



Leveraging Leadership *and* System Change Innovation for Fatherhood Program Sustainability



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance



**FATHERS
INCORPORATED**

In March 2020—

despite two decades of strong, consistent service to low-income fathers—the FATHER Project faced the prospect of shutting its doors permanently. COVID-19 forced the closing of Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota’s retail stores, program leadership was furloughed, and in-person services were suspended.

One month later, George Floyd was murdered. During the subsequent community uprising, we lost our physical space and all of our equipment and belongings due to fire-related damages. The future of the program was bleak. Since then, we have experienced a 180-degree turnaround and an unexpected path toward opportunity and sustainability.

GOODWILL®

**EASTER
SEALS**

Leveraging Leadership and System Change Innovation for Fatherhood Program Sustainability¹

Andrew Freeberg | Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota
Nigel Vann | Fathers Incorporated

The vastly altered societal context since March 2020 has created an opportunity for responsible fatherhood programs to partner with systems such as child welfare, child support, criminal justice, public assistance, workforce development, and others in innovative ways that could lead to program sustainability in ways that the fatherhood field has not seen before.

In this National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse information brief, Dr. Andrew Freeberg, Director of Family Stability for Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota, draws on his 20 years of experience overseeing the organization’s FATHER Project to provide a case study of leadership, innovation, and sustainability. He also shares strategies that other leaders of fatherhood programs might employ.



¹ Suggested citation: Freeberg, A. & Vann, N. (2022). Leveraging leadership and system change innovation for fatherhood program sustainability. [Information Brief]. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

KEY MESSAGES/TIPS FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATION LEADERS

To be successful and sustainable, fatherhood programs and organization leaders need to:

1. Develop a strong and consistent service model that includes solid partnerships with other community-based services, legislative bodies, and public systems such as child support, criminal justice, public assistance, child welfare, health, and education.
2. Evaluate program services and outcomes routinely and thoroughly.
3. Examine and apply evaluation results to ensure that programs continue to evolve and grow to meet the challenges of changing times and situations.
4. Respond to changing societal contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging calls for systems change to address issues related to equity and justice.
5. Lead systems change by working with funders and public systems to secure resources to embed fatherhood services within all organizations and agencies that seek to strengthen and support families and children.
6. Nurture individual relationships within the agencies you work with—funding decisions are often made by individuals so nurturing these relationships is crucial to securing funds.

There is a new receptivity among human service and workforce agency leaders to intentionally engage and serve dads. Now is the time.

Background

Since 2020, staff at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota's FATHER Project, along with the entire fatherhood field, have wrestled with ways to help fathers deal with the disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on low-income communities of color. At the same time, in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, we added our voice to the growing calls for justice following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent uprisings across the country. FATHER Project leaders became part of emerging conversations about systemic racism and other barriers facing men of color. Amid tragic societal, programmatic, and personal circumstances, we somehow saw a "silver lining" emerge as our community gained a better understanding of the systemic barriers and challenges facing low-income fathers of color. Most importantly, local leaders of public and community-based services and agencies also acknowledged these barriers and started becoming more receptive to innovative solutions. We realized that "now is the time" to advocate for fair, inclusive, and equitable approaches that support men and fathers who must navigate systems with which

their lives are intertwined. These systems include public assistance, child support, criminal justice, child welfare, public health, and education.

During these changing times, public agencies became more "receptive" to the FATHER Project's mission of helping low-income fathers overcome barriers that prevent them from supporting their children both emotionally and economically. Leveraging our solid reputation built on 20 years of consistently delivering quality services and our commitment to continuous program improvement, we developed a diverse funding portfolio that includes multiple contracts for services with city and county human service agencies; support from foundations and private donors; and resources made available through state legislative action. We are actively partnering with several public agencies to serve dads in new and collaborative ways. If successfully implemented and effectively shared, this approach may yield a long-term, sustainable funding model for the FATHER Project.

