



## **BARRIERS TO OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT OF NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS**

A Report to the State of Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development  
by  
Rebecca May

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On behalf of the State of Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD), the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy (the Center) conducted two focus groups of noncustodial parents and of practitioners who work with noncustodial parents. DWD staff were interested in gathering information related to the use of employment and training programs by noncustodial parents. Specifically, staff wanted to know: 1) what types of issues prevent noncustodial parents from utilizing programs that are available to them, 2) what noncustodial parents and practitioners think would be useful recruitment strategies, and 3) what program services are most needed. To facilitate the focus groups, DWD contracted with the Center, a national policy organization that provides policy advocacy, technical and legal assistance on behalf of low-income fathers and their families. The Center's Executive Director David Pate facilitated the focus group with noncustodial parents, and Senior Legal Analyst Jacquelyn Boggess facilitated the focus group with practitioners.

There were 13 participants in the noncustodial parent focus group. Each of the participants was a father, and each had children for whom they were nonresident, although many also lived in households with some of their own biological children or with the children of their partners. The discussion remarks made clear that most were struggling financially, although one participant had a very stable and long-term job.

The second focus group was conducted with 10 practitioners from agencies in the Milwaukee area that provide services to noncustodial parents. Agencies represented included Rosalie Manor, La Causa, United Migrant Opportunities Services, the Parenting Network, and the Next Door Foundation. Also present were representatives from the Department of Workforce Development and the State Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards. Both discussions were based on a protocol created by DWD and Center staff.

The current paper summarizes issues raised within the focus groups that seem most relevant in understanding the challenges to recruiting and enrolling noncustodial parents in employment and training programs. A second paper outlines the recommendations of focus group participants for improving recruitment strategies and their sense of the services that are most needed.

The set of issues raised in this report are not purported to be exhaustive, since they derive from a relatively small number of discussion group participants, but the issues raised seem likely to be pertinent for a larger group of low-income noncustodial parents and practitioners who provide services to them.

Among the key barriers described by participants:

- **Disabilities.** Many noncustodial parents cannot take advantage of available services because of a disability. Often the disability rules out many types of employment, but there are few services available. Child support obligations make employment necessary despite the disability.
- **Stress.** The acute financial and emotional stress many noncustodial parents experience prevents those most in need of services from seeking them out, particularly if the

services are associated with government or court systems that play an enforcement role as well.

- **Lack of Paid Training.** If programs offer activities that are difficult to complete, such as unpaid training, participation will be negatively affected.
- **Inhospitable Offices.** Noncustodial parents often feel unwelcome when they seek services from government or community services, and participants described this as being particularly true if the primary focus of services is on custodial parents.
- **Felony Records.** Felony records make job placement difficult, and reduce the prospects of positive outcomes for this group of potential participants, which discourages participation.
- **Staff Attitudes.** Attitudes of staff who make referrals as well as of program staff were cited as deterrents to outreach efforts by both the noncustodial parents and the practitioners. Stereotypes on the part of staff toward noncustodial parents were felt to be common, and to discourage participation in services.
- **Referral Process.** Failure to ensure that a referral process leads to participation in a useful service diminishes the chance to engage clients.

### Outreach Issues

Many of the experiences of focus group participants, and the opinions that they had formed from these experiences, provide insight into what some of the challenges are in recruiting low-income noncustodial parents into programs.

#### Initial Referral Method, Staff Attitudes and Agency Atmosphere

Attitudes of staff who make referrals as well as of program staff were cited as deterrents to outreach efforts by both the noncustodial parents and the practitioners. Some participants had been so frustrated in attempts to follow through on referrals made by state caseworkers<sup>1</sup> that they had developed a sense that there was intent on the part of government officials to prevent noncustodial parents from accessing services. This was in spite of the fact that there were acknowledged to be many existing services in the area. This sense seemed to have derived not from particular actions taken by caseworkers but from the limited action that was taken to ensure that services were adequate and accessible or that the referral had resulted in the client's engagement with the program.

The tendency for caseworkers to refer clients to services by providing a phone number did not always mean that the noncustodial parent could access the service. In fact, being told to 'call a number', then doing so but not getting through to program staff who could help was very frustrating to some participants. This phone call can in fact constitute one of the factors on which the success or failure of outreach and recruitment efforts hinge. As one participant put it,

*I think there's plenty of help out there, but they don't want to give us any...like you gotta keep searching and searching. So until you can finally get the right number, and you get over there and you keep wondering like is this the right time, or are they gonna give me another number to call? And maybe that's how you get frustrated. You like... I'm not gonna deal with it.*

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<sup>1</sup> Casework staff could have been from child support offices, probation and parole, or other state social service programs; the specific program for which the caseworker worked was not always clear in discussions.

