

executive summary:

by Carlos Romo, May 2004



The Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF) is the only statewide, collaborative demonstration project aimed at increasing the capacity of local organizations to serve “fragile families,” defined by the Ford Foundation as young, low-income never-married parents and their children. Started in 1999 as a partnership between the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and the Center for Public Policy Priorities, TFF brought together more than 30 local, state, and national funders to test promising practices in responsible fatherhood in eleven Texas communities.

After three years of documenting the progress of community organizations participating in the TFF demonstration, Texas’s efforts have provided an in-depth look into one incarnation of the new American family. The TFF experience has demonstrated that fragile families are making significant efforts to be supportive of their young children and that young fathers are responsive to programs that target their needs. However, young families still face significant barriers to becoming healthy two-parent families. Lack of employment, criminal histories, and a general lack of relationship skills are areas where fatherhood programs can help young families. As new service strategies are increasingly debated at state and national forums, TFF’s findings offer guidance for supporting new and existing services that can help fragile families succeed and thrive.

The Texas Fragile Families Model:

TFF started with the Partners for Fragile Families (PFF) model developed by the Ford Foundation and adapted it to fit the Texas landscape. The core program elements—employment assistance, help with paternity and child support, and peer support groups centered on a fatherhood development curriculum—were replicated. But instead of PFF’s network of sites at cities in various states, TFF

wanted to focus on developing strong partnerships between community-based organizations and state agencies for long-term sustainability and lasting policy change. The state TFF staff served as facilitators and intermediaries for the project and coordinated technical assistance and the project evaluation. The direct work with fathers was solely the responsibility of local demonstration programs that responded to a Request for Proposals and whose programs varied according to the particular strengths and needs of the local organizations.

The role of TFF’s intermediary staff evolved over the four years of the initiative. It included educating and recruiting community-based organizations to work with young fathers; enlisting both private foundations and public agencies as funding and planning partners; providing technical assistance to funded programs; and participating in public policy education. The scope of these activities also resulted in the TFF state collaboration serving not only as a technical assistance intermediary between funders and local TFF sites, but also as an advocate between the private and public entities interested in serving low-income fragile families. From this unique intermediary structure, important lessons have been learned regarding funding collaborations and the long-term sustainability of large-scale social initiatives.

The TFF experience has demonstrated that fragile families are making significant efforts to be supportive of their young children and that young fathers are responsive to programs that target their needs.

FREQUENCY THAT TFF FATHERS VISIT CHILDREN



Evaluation Findings:

Young low-income fathers in Texas Fragile Families were involved with their families but faced significant personal barriers to long-term engagement. Sixty-seven percent of TFF fathers were still romantically connected to the mother of their children and more than half of TFF participants were cohabiting with their partners when they enrolled in TFF services. TFF fathers also saw their children regularly and believed that they had significant influence over how their child was being raised. This is consistent with national data on fragile families that show young fathers to be highly involved with their families and contributing significantly to a supportive environment for their children.

Personal Barriers to Involvement:

However, age, ethnicity, criminal history and substance abuse are significant predictors of several outcomes including the frequency with which a father sees his child and the relationships that low-income men have with their partners and babies.

Criminal history is the most significant predictor of outcomes like whether a father is employed in any given month and whether a father and mother have relationship problems. Other significant personal issues include a prevalence of mental health issues including anger and aggression, lack of a high school diploma or GED, and unstable employment. TFF also found that ethnicity is significantly linked with the likelihood that a father marries, spends time with his children, and the likelihood that he had established paternity.

FATHERS WITH THE NUMBER OF FOLLOWING BARRIERS:

No High School Degree Or GED, Criminal History, Substance Abuse Issues, Lack Of Stable Home, Or Lack Of Transportation:

| BARRIERS | % OF FATHERS WITH CORRESPONDING NO. OF BARRIERS | CUMULATIVE % |
|----------|---|--------------|
| 4 | 3% | 3% |
| 3 | 12 | 15 |
| 2 | 34 | 51 |
| 1 | 35 | 84 |
| 0 | 16 | 100 |

Workforce & Child Support:

While low-income fathers request a range of services, help with employment is the number one need of low-income fathers. Three out of four fathers entered TFF programs seeking “help in finding a job.” Despite numerous barriers to steady employment, most low-income fathers are working, even if intermittently. The average wage for TFF fathers was \$7.50 per hour. However, many were working less than 40 hours per week and up to half were unemployed when they sought services from TFF. Under-employment may be the most significant issue among low-income men. Even those fathers working full-time average less than six months in full time work over the last year.