Overview of the FATHER Project

The FATHER Project started serving dads in 1998 as one of 10 sites in the [Partners for Fragile Families demonstration](#), which aimed to influence systems change; deliver appropriate and effective services across workforce, child support, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) systems; and improve outcomes for parents and children in low-income families.² For the past 20 years, our program model has expanded and contracted, because it relied heavily on federal funding via a series of various demonstration projects for several years at a time. Although several public funding streams support programs for low-income families and children, the elusive nature of state and local funding for father-specific services has had a negative impact on many fatherhood programs during this time. In particular, the lack of consistent funding has resulted in lost opportunities to engage fathers as crucial contributors to strong, healthy families.

Despite the challenge of constantly needing to invest time and energy simply to keep our doors open, the FATHER Project has evolved to successfully serve diverse cultural communities across the Twin Cities area. Although historically we have mainly served African American fathers, our program is not culturally specific; we also serve Southeast Asian, East African, Latino, and Caucasian fathers. In addition, we have successfully shared our program model with partners and replicated the program in rural and other Greater Minnesota locations.³

The FATHER Project began within the city of Minneapolis mayor's office in 1998 and joined Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota in 2004. With Office of Family Assistance (OFA) grants from 2006 to 2010 and then again from 2011 to 2015, the FATHER Project has served thousands of fathers through an extensive network of partners. A return on investment study by the Wilder Foundation in 2010 showed that the FATHER Project produced net economic value to participants, their children, and taxpayers through increased wages, child support payments, and other indirect economic and emotional supports provided to children and families.⁴ In 2011, the FATHER Project was selected as one of four OFA responsible fatherhood grantees to participate in the

Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation. Results of the PACT evaluation were promising, but the lessons learned highlighted areas where fatherhood programs (including the FATHER Project) must increase their focus to achieve intended outcomes. In particular, the evaluation underscored the need to do more to help fathers improve their coparenting relationships, strengthen their social-emotional well-being, attain more in-person contact with their children, and increase their earnings to provide economic support for their children.⁵

Since then, our service model has remained consistent with the FATHER Project's mission, but we are placing more emphasis on addressing the lessons learned from the PACT evaluation and other research projects to increase outcomes and impacts for the fathers and families we serve. Our services are grounded in an intensive, individualized case management model where a dedicated "father advocate" provides coaching and goal setting assistance and connects dads to parenting and employment services, along with guidance for navigating systems-based barriers such as those often posed by child support obligations, family court proceedings, or requirements of probation or parole. At the same time, career navigators provide assessment, employment readiness, and career navigation services. Embedded service partners in arenas such as child support, legal services, and early childhood education help us meet other needs of fathers to the fullest extent.

Our model is highly individualized, based on meeting the needs of each father and using a strengths-based perspective to reinforce their unique and inherent value in the lives of their children. We then help fathers stabilize their lives, overcome challenges, develop parenting and career skills, and meet their responsibilities so that they can contribute to the lives of their children, families, and communities. We design our services based on the circumstances of each individual father, as opposed to starting with a prescriptive set of general services. Utilizing this approach has helped us develop and implement innovative FATHER Project services for more than 20 years throughout Minnesota.

² Martinson et al., 2007.

³ Organizational partners who have successfully replicated the FATHER project with guidance and support from our leadership team include Family Service Rochester; CHI St. Joseph's Health FATHER Project, Park Rapids; and Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota, St. Cloud.

⁴ Diaz and Chase, 2010.

⁵ Avellar et al., 2019.



Innovative Response to the Changing Societal Context

In March 2020—despite two decades of strong, consistent service to low-income fathers—the FATHER Project faced the prospect of shutting its doors permanently. Federal funding had ended in 2017 and subsequent intensive sustainability efforts to secure funding were unsuccessful. Funding opportunities for the FATHER Project appeared to be scarce.

Then, when COVID-19 forced the closing of Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota's retail stores, the backstop of support that had helped the FATHER Project survive many previous "lean" years was gone. Staffing had previously been reduced to two direct service staff due to unsuccessful efforts to secure new, sustainable funding. Soon after the closing of our retail stores, program leadership was furloughed, in-person services were suspended, and plans for ending the program were in progress. The future of the program was bleak.

One month later, George Floyd was murdered. During the subsequent community uprising, we lost our physical space and all of our equipment and belongings due to fire-related damages. This was another seemingly insurmountable blow to the program.

