the clients were able to reduce or eliminate the amount they had been ordered to repay. In addition to assisting these families directly, the cases helped inform the products the Center and ABC for Health developed through the project.

Based in part on the surveys and discussions, on state statutes and policy directives, and on information gained through representing families, the Center and ABC for Health developed a report on our findings, Report on Wisconsin’s Medicaid-Supported Birth Cost Recovery Policy (Marguerite Roulet & Michael Rust, of ABC for Health) as well as a question and answer handbook to assist families in negotiating this process, Q and A: Common Questions About Birth Cost Recovery in Wisconsin (Scott Sussman and Michael Rust).

While this project 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 in 2002 recommended that states desist from recuperating 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 a significant financial burden on low-income families.

**Child welfare and permanency planning**
The Center collaborated with the National Resource Center on Foster Care and Permanency Planning during the past year on their work with state child welfare agencies in order to improve outcomes for children involved in protective services programs and foster care. The Resource Center in turn has requested that CFFPP provide assistance to states to improve the process of involving noncustodial fathers in permanency planning when their children are brought into the child welfare system. During the past year Center staff worked with Oklahoma child welfare representatives and made two site visits to Oklahoma to participate in training conferences for state child welfare representatives and to provide information about noncustodial parents and the intersection of fatherhood policies with child welfare policies and practices.

Based on information provided by Center staff, the National Resource Center is planning to develop a national web cast in conjunction with CFFPP for state child welfare agencies on issues pertaining to noncustodial parents and child welfare practices.
On the state level, the Center has worked to develop collaborations with other agencies involved in these issues, including the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families and the Children’s Trust Fund, and is examining Wisconsin’s child welfare agenda under the administration of Gov. Jim Doyle.

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