



The President's Fatherhood, Marriage, and Family Innovation Fund

Introduction

On February 1, President Obama sent the FY 2011 budget request to Congress. Included in the Administration for Children and Families budget was a line item for a "Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Innovation Fund." The administration proposes that this appropriation provide grants to states and multi-state collaborations to partner with agencies and community-based organizations for the provision of services to parents and families.

The President's budget plan is just that, a plan, not proposed or codified legislation. It is a funding proposal to spend \$500 million dollars in FY 2011. And, though it contains a general outline for the use of the funds, it does not strictly dictate the type of services to be provided by future grantees, nor does it advocate for a particular number of grants to be awarded. Unlike the legislative fatherhood proposals in 1998, or the Healthy Marriage and Fatherhood grants in 2005, this plan is not prescriptive. It would allow grantee states to foreground the urgent needs of employment and economic security. At the same time, it also allows grantees to address any and all of the other needs of the communities being served, including healthy relationship support and education, health care, or reentry assistance. Resulting programs might focus on workforce development, fatherhood, healthy relationships or some combination thereof. The central objective of the plan is that the local grantee partnerships use this funding to assess and respond to community needs with innovative (and hopefully, replicable) programming.

Background

Recent congresses and the two previous presidential administrations have included fathers in the social welfare policy conversation, and federal agencies and institutions have supported "fatherhood" and "healthy marriage and relationship" services and programming. Indeed, in the fifteen years since President Clinton's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) plan operationalized the "end of welfare as we know it," the central focus of social welfare policy and practice has adjusted to include men who are fathers. President Clinton and the 104th Congress proposed and seriously discussed fatherhood legislation (though it was never passed by the full Congress), and, ultimately, the TANF law included a mandate to states to redouble efforts to collect child support. The next administration, under President Bush, supported legislation that passed as part of the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act and moved the focus decidedly away from child support toward the encouragement of marriage and the improvement of family relationships, but continued the inclusion of men in the national policy conversation.



The Proposal

The last fifteen years of welfare policy have focused on “personal responsibility” for mothers and “responsible fatherhood” for men. We dedicated many of our resources and energy to teaching and demanding responsibility from low-income parents. However, most adults accept their responsibilities as parents and, perhaps, resources would be better spent supporting parents’ determination to pursue opportunities that may benefit themselves and their children. To this end, the “Fatherhood, Marriage, and Family Innovation Fund” would advance the positive national policy trend toward support for low-income fathers and noncustodial parents. It would concurrently provide an additional source of support and services to custodial parents.

This progressive proposal could institutionalize and fund needed services for low-income parents. To the extent that past policies excluded noncustodial parents from social services and removed custodial parents from the welfare roles, this funding would reverse that trend and allow state-directed partnerships to proactively respond to the needs in their communities. The implementation of the Innovation Fund would encourage and support state agencies and community-based organizations to provide holistic services to low-income families. Ultimately, this funding stream could lead to a fundamental change in national policy that would provide for the delivery of more responsive TANF and non-TANF services for men and women so that they can better provide for their children and make positive contributions to their families and communities.

*Outline of President Obama’s Proposal
(as included in his Budget Request)*

Who will be eligible to apply?

Applicants for Fatherhood, Marriage, and Family Innovation Fund monies can be a single state or a multi-state collaborative in partnership with experienced community-based organizations.

All initiatives will be required to establish meaningful performance goals, such as higher family earnings and improvements in factors that relate to child outcomes, and to measure progress toward those goals.

Programs may include both services designed to promote employment as well as services designed to improve family functioning and parenting skill.

Rigorous evaluation is included as a condition of funding.



The Innovation Fund would create two equal funding streams for:

- I. State-initiated comprehensive responsible fatherhood initiatives
- and
- II. State-initiated comprehensive family self-sufficiency demonstrations

Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives

According to the budget narrative, core elements of “typical” fatherhood programs include:

- co-parenting services and conflict resolution services
- connection to job training and other employment services
- child support enforcement case management
- financial incentives
- earning supplements
- employment preparation services
- training subsidies
- legal services
- substance abuse and mental health treatment
- linkages to domestic violence prevention programs
- linkages to public agencies and community-based providers offering housing assistance
- benefits enrollment

Fatherhood programs receiving Innovation Funds would be required to address issues related to domestic violence and have a plan in place to reduce the risk of domestic violence.

Family Self-Sufficiency Demonstrations

The “Family Innovation” portion of this fund, intended to “address the employment and self-sufficiency needs of custodial parents,” will develop promising new approaches in areas such as:

1. identifying families that have serious barriers to employment, including strategies that use mechanisms of ongoing assessment or that focus on families at risk for involvement in the child welfare system
2. implementing strategies to help families address these barriers and also prepare for employment
3. promoting child well-being in highly disadvantaged families, including child-only cases
4. supporting those with barriers who find jobs so they can sustain employment

Proposed changes to Asset Limits

Establish a \$10,000 national asset limit in considering eligibility for all federally funded means-tested programs serving working-age individuals and their families.

Exclude refundable tax credits for 12 months from consideration when determining if a family is eligible for any federally funded means-tested program with an asset test.