Local community-based organizations that work with families are not experts in workforce development. As a result, TFF organizations depended on local public agencies for help with services like workforce development. Unfortunately, the Texas workforce system is failing young low-income minority men. As a result of federal guidelines and a lack of state leadership in working with fragile families, Texas workforce agencies remain unresponsive to the needs of fragile families.

The Office of Attorney General Child Support Division (OAG) has been the leading innovator in developing programs for low-income child support obligors. TFF created the federally funded Project Bootstrap in conjunction with the OAG to develop financial incentives to encourage TFF fathers to establish paternity and child support orders and participate in job-training activities. Preliminary data indicates that Bootstrap participants were five times more likely to establish child support orders than non-Bootstrap TFF participants and were twice as likely to establish paternity.

While 30 percent of TFF fathers claim to be supporting their families informally, significant obstacles prevent the engagement of low-income fathers in the payment of formal child support. First, many TFF fathers are cohabiting with mothers of children on public assistance, and many do not realize that child support arrearages assigned to the state to recoup the costs of public assistance are building even if the mother is not seeking child support enforcement. Furthermore, lack of a state

child support “pass-through” policy discourages fathers from paying support to their low-income partners. One in four TFF fathers had also been incarcerated, and there is a strong possibility that incarcerated parents fail to modify their orders even when they have little or no income. Last, ethnicity appears to play a role in the likelihood that a father establishes child support, even when controlling for other factors like education and employment. This suggests that child support enforcement may need to do a better job of reaching out to minority communities.

Implications for Marriage:

Marriage and family formation have always been areas of interest for fragile family researchers and practitioners. With new federal marriage proposals on the horizon, it is important to understand how a state marriage initiative might supplement existing fragile families programming. TFF evaluation data suggests two major findings related to marriage.

A somewhat surprising finding is that there are no significant differences between married and unmarried TFF fathers in education levels, criminal and substance abuse histories, or self-reported relationship violence. On the other hand, there are significant differences between married and unmarried fathers’ reports of relationship conflict and married fathers were more likely to “discuss disagreements” with their partners than non-married fathers.

One of TFF’s most important findings related to marriage is that married and unmarried TFF fathers differ significantly with regards to employment. National fragile families research has suggested

As a result of federal guidelines and a lack of state leadership in working with fragile families, Texas workforce agencies remain unresponsive to the needs of fragile families.

that economic stability may be one of the prevailing factors among low-income fragile families' decision to marry. TFF data indicates that married fathers were 1) significantly more likely to be employed in any given month; 2) worked significantly more hours per week; and 3) were paid substantially more per hour than un-married fathers. This data strongly supports the link between the employability of low-income men and their "marriageability."

Promising Practices:

TFF's 11 demonstration projects used a variety of program interventions to help fragile families engage in the social service system in Texas. While the "magic moment" of childbirth is undoubtedly the most critical moment for social service intervention, TFF data from 11 community-based programs show that young fathers and families have a diverse set of characteristics and needs and suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed in addressing all the needs of these families.

Nonetheless, one goal of TFF was to find promising practices for work with young low-income fathers. A critical overarching element for a successful fatherhood program is a qualified program staff. Organizations may need to reach out to non-traditional sources for male and female staff who can serve as role models and work with young minority men. Once an organization has strong staff, a key to keeping staff happy and productive is constant administrative support and flexibility.

Responsible fatherhood organizations must also learn that, no matter what the intended focus of a fragile families organization, employment will always be a need for low-income men. Successful TFF sites were able to navigate the Texas workforce system by developing strategic partners to tap public funding streams like the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). A promising source of funding for training and employment services for young low-income fathers is WIA "out-of-school" youth funding. Many TFF organizations were able to successfully partner with workforce providers for the mutual benefit of both organizations and fathers.

Recruitment and retention are also major challenges for fragile families organizations. Successful recruitment necessitates reaching out to young men through already established contact points like schools, hospitals, mothers and other family members. Since length of program participation was significantly related to outcomes like employment and child support, sites that overcame initial recruitment and retention hurdles tended to be the most successful models for working with fathers. The three most promising models for services to fragile families in the TFF experience were school-focused programs, team parenting programs, and the development of community-based fatherhood programs as employment and child support intermediaries.

School-Based Programs:

The TFF school-focused programs were the most consistent, manageable, and cost-effective sites in the initiative. Younger fathers were more likely to still be connected to the mother, and were more likely to still be living with their own parents, providing critical support for a new father. In-school fathers were also less likely to have serious criminal records, lengthy histories of unemployment or inconsistent work, or a built-up mistrust of authority figures and social service agencies. All of these issues have historically posed serious roadblocks to program success with fathers.

