



Spotlight on Fathers and Families Center

An NRFC team visited the Fathers and Families Center in Indianapolis on April 23 and 24, 2018. The team had the opportunity to talk with program staff, participants, graduates, and community partners. This NRFC Spotlight highlights aspects of the Fathers and Families Center work with fathers that may be of interest to other fatherhood practitioners.



Background

The Fathers and Families Center, initially known as Wishard Health Services' Father Resource Program, began operation in November 1993 as a hospital-based program to address issues associated with "a high single parent birth rate and the invisibility of young fathers, particularly in the African American community." The name changed to "Fathers and Families Resource/Research Center" in 1999 when the Center was recognized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. After moving to a more visible and accessible location in the community in 2003, the name was shortened to the Fathers and Families Center. Wallace McLaughlin, PhD has led the program since that time, as Program Director (1993-99) and President/CEO (1999-present), and the Center

is still affiliated with the hospital, which is now operated by Eskenazi Health. As of November 2018, the Center will have delivered fatherhood program services for 25 years. In that time, more than 15,000 fathers have received assistance to help them and their families move out of poverty and on to self-sufficiency and stability.

Financial Support

Since program inception, the Center has received financial support from a wide array of public and private funding sources. Current support comes from the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Clowes Fund, Employ Indy, United Way of Central Indiana, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Eskenazi Health, Marion County Public Health, and other corporate and individual donations. The Center received two Healthy Marriage grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (2006-11 and 2011-15). They also participated in the *Partners for Fragile Families* demonstration, jointly funded by the Ford Foundation and the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (2000-2003), and *Bringing Back the Dads*, a federally funded project through the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (2007-11).

Service Area

The Center provides services for fathers and their families in Marion County, Indiana.

Demographics

Services are available for all fathers, although the majority of participants come from economically disadvantaged, African-American neighborhoods. More than half of participants have had some prior criminal justice involvement, and many come to the Center looking for assistance with employment, housing, or obtaining a high school diploma. Services were originally established for younger fathers (under the age of 28), but are now available for fathers of all ages.

Staff

The Center employs 18 full-time staff, led by a management team of Wallace McLaughlin PhD (President/CEO), Anna Melodia MS (Director of Operations and Grant Management), Joseph Palus PhD (Director of Programs and Evaluation), LaNita Nixon (Workforce Development Manager), James Melton (Fatherhood Services Manager), and Terrence Harper LCAS, LMHT (Mental Health and Wellness Manager). The team includes three Family Support Services Specialists, an Employment Specialist, a Career Specialist, an Education Specialist, program and administrative support staff, and volunteers who provide expertise for class sessions on a variety of topics.

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Program Philosophy

The Center's slogan *"Building a Noble Legacy of Fatherhood"* was created in 1993 to convey the program's determination to "reconnect a generation of young men with the tradition of responsible fatherhood."

During the program visit, the NRFC team heard several phrases and themes that further reflect the general philosophy of the program. These include:

- *"We build relationships and we show that we care."*
- *"We show respect ... we empathize, we don't patronize."*
- *"We have expectations of what our fathers can achieve, but we are always nonjudgmental about their previous experiences."*
- *"We provide a sanctuary and a space of truth where we help you get back on the path so you can continue to grow."*
- *"We help parents address challenges so they can provide a safe place for their children to grow up."*

Program Overview

The Center offers three main strands of programs for fathers and their families:

- Strong Fathers/Strengthening Families – workshops and counseling focused on parenting, relationship, and co-parenting skills.
- Education – classes and assistance to prepare for High School Equivalency (HSE) exams.
- Workforce Development – job readiness, training, and employment services.

Services are also available for mothers and/or other significant caregivers of participating fathers' children. These services include educational assistance, co-parenting skills classes, and couples counseling. All participants have the opportunity to participate in counseling and consultation sessions with the Mental Health and Wellness Manager.

Story Telling is a new program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Forward Promise initiative. Grounded in oral traditions of storytelling, this two-year project guides boys and young men of color (ages 16-24) through a process of self-discovery and reflection to help them address trauma in order to "heal, grow, and thrive." Fathers may choose to tell their story through poetry, journals, letters, music, and other creative approaches. Counseling and hands-on creative workshop sessions are designed to help them contextualize their experiences, put their feelings into words, and acquire new skills and confidence to craft and share their stories. At the end of each year, a Community Conversation is held as a forum for the men to share their stories and speak to systems change needs in areas such as healthcare and criminal justice.