Practitioners also felt that program staff may often feel that there are fewer and fewer services available, and so put little effort into referrals. Children First, WIA and Department of Corrections programs for noncustodial parents were some examples given of services that are available, but are often not known by caseworkers.

Other difficulties that were mentioned involved the reception that noncustodial parents get upon entering a program. Both the physical aspects and the staff attitude and intake process were felt to be critical to whether a noncustodial parent would feel comfortable enough to continue with a program.

The physical environment was raised as an issue in that, it was suggested, many programs are focused on services to custodial parents and this is reflected in the materials available upon entering the agency, and in the general decor. This can lead male participants to feel unwelcome. It was also noted that many of the forms available at the reception were targeted to mothers and not fathers.

The attitudes of staff when noncustodial parents approach a program for services were also felt to be critical and often problematic. Attitudes of government caseworkers were mentioned as important as well as the attitudes of staff when a noncustodial father first seeks services from a community program.

Stereotypes on the part of staff toward noncustodial parents were felt to discourage participation in services. Staff were said to often treat fathers as though they were “deadbeats”, not engaging them in a way that promoted trust but simply going through forms in a disinterested manner. As one practitioner noted:

*I have no idea why more social workers aren't taught to smile and make clients relax. You cannot make a client relax if you're very standoffish and ask them questions in a corporate way: name, Social Security, okay, are you adjudicated, you're not adjudicated, leave the area.*

The ability of a program to develop a relationship of trust with noncustodial parents was also felt to be necessary to the program's success in recruiting through word-of-mouth. Both groups raised the issue of the gender of staff. It was generally felt that the prevalence of women in social work positions made it difficult for men to trust a program. Practitioners reported that when men were involved as caseworkers, it seemed to provide an additional level of trust and energy on the part of participants.

Another deterrent to outreach was an incident particular to the Milwaukee area. A local advertising effort for the Welfare-to-Work program led to an outpouring of noncustodial parents applying for services. The eligibility rules in place at the time for Welfare-to-Work were extremely complicated, however, and led to the majority of applicants being determined ineligible for the program. Practitioners felt that this soured many noncustodial parents in the community from responding to subsequent recruitment efforts.

One practitioner described the value of having a regular presence in the neighborhood. Once the connection is made to the community by staff who are seen there often, trust begins to develop and word-of-mouth spreads quickly. Another described his program's efforts to build trust through family outings and raffles.

### History with Government Systems

The fear of going to the courthouse (“downtown”), where most participants had a previous negative experience of some sort, kept many participants who were searching for employment

and training services from pursuing Children First as an option. Most of the focus group participants who were enrolled in a Children First program had been court-ordered into it, and felt that the court was the only means of accessing these services. This may indicate that word-of-mouth, while an important means of recruitment, can also serve to deter clients if the program participants are not well-informed on how to access services. If noncustodial parents feel that the way to access services is to go to court, and they are not made aware through other means that there are services available in the community, then they are not likely to volunteer for programs like Children First.

Practitioners described their need to avoid having their program viewed as a government program in order to gain the trust of clients. Any inkling on the part of some clients that the program was connected to the court system would prevent establishing a good rapport with the client: "I'm not gonna bring a client anywhere near a state building, because he's gonna think, oh, okay, you set me up."

The fear of arrest, most often because of a warrant for nonpayment of child support or the fear of such a warrant, was cited as a deterrent to participation in any formal program at a number of points in both focus groups. One practitioner noted,

*A lot of dads, first of all, are not educated and are scared to use the system in that sense, to find out, 'I know I haven't been paying child support. But I haven't been working, and when I do work, I make six dollars an hour. By the time they take my child support, I just got enough for a bus ticket to make it through the week. I can't even eat.' The system plays a huge role in that, because if they're in contempt, what can they do? They don't want to go to jail.*

### Barriers to Accessing Services

In addition to the perceptions of noncustodial parents that may prevent programs from successfully engaging them in services, and whether or not the services provided were felt to be useful, there were many actual barriers that prevented participation in programs. Most striking was the number of participants who had disabilities and health issues that prevented them from taking part in the labor force. For these noncustodial parents, child support debt has continued to accrue in spite of their condition, making for a particularly frustrating and insurmountable financial situation. One father described his experience of being called into court shortly after surgery following a stroke:

*I was in child support court in March, and I'm sitting up there, I'm like, I honestly couldn't believe it. Here everyone that knows me knows I've just had my wig split open, and I'm trying to recuperate. What am I doing in child support court, especially for a child that spends just as much time with me as she does with her? She has her own room. My child has two homes.*

Felony convictions also constitute a difficult barrier for noncustodial parents to overcome in the search for services that can lead to employment stability. Many participants had been frustrated at the inability to get anywhere with a potential employer after acknowledging a misdemeanor or felony on a job application. Felony convictions for nonpayment of child support were particularly hard for some participants to contend with, since the conviction itself constituted a barrier to employment and the payment of child support.