Since then, we have experienced a 180-degree turnaround and an unexpected path toward opportunity and sustainability. Today, the program has secured contracts and grants of just over \$1 million annually for the current fiscal year, staff have been hired to build a service team of 10 full-time positions, services have been re-established virtually and in-person, and partners have been re-engaged.



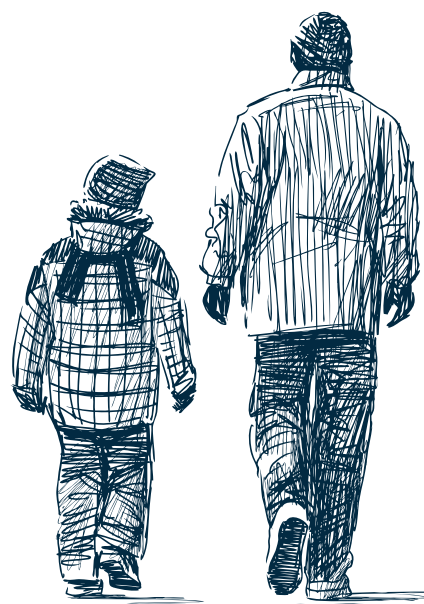
WHAT MADE THIS 180-DEGREE TURNAROUND POSSIBLE?

Having a highly favorable reputation in the community and a proven service delivery model were essential, but these had been steady factors for over 20 years. We believe that the changing societal context, combined with the innovative efforts of a strong internal leadership team, made a critical difference. Here are some of the innovative steps we took:

- ✓ When we approached community stakeholders and decision makers about the prospect of the FATHER Project permanently closing its doors, they were much more receptive to taking action to prevent this than they had been just a few months earlier.
- ✓ We found that they supported and validated the need to engage fathers, particularly men of color, and the need to include fathers more fully within the systems that impact their lives.
- ✓ We proposed innovative ideas for collaboration, integration, and attachment of fatherhood services within multiple public systems, and we asked leaders of local agencies to help make service development possible by providing the necessary funding.
- ✓ We built relationships with new stakeholders and identified “champions” within these systems who were willing to commit resources to integrate the proven, innovative, responsible fatherhood services that the FATHER Project has to offer.
- ✓ None of this would have happened without the persistent, unwavering, expert leadership of Guy Bowling, our Senior Workforce Development Manager.

KEY MESSAGES

- Develop a strong and consistent service model that includes solid partnerships with other community-based services, legislative bodies, and public systems such as child support, criminal justice, public assistance, child welfare, health, and education.
- Respond to changing societal contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging calls for systems change to address issues related to equity and justice.
- Nurture individual relationships within the agencies you work with—funding decisions are often made by individuals so nurturing these relationships is crucial to securing funds.