The Center holds Recognition Ceremonies for HSE graduates, and fathers who have achieved employment goals, to celebrate their accomplishments with peers and family members. At the end of each year, in keeping with a focus on "Serving the Community," program staff, participants, and alumni work together to provide holiday food baskets for needy families.



"We all 'walk the talk' ... we believe in one another ... we all do every job."

Robert Mays
Family Support Services Specialist

Recruitment, Intake and Assessment

Fathers in the community often hear about the Center by word-of-mouth from past participants. Others are referred from partner agencies and some learn about the program through radio commercials, bus ads, or community events. Staff members also provide community workshops and participate in Health and Community Fairs to share information about the Center and the importance of fatherhood.

The Center's website (<http://www.fatherresource.org>) provides an "entry portal" for potential participants where they can review information on program services and, if interested, "Click to Enroll" under a specific area of interest. This takes interested individuals to the program's [intake form](#), which gathers demographic, background, and contact information. After completion and submission of this form, a staff member will review the information, log the application in their Management Information System, and contact the applicant to explain more about the program. Staff report that younger men are very comfortable with online sign-up via their phones and, although they often begin by showing more interest in obtaining employment or educational qualifications, many decide to participate in the Strong Fathers class once they learn about the full range of opportunities.

Orientation sessions are held every Friday. At that time, new participants can begin to work one-on-one with assigned program staff, receive initial counseling and assistance, and be scheduled for the next available classes.

"A lot [of our participants] come here because it's a safe place – their lives are so chaotic, they're looking for support ... they get reenergized here and become more centered."

Anna Melodia
Director of Operations

The Role of Partner Agencies

The Center works with a wide range of community partners to encourage participant referrals and provide services for fathers and other family members. Primary sources of participant referrals include criminal justice systems (criminal, drug, and reentry courts; police, parole), the child support office, and other social service agencies. Other partners for programmatic and referral assistance include schools, faith-based organizations, training certification providers, health centers, and food assistance programs (e.g., Gleaners Food Bank and Second Helpings).

Representatives of various partner agencies, including Indiana Coalition to End Sexual Assault, Minority Health Coalition of Marion County, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Food Nutrition Office, facilitate workshops during the Strong Fathers class. The local workforce investment board, Employ Indy, identifies high demand occupations in Marion County, assists with job placement, and provides information on training certification programs.

The Center maintains a network of more than 70 employers, many of them "felon-friendly," who work closely with program staff to identify job opportunities for fathers and provide on-the-job support as needed. In recognition of the role that these employers provide, the Center hosts an annual Employer Appreciation Breakfast that includes employer awards, presentations by staff, and testimonies from program graduates.



Strong Fathers Classes

The main program component is the 3-week Strong Fathers class, which begins with a focus on parenting and life skills, then weaves in job readiness and relationship skills, and sets the stage for longer term education and training classes designed to increase skills and expand employment opportunities. During the 3-week class, fathers attend sessions every day from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and receive a free lunch, which is provided on site by Second Helpings. To encourage participation, all participants receive a small weekly stipend, along with transportation assistance such as bus passes or gas cards if needed. They can also request financial assistance for barrier removal or other emergencies.

"We help fathers set goals to change the quality of their lives ...we hold them accountable [to those goals] ...if they run into issues, we talk about it and help them deal with it."

John Muhammad
Family Support Services Specialist

During the first two weeks of the class, the focus is on topics such as parenting, manhood, anger management, healthy relationships, and financial management. A popular activity during the first week is the Fatherhood Panel, where program alumni and community elders share their experiences and offer advice. In week three, fathers participate in a range of education, training, and job readiness activities. After completion of the three weeks, depending on qualifications and interests, fathers may move to immediate job search activities or continue to participate in education and training programs.

Some Strong Fathers alumni also serve on the Participant Leadership Council, which provides opportunities to participate as presenters or program ambassadors at community fairs or special events and assist with program planning, recruitment, and fundraising.

Education Services - High School Equivalency (HSE)



The Center employs a full-time Education Specialist to help individuals without a high school diploma study for the HSE exam, which is required in Indiana instead of the General Education Diploma (GED). The day class is dedicated to serving Strong Fathers participants (8:30 a.m. to noon, Monday through Friday); whereas the afternoon class is open to alumni and participants' spouses, partners or girlfriends (Tuesday and Thursday, 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.). The learning is individualized and based on ongoing assessments so that students can work at their own pace.