School-based fatherhood programs have the advantage of sharing resources with school services like drop-out prevention and young parenting programs that have similar goals as young fathers' programs.

This data strongly supports the link between the employability of low-income fathers and their "marriageability."

COMPARING MARRIED AND UNMARRIED TFF FATHERS:

| CHARACTERISTICS | MARRIED | UNMARRIED* | SIGNIFICANCE OF DIFFERENCE |
|---|-----------|------------|----------------------------|
| AVERAGE AGE | 20.7 YRS | 22.2 YRS | NS |
| EDUCATION LEVEL | 10.71 YRS | 10.55 YRS | NS |
| ETHNICITY: | | | |
| WHITE | 27% | 73% | |
| HISPANIC | 25% | 75% | |
| BLACK | 13% | 87% | |
| REPLIED "YES" TO SUBSTANCE ABUSE ISSUE | 8% | 11% | NS |
| STATED ISSUE WITH CRIMINAL HISTORY | 32% | 35% | NS |
| PERCENT UNEMPLOYED DURING ANY GIVEN MONTH | 17% | 41% | .0001 |
| AVERAGE HOURS EMPLOYED ANY GIVEN WEEK** | 38 HRS | 34 HRS | .00014 |
| AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE** | \$7.50 | \$7.00 | .014 |
| AVG. CONFLICT SCORE (SCALE OF 0-8)*** | 1.05 | 1.80 | .0008 |
| DISCUSS DISAGREEMENTS (% ANSWERING YES) | 92% | 81% | .002 |
| REPORTS OF VIOLENCE**** | 9% | 8% | NS |

* Unmarried includes divorced or separated for this analysis

** After controlling for education, age and other factors

*** Controlling for ethnicity, criminal history

**** Self-reported partner violence, controlling for criminal history and ethnicity

NS Not significant

Team Parenting Programs:

Young fathers in TFF were more likely to be having their first child and are more willing to seek out help in what to expect as a new dad. Fifty-seven percent of young fathers stated when they entered the program that they were interested in developing parenting skills, and nearly a third were interested in improving their relationship with their partner.

Fragile family programs that can genuinely unite mother and father-focused programs through coordinated services and a true sharing of resources are termed family-centered programs. The goal of these programs is not helping solely a father or a mother, but rather the family as a whole for the ultimate benefit of children. Although certain services may be more appealing to either mothers or fathers, a strong family-centered program will make a range of services family friendly and incorporate the interests of both mothers and fathers.

It is important to note that it takes particularly strong organizational leadership to hold a team parenting program's staff together and coordinate services that are attractive and engaging to all family members. True coordination of mother and father-focused programs into a holistic approach will require significant staff training and management.

Public/Private Community-Based Intermediaries:

A major responsibility of TFF was to encourage TFF sites to develop partnerships with local agencies that would facilitate the delivery of employment and child support services to young low-income fathers. Similar to the recent trend of state agencies using private companies to increase collections among "deadbeat dads," there is also a strong need for child support and workforce offices to contract with non-profit community-based agencies to help increase support among "deadbroke dads."

Local workforce providers and child support units have had trouble reaching out to hard-to-find, out-of-school minority youth and low-income child-support obligors. Community based organizations like TFF sites helped local public agencies meet required performance measures by either directly subcontracting with agencies or establishing a

Memorandum of Understanding to mutually benefit both organizations. Sites that established formal funding links between their organizations and public agencies were particularly successful in helping low-income dads increase employment and child support.

One particular group in need of a new strategic child support and workforce approach may be Black fathers. TFF data suggests that even when controlling for other factors like education and employment, Blacks are less likely than Whites or Hispanics to have established paternity or child support orders. They are also more likely to have conflict with their partners and have a criminal background and are less likely to get married. Examples of possible changes that could help reach out to low-income minority fathers would be greater work with organizations with established roots in minority communities and innovative child support initiatives targeting minority fathers that are currently incarcerated.

Program Outcomes:

The more time participants spent in TFF, the more likely they had positive outcomes. The average TFF participant spent almost six months in TFF activities and as a variable, length of program participation was significantly associated with establishment of child support orders, an increase in father-child interaction, a decrease in conflict with a father's partner, and increases in employment.

TFF succeeded in meeting one immediate need of low-income fathers. Employment rates of TFF fathers jumped significantly in the first three months of program activity and continued an upward trend

Fifty-seven percent of young fathers stated when they entered the program that they were interested in developing parenting skills, and nearly a third were interested in improving their relationship with their partner.

more than one year after joining. Only 50 percent of TFF participants were employed when they entered the program, but nearly 70 percent were employed at six months and almost 80 percent at 12 months.