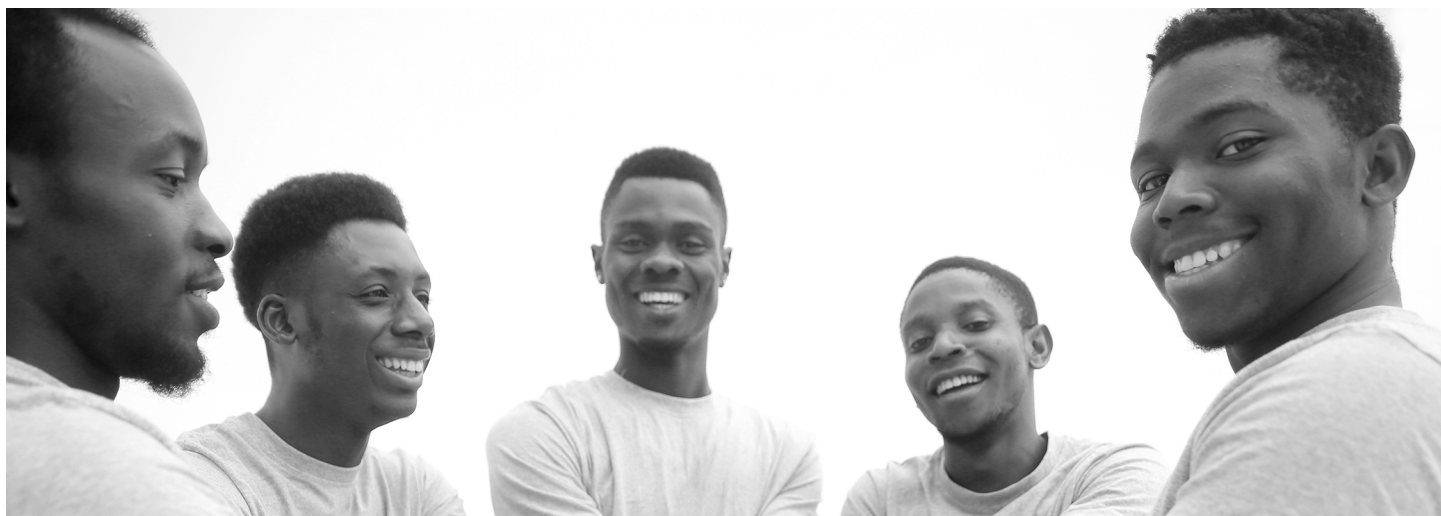


GUY BOWLING:

PROJECT LEADER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Guy Bowling, a 2020 Bush Fellow who earned an M.A. in Public Affairs, understands from personal experience the challenges of parenting without positive role models.

- He has applied his lived experience to policy making, research, and evaluation to implement innovative programming for fathers.
- His lifework has helped transform the lives of hundreds of young, low-income men to become responsible, involved fathers.
- He understands the struggles and barriers these men face in the child support, criminal justice, public assistance, child welfare, and education systems.
- In more than 25 years of leading program development in the field of fatherhood and family support, he has led three federally funded responsible fatherhood initiatives and helped staff incorporate evidence-based, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant practices to ensure that program participants receive the supports they need to succeed.
- His will to foster change has motivated him to implement meaningful, innovative practices that have transformed systems impacting low-income men in the Twin Cities area.
- His leadership has helped these systems work together in collaboration with the FATHER Project to better support the involvement of fathers and increase the economic stability of families.
- He has led the FATHER Project from the brink of extinction to a strong and sustainable program model that can inform the fatherhood field.



Building Collaborative Networks to Maintain Fatherhood Program Sustainability

One of the major challenges that fatherhood programs face is how to consistently connect to reliable and ongoing funding sources. We at the FATHER Project believe that most, if not all, public service systems, have a “stake” in fatherhood, even if they don’t immediately recognize it. Indeed, representatives and leaders from within many public systems have acknowledged the importance of fathers in the lives of their children and families.

However, securing resources to support a true, sustainable “home” for fatherhood services that encourages collaboration between public service agencies and fatherhood programs has often been elusive.⁶ Public service agencies, such as corrections, child support, public health, child welfare, home visiting, Healthy Start, and Head Start, have acknowledged and

made some efforts to involve fathers, but these efforts have often lacked cohesion.⁷ Fatherhood programs that are willing to partner and collaborate deeply with and within these agencies, as the FATHER Project has done, can lay the foundations for a “home” that supports direct services to dads within diverse public systems. This can also create a role for fatherhood programs to deliver training and support for the professionals who provide these public services, facilitate greater interagency collaboration, and ultimately lead to better mutual outcomes for fathers, families, and children. Without these types of collaboration and training for service providers, the fatherhood field may remain fragmented, resources for fatherhood programming will continue to ebb and flow, and families and children will feel an increased impact when services retract.

The long-term challenge of fatherhood programs is financial sustainability

— *“Developing a more diverse source of funding is critical for the field....One study shows that trusted intermediaries can serve as honest brokers between responsible fatherhood programs and state government stakeholders to leverage funds states usually devote to other children, youth, and family services in support of fatherhood programs.”*

— *“In an era of evidence-based and evidence-informed practice, fatherhood programs can no longer expect to receive public or even private support without demonstrating their effectiveness.”*

(Ron Mincy in Fagan & Pearson, 2021, pp. xxiv–xxv)

⁶ Fagan & Pearson, 2021; Klempin & Mincy, 2012.

⁷ National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2021; Bellamy, 2020.