Through a partnership with a local school district, participants and other community members can take the HSE exam at the Center, which provides an opportunity to take the test in a comfortable and familiar environment. Although the test fee is \$90, there is no cost for Strong Fathers participants.

The Recognition Ceremonies, which are held three times a year, provide an opportunity for successful students to receive their HSE Diplomas in cap and gown. Each ceremony includes dinner for graduates with their families and friends, presentations by staff and board members, and opportunities for graduates and family members to offer their personal reflections.

"Over the last few years, we have seen a significant increase in our students' success rate. We have one of the highest success rates in the county and state."

Victoria Handy ("Miss V")
Education Specialist

Workforce and Career Development

The Center offers comprehensive job assistance to help participants with pre-employment, employment, and post-employment needs. Program services are designed to remove barriers to self-sufficiency (e.g., lack of education, need for job training, addiction, family instability, unreliable transportation) and help at-risk fathers and their families create stable environments that increase their children's life chances.

Pre-employment assistance focuses on preparing participants for a successful job search. Topics covered include resume building, financial management, the do's and don'ts of job search, employer expectations, completing job applications, dressing for success (which can include learning how to tie a tie), communication skills, interview tips, how to answer difficult questions, and mock interviews. Upon completion of the 3-week Strong Fathers class, fathers can participate in skills training provided by local training providers such as Hoosier Occupational Training Services, Health and Science Innovation, Vincennes University, Ivy Tech Community College, and the Indiana Plan (a pre-apprenticeship program). Since the Indianapolis area is a mid-west hub for various warehouse logistics operations, two of the most popular training programs are in the areas of Forklift Operation and Commercial Drivers' Licensing. Other popular training programs include Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC)/Apartment Maintenance, 3-D Printing, and Welding. With a focus on training certifications that address the need for qualified employees in middle-skills job areas, the Center is one of five local non-profit organizations awarded a Community Development Block Grant to implement Employ Indy's ABC initiative to help participants work towards *A Job, a Better Job, a Career*.

The Center's workforce team helps fathers explore their employment expectations and skills, works with a network of more than 70 employers to identify job openings, and provides a weekly Job Club where fathers learn about job openings, receive assistance with online applications, and meet employers for onsite interviews. The team also organizes three onsite Job Fairs with employers each year.

To help fathers retain employment and plan for career advancement, staff also cover issues such as:

- Employer expectations.
- Strategies for climbing the career ladder.
- How to deal with difficult co-workers.
- The value of teamwork.

“Getting a job is the first step, keeping the job to build a solid work history is the foundation of employment.”

LaNita Nixon

Workforce Development Manager

Other Supportive Services



The Center utilizes a holistic, wrap-around system of programs and supportive services. Terrence Harper LCAS, Mental Health and Wellness Manager, conducts mental health assessments for all Strong Fathers participants and provides addiction, individual, and couples counseling. Counseling sessions are provided either in-person or via video sessions, which provides couples with the opportunity to participate from separate locations if they prefer. For those that need more sustained and intensive care, particularly in the areas of addictions or mental health services, the Center provides referrals and follow-up through their network of partner agencies.

Another key program component focuses on “Strengthening Families” through services for the partners, co-parents, spouses, or girlfriends of participants. These services include:

- Woman2Woman (small group workshops).
- Relationship classes for couples.
- Co-parenting counseling support for individual couples.

“Providing couples counseling and drug treatment referrals has helped parents maintain custody of, or reunite with, children in the child welfare system.”

Wallace McLaughlin

President/CEO

There is a clear program focus on long-term support for all participants. Participants also receive assistance with health insurance enrollment, access to an “interview clothes” storeroom and dry goods pantry, help with court advocacy (which can be provided in-person or via written testimony), and referrals for health care, social services, or housing. As Wallace McLaughlin, President and CEO, explains: “Because life can change at any time, we ensure that alumni can continue to access program services as needed. Fathers often return if they lose their job, but we also encourage them to contact us if they want to upgrade their job skills, access counseling, or just need a ‘safe place to fall.’”

In the words of the fathers:

- *“The program shaped my thought processes ... I didn’t have a vision before.”*
- *“They don’t spoon feed you ... they help you find your direction, then you have to take action.”*
- *“This is the first place that ever gave me a chance ... they help you solve all your problems.”*