Some participants had benefited from programs that had helped them to contend with a criminal record and felt that the provision of such services could be a critical component in retaining clients in programs.

### Child Support Practices Can Deter Clients from Program Participation

Child support debt and enforcement practices were the common thread throughout discussions, with participants reiterating that the financial and emotional stress that they were under as a result of these practices kept them from successfully participating in programs that could otherwise have benefited them.

Unpaid training was also raised as an issue with regard to the difficulty of completing training. It was felt that participating in such programs would result in an insurmountable child support debt, unless programs were able to “figure out ways to help us just cut the payments down a little bit, give some kind of leeway or something like that.” Others also recommended that the state suspend child support when a noncustodial parent is court-ordered to Children First so that training could be completed that would lead to decent jobs. As one participant stated, “If the government is going to fund a program and then tell the individual they gotta participate in it or else, then that still ain’t solving the problem, because my child support is steady going up. It should be a paid program. Then that way the state is getting their money for child support. You getting a future - training for career employment.”

Child support debt for children with whom they did not reside was often only one part of the father’s financial obligations to children. Several fathers in the participant group had responsibility for the children of their current partner, which often caused additional hardship in meeting current obligations.

The process of court-ordering noncustodial parents into Children First programs was raised as an issue as well. One participant (other Center focus group participants have independently raised this same issue) described the court process this way: “a representative of the state or someone asked me if I wanted some assistance with finding gainful employment, and I said, sure, why not? I would love to get some assistance with work. Come to find out...I had just left out of the courtroom signing over my rights, mainly saying that if I don’t participate in this program that I just voluntarily asked for the help, then I could face jail time.” This would seem to further erode any trust that the state would like to develop with noncustodial parents in order to encourage their participation in employment and training programs.

### Unstable Employment Creates Additional Challenges

Participants expressed support for the idea that a noncustodial parent with a job should pay child support. But the instability of jobs and of the job market, along with the prevalence in the group of medical disabilities meant that this ideal was difficult to attain. Many expressed a strong desire to have a good, quality job and the willingness to pay child support in that case, but frustration at the inability of the child support system to accommodate fluctuations in employment status, leading to growing debt and more difficulty in affording training programs or low-wage jobs.

Several participants acknowledged working, or knowing others who worked outside of the formal labor market in order to get by. As one father stated,

*I’m starting to see my brothers here fall into that trap. A lot of people they’re forced to do certain things to survive and that. You can say, oh, no, no. But, man, I know brothers been out of work six, seven months. They can’t pay no bills or nothing. I mean, you put me in a position like that... well, I gotta go out here and hustle.*

One participant resorted to working for a “chop shop” in spite of being a skilled and trained mechanic with extensive experience. This came about after he made the mistake of paying child

support informally to the mother of his daughter over a period of time. Because these payments were not formal, he was found guilty of a felony for nonpayment of child support and served time in prison for the offense. Upon release, he found that obtaining employment was not possible with a felony on his record, and yet, his child support debt continued to grow. This led him to feel that working outside of the law, and so out of the formal labor force was his only option. Needless to say, this also kept him from seeking formal employment services from the government or community.

The frustration with gaining access to his child through the court system was also cited by a father as a contributing factor in his working 'underground':

*I don't like doing this stuff. I'm not gonna lie. I don't like doing this. I hate it. But on the other hand, like the gentleman right here, I haven't seen my daughter in a long time. I call downtown - yo - I haven't seen my daughter - they, oh, whatever, good-bye, click.*

It was also expressed that making higher wages is not necessarily helpful if it means, as it did for several fathers, that more child support is deducted with higher wages. While this might be reasonable in many cases, it was nevertheless the perception on the part of these fathers that child support payments did not benefit their family. In many cases, this is borne out by policies that recoup birth costs, tax intercepts and AFDC costs in Wisconsin.

Programs that seek to improve the financial situation of clients would be well-advised to take into careful consideration the stress on low-income fathers brought about by child support enforcement and mounting debt. Even if an increase in wages results in more child support going to their children, the enforcement of child support itself as well as other systemic pressures placed on low-income fathers (such as the criminal justice system and government social service and health systems) can lead to a conclusion that any state action is punitive. This would affect a noncustodial parent's willingness to trust a program operated by the state, particularly if its goal was to increase child support payments.