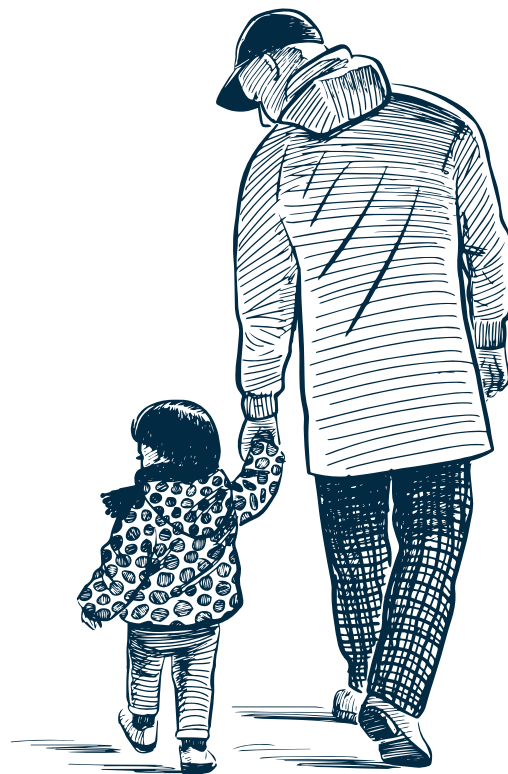


ENSURE SUCCESS BY FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

The FATHER Project has consistently developed, shared, and followed best practices for program development and sustainability that follow widely recognized practices within the fatherhood field.⁸

For example, we have:

- ✓ Embedded our fatherhood program within a large, stable organization that provides infrastructure and support (Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota).
- ✓ Tracked outcomes so we can evaluate the program routinely and apply evaluation results to ongoing continuous improvement.
- ✓ Shared the story of our program and its impact results broadly and widely to cultivate fatherhood “champions” and advocates within our community and among state legislative leaders.
- ✓ Built relationships with leaders of key agencies and service systems.
- ✓ Replicated our program through partnerships in other parts of Minnesota.
- ✓ Developed a diverse team of staff members who are able to help fathers recognize and enhance their personal strengths so they can overcome whatever challenges they face.
- ✓ Worked in close partnership with Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota’s internal team of grant writers and fundraisers to pursue funding opportunities with public agencies and private funders. Most recently, we have engaged with and leveraged support from child welfare programs in Hennepin County and Ramsey County, and from the St. Paul & Minnesota Foundation, the Hearst Foundation, and the Otto Bremer Trust.



KEY MESSAGES

- ☐ Evaluate program services and outcomes routinely and thoroughly.
- ☐ Examine and apply evaluation results to ensure that programs continue to evolve and grow to meet the challenges of changing times and situations.

⁸ For more on promising practices, see Vann, 2021; Fagan & Pearson, 2021; Avellar, 2013; and Bronte-Tinkew, et al., 2007.



WORKING WITH PUBLIC SYSTEMS: TIPS FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAM LEADERS

Fatherhood leaders can help bring innovation to systems that have either overlooked or struggled to effectively involve fathers by:

- ✓ Sharing fatherhood best practices and showing how the integration of these practices into a wide array of service delivery systems can benefit families and children.
- ✓ Helping public service systems evolve so they can focus on the “full family;” be more responsive to, and engaging of, fathers; and ensure that fathers can access their potential to have a positive impact on their children.
- ✓ Providing follow-up to fully support intensive, integrated service collaborations; track outcomes in program evaluations; and share outcomes and learnings broadly and effectively.
- ✓ Being bold and asking public agencies to “put their money where their mouth is.” This may involve asking and encouraging agencies to:
 - Fund direct service contracts with local fatherhood programs.
 - Support and provide funds for internal “father-centric” professional staff who understand the barriers many low-income fathers face, are trained in father-friendly service delivery, and know how to work with community partners to ensure fathers receive needed support services.

KEY MESSAGE

- Lead systems change by working with funders and public systems to secure resources to embed fatherhood services within all organizations and agencies that seek to strengthen and support families and children.