TFF data also shows an increase in child support orders and paternity establishment the longer a participant was involved in the program. Fathers participating in specially designated Project Bootstrap pilot programs supported by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement were even more likely to establish a child support order and paternity while in TFF.

Conclusion:

TFF has demonstrated that community-based programs will best serve the diverse needs of their clients by seeking strategic public and private partners to help connect young fathers to the various resources available in their communities. The goal should be to engage fathers in their immediate needs like employment while outlining a clear case plan for nurturing their long-term involvement with their families.

While TFF evaluation data shows that clients have improved along various measures through participation in TFF, successful outcomes resulted only after great effort from local pilot sites. One clear conclusion from TFF is the need for greater recognition among policy-makers and public agency officials of the daily struggle that low-income fathers face in efforts to become better, more involved parents. Only when the social service system fully acknowledges the importance of supporting low-income fathers in public assistance

programs will we see significant improvement in the well-being of fragile families and their children.

Recommendations:

Overall, Texas has made significant improvements for work with low-income non-custodial parents over the last five years. In particular, the Office of the Attorney General's new Office of Family and Legal Policy is a significant step toward establishing Texas as a state innovator in fragile families and marriage programming. In contrast, despite the demonstrated needs of employment services among low-income minority fathers, the Texas Workforce Commission has yet to allocate significant state resources for work with fathers.

Clearly, the key to further developing responsible fatherhood programming in Texas will be the engagement of the Texas workforce system. While state and local agencies' hands are somewhat tied by federal guidelines, state legislators can set new priorities, and new federal initiatives offer some flexibility for state agencies to work with fathers. The following recommendations are based on TFF initiative findings regarding the need for a stronger inter-agency strategy for work with this population:

Recommendations For Workforce & Education Policy:

- > Federal workforce guidelines should re-establish eligibility criteria for low-income non-custodial parents and should target young in-school and out-of-school fathers
- > Education administrators should recognize the critical role that school-based parenting programs play in the lives of fragile families and should enhance youth projects targeting fathers in school-based settings to reinforce high school graduation and prevent future barriers to employment
- > Legislators should encourage greater inter-agency cooperation between the OAG Child Support Division and the Texas Workforce Commission
- > Legislators should request that the Texas Workforce Commission use a portion of federal workforce "set-aside" dollars for projects targeting young low-income fathers and child support obligors

Only when the social service system fully acknowledges the importance of supporting low-income fathers in public assistance programs will we see significant improvement in the well-being of fragile families and their children.

Recommendations For Child Support Policy:

- > The OAG Child Support Division should examine the efficacy of using alternative methods for determining default orders, particularly for incarcerated fathers
- > The Child Support Division should explore greater use of non-profit community-based vendors to help with child support enforcement in low-income and minority communities
- > Texas legislators should establish new child support “pass-through” guidelines to encourage more formal child support payments among low-income obligors

Recommendations Related To Marriage Policy:

- > Legislators should help state agencies secure new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds dedicated to healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood demonstration projects and encourage appropriate evaluations of the effectiveness of funded projects
- > State healthy marriage programs should address the “marriageability” of low-income men by directly addressing the employability of low-income fathers
- > Family formation and marriage projects should address personal barriers to responsible fatherhood among low-income men like mental health issues, anger, violence, substance abuse, and under-employment

Practitioner Recommendations:

- > Community based programs should use the necessary resources to find good, qualified staff that can serve both as case managers and role models for low-income minority men
- > Programs will best serve the diverse needs of their clients by seeking strategic partners and collaborators to help them tap into other public and non-public resources available for participants
- > Community based programs specialized in working with low-income minority men can add value to public agencies like child support and workforce agencies that have difficulty serving mandated target populations like low-income child support obligors and out of school youth
- > School-based professionals should work to integrate fathers into existing school-based services targeting parents and at-risk youth
- > Family planning and pre-natal clinics, hospitals, and public assistance programs targeting women must make efforts to involve males in families
- > Working with young fragile families in school-based settings is one of the most effective social service models for recruiting young fathers into parenting programs

The Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF) is a joint project between the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and the Center for Public Policy Priorities. TFF is designed to facilitate the development of social services for young, low-income fathers as they support the emotional, physical, and financial needs of their children. For more information on TFF or the full evaluation report, see www.texasfragilefamilies.org.

The Center, www.cppp.org, is a non-partisan, non-profit policy research organization committed to improving public policies and private practices to better the economic and social conditions and prospects of low- and moderate-income Texans. The Center pursues this goal through independent research, policy analysis and development, public education, and technical assistance.