FATHERHOOD PROGRAM STAFF CAN COLLABORATE WITH:

1. Child welfare social workers to find and engage fathers whose families have an open child protection case.
2. Public assistance workers to help fathers navigate public assistance systems and encourage referrals of fathers to the fatherhood program.
3. Child support staff to help fathers navigate paternity, parenting time, order modification, and custody issues.
4. Correctional staff and probation officers to help fathers prepare for their return to their family and community.

It takes holistic thinking, collaboration, and persistence to engage and fully involve dads in family-focused program services. Fathers, families, and children will all benefit if fatherhood programs can develop “win-win” partnerships with public systems that acknowledge fathers as key resources for their children and create system approaches focused on the whole family.

Conclusion

The circumstances and context of our responsible fatherhood work in the Twin Cities area, locally implemented via the FATHER Project, has changed since 2020 in the face of local unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd and, to a lesser extent, systemic and disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances changed the conversation and the willingness of agency leaders, funders, and policy makers to consider new ideas for serving fathers, such as building collaborative networks between the many public “systems” that intersect with the lives of fathers and their families.

The ability of low-income fathers to support the development of their children and help them thrive has been challenged by these changing societal factors. In addition, the changing context has led to different conversations with funders and an increased receptivity that has resulted in new and diverse funding sources, which have helped us chart a new path for the FATHER Project. We believe that this path, with ties to ongoing funding streams and the ability to train professionals working within those streams, can lead to long term sustainability, continued innovation, and positive impacts for fathers, families, and children.

This information brief has shown how the FATHER Project was able to secure funding to sustain fatherhood program services by strategically and opportunistically developing and leveraging community partnerships and innovative funding sources in the face of changing societal contexts. We hope that other fatherhood programs can learn from and apply our key messages related to bringing innovative solutions to mission-aligned community partners, applying lessons learned from program evaluations, having the flexibility to adjust priorities, and developing relationships with public service systems and key individuals within those systems.

Although we have made significant progress in Minnesota, we still need to do more work to coordinate services across multiple systems and funding sources. We must also develop additional, less restrictive funding sources that can support services for all low-income dads, not just those involved with Minnesota’s public assistance program, child welfare agency, or criminal justice system. The work to implement and fulfill these promises has just begun. Stay tuned.



Helpful Resources

NRFC Resources

- [Leadership qualities that lead to engaging and sustainable fatherhood initiatives](#) (Video from 2022 Fatherhood Summit Virtual Event)
- [Program sustainability: Tips from the field](#) (Information Brief, 2019)
- [Keeping the doors open: Sustainability tips for fatherhood programs](#) (Webinar, 2017)

Other Resources

- Center for Public Health Systems Science
 - [Program sustainability assessment tool](#) (2017)
- Fatherhood Research and Practice Network
 - [Policies and programs affecting fathers: A state-by-state report](#) (2021)
- MDRC
 - [Inside, outside, round, and round: Sustaining engagement in responsible fatherhood programs](#) (2020)
- Office of Adolescent Health
 - [Sustaining programs for expectant and parenting teens: Lessons learned from former pregnancy assistance fund grantees](#) (2020)
- Urban Institute
 - [Ten key findings from responsible fatherhood initiatives](#) (2008)



References

Avellar, S., Covington, R., Moore, Q., Patnaik, A., & Wu, A. (2019).

Effects of four responsible fatherhood programs for low-income fathers: Evidence from the Parents and Children Together evaluation. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/effects-four-responsible-fatherhood-programs-low-income-fathers-evidence-parents-and>

Avellar, S. (2013).

Forging effective responsible fatherhood partnerships: A research-to-practice brief. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/forging-effective-responsible-fatherhood-partnerships-research-practice-brief>

Bellamy, J. (2020).

Engaging fathers in home visiting programs. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/engaging-fathers-home-visiting-program

Bronte-Tinkew, J., Carrano, J., Allen, T., Bowie, L., Mbawa, K., & Matthews, G. (2007).

Elements of promising practice for fatherhood programs: Evidence-based research findings on programs for fathers. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/elements-promising-practice-fatherhood-programs-evidence-based-research-findings>

Diaz, J. Y., & Chase, R. (2010).

Return on investment to the FATHER Project. Wilder Research. https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/Goodwill_FatherProject_ROI_10-10.pdf

Fagan, J., & Pearson, J. (eds). (2021).

New research on parenting programs for low-income fathers. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/New-Research-on-Parenting-Programs-for-Low-Income-Fathers/Fagan-Pearson/p/book/9780367363420>

Klempin, S., & Mincy, R. B. (2012).

Tossed on a sea of change: A status update on the responsible fatherhood field. Center for Research on Fathers, Children, and Family Well-Being, Columbia University School of Social Work. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/tossed-sea-change-status-update-responsible-fatherhood-field>

Martinson, K., Nightingale, D. S., Holcomb, P. A., Barnow, B. S., & Trutko, J. (2007).

Partners for Fragile Families demonstration projects: Employment and child support outcomes and trends. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/partners-fragile-families-demonstration-projects-employment-and-child>

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. (2021).

Engaging fathers: Tools and tips to assess the father-friendliness of your organization. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/engaging-fathers-tools-and-tips-assess-father-friendliness-your-organization>

Vann, N. (2021).

Responsible fatherhood toolkit: Resources from the field. (2nd edition). National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/responsible-fatherhood-toolkit-resources-field-2021>

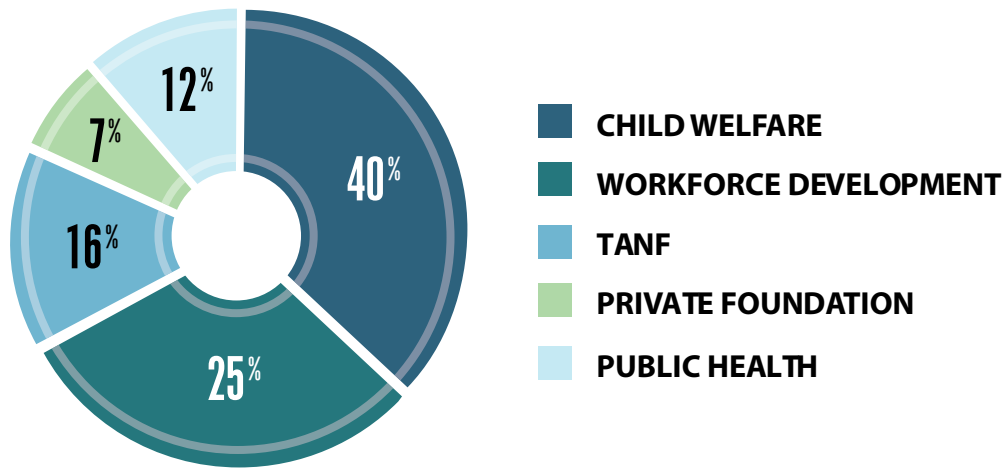


Appendix

FATHER Project Funding Sources and Services Supported

FUNDING SOURCE	AGENCY	FATHER PROJECT SERVICES	PERCENTAGE OF ANNUAL BUDGET
Children and Family Services — Hennepin and Ramsey counties	Child Welfare	Work with agency staff to engage and strengthen fathers as a resource in child protection situations.	40%
Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development	Workforce Development	Work with low-income dads to increase their career skills, place them in full-time jobs, and enhance their economic stability.	25%
Minnesota Family Investment Program — Hennepin and Ramsey counties	TANF	Provide career counseling, parenting support, and public system resource navigation for low-income dads.	16%
Private Foundation Funding	St. Paul Foundation Hearst Foundation Bremer Foundation	Work with fathers in high crime/high poverty areas of East St. Paul, particularly fathers who have been involved in the criminal justice system, to increase their economic and emotional stability and benefit their children.	12%
City of Minneapolis Health Department	Public Health	Work with low-income dads to promote healthy child development and strengthen their parenting and career skills.	7%

FATHER Project Funding Types by Category



This information brief was developed by Andrew Freeberg (Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota) and Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated) with assistance from Guy Bowling (Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota) on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. Dina Israel (MDRC) and Paige Thompson (Urban Institute) reviewed the document and provided helpful feedback and suggestions.

Suggested citation:
Freeberg, A. & Vann, N. (2022). Leveraging leadership and system change innovation for fatherhood program sustainability. [Information Brief]. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

