



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

National  
Responsible  
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



## NRFC Webinar Series

### *Working with Child Welfare Agencies to Improve Outcomes for Families*

## Transcript

July 19, 2017

**Moderator:**

- Nigel Vann, Product Lead, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

**Presenters:**

- Penny Putnam-Collins, Child Welfare Information Gateway, Fairfax, VA
- Alan-Michael Graves, Director, Project Fatherhood, Children's Institute, Los Angeles, CA
- LaRon Burris, Fathers Engagement Project, Washington State Children's Administration, King County, WA

Male operator: Good day, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Office of Family Assistance National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, "Working with Child Welfare Agencies to Improve Outcomes for Families" webinar. As a reminder, today's conference is being recorded. And at this time, I'd like to turn the floor over to Nigel Vann. Please go ahead, sir.

Nigel Vann: Okay, well thank you very much. And good morning, good afternoon, everybody. We're going to be talking about child welfare today, another one of our webinars that we're providing on a bimonthly basis. And as always, we welcome and encourage your input and participation today, and with any ideas for future webinars. A key thing that we see in this fatherhood work is the importance of developing community partnerships. That can help you get more fathers involved in the program, but it can also ensure that all the necessary support services are available for fathers and their families. And that's certainly true about trying to find ways to work more closely with child welfare.

As pointed out in the announcement for the webinar, although nonresident fathers can be a positive influence and provide a lot of great resources for their kids, they're not always identified or engaged during the child welfare process. So that's one of the things we want to talk about today. Ways that fatherhood programs can work with child welfare to help dads be more aware of how the system works and how we can also ease the job of the child welfare worker.

As you just heard, the webinar is being recorded, so you'll be able to come back to this later. As you see on your screen here, there's a chat box on the left, and I see a few people have already started using that. We certainly welcome that, just introduce each other and share information. If you do have a question for the presenters, we ask that you use the Ask a Question box in the bottom right-hand corner of your screen. And then at the end of the webinar, we'll get to as many of those questions as we can. If we don't answer them all, then we'll ask the presenters to send us some written responses, and we'll post those on the website, along with the slides and the other resources in a few weeks' time.

You can also see on your screen there's a Downloadable Resources section. You can get the presenter bios there. There's a list of helpful resources, and you can also download the slides from today's presentation. And there's an additional one at

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the bottom there with more information from the Child Welfare Information Gateway. And on the left-hand side, there's some Web Links. You'll find there various links for the Clearinghouse and for the organizations of each of the presenters.

I'm just going to begin with a brief overview of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. This is mainly for people who are joining us for the first time. It is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. And we have various resources available for practitioners, fathers, researchers and policymakers.

Here's a quick overview of our contact information. Just come to [fatherhood.gov](http://fatherhood.gov) to see what we've got there. You can email us at [info@fatherhood.gov](mailto:info@fatherhood.gov). I always encourage people to use the help line that you see there, 1-877-4DAD411. Fathers can call that, mothers can call that, practitioners can call that with questions. We have trained mediators on the line. You can help parents talk to each other sometimes. We have people on the line who can refer you to programs in your local area. You can also engage with us via [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

So today in a few minutes, I'm going to give you a brief overview of a section in our toolkit that addresses working with the child welfare system. And then we'll first of all be hearing from Penny Putnam-Collins, who is with the Child Welfare Information Gateway. Penny will be sharing information on how the child welfare system works, some of the barriers that staff are faced with in trying to engage fathers, some of the advantages of fathers being involved, and just some general tips for how fatherhood programs can ease the burden of the child welfare staff sometimes.

And then we'll be hearing from two guys who have been doing some sterling work in their communities to connect fatherhood services to the local child welfare agencies. First of all, we'll hear from Alan-Michael Graves, who's the Director of Project Fatherhood with the Children's Institute in Los Angeles. And then from LaRon Burris, who is with the Fathers Engagement Project in King County and Pierce County, Washington state, working with the Washington state Children's Administration. I'll say a little bit more about each of our presenters when we get there. And as I said, at the end of the webinar, we'll have a Q&A section.

Now I mentioned the helpful resources that you can download from the box at the bottom. I did just want to highlight a few things from that. The first one is a training video that features LaRon Burris. And this was filmed I think about 10 years ago, a bit less than that. It's a training video for professional social workers who are working in child welfare agencies. It's called "Including Fathers."

Then there's a recent podcast series that's available from the Child Welfare Information Gateway. And that features some leaders of fatherhood programs and also a specific partnership in South Carolina between a fatherhood program and the child welfare agency there. So there's some interesting things to hear there.

There's also a video from the Center for the Study of Social Policy that is specifically focusing on young fathers, and a lot of these young fathers who are still actually in foster care themselves when they become fathers, and ways to engage with them. Then the toolkit section that I mentioned that's in our Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit. I certainly encourage all fatherhood practitioners to check out the toolkit if you haven't already. We have all sorts of information in there to help you get programs started, download some activities you can use with the dads. All sorts of useful things in there.

This is just a screenshot of the page that you land at when you come into the toolkit and then click on the Child Welfare section. This is just a sample of some of the top takeaways that we have in there. There's information in the toolkit on how the child welfare system works, some of the barriers that child welfare workers do face, and Penny's going to get into that more. Things like the caseload, the stereotypes that some people may have of fathers. It's not easy always to identify fathers, particularly if they haven't got paternity established. And of course, you've also got to be aware of domestic violence concerns sometimes, so child welfare staff do have to do a thorough assessment of cases.

The toolkit's also got some examples of training that fatherhood programs have provided for their local child welfare agency to help them better understand the fathers and connect to the services that fatherhood programs have. And we've got some program examples in there and some quotes from fatherhood practitioners. And what you're seeing on your screen is just some of the top takeaways that really are going to get repeated here by the presenters, so I'm not going to dwell on those for too much longer. Just a reminder that you can ask questions in the Ask a Question box.

So before I introduce our first presenter, I'm going to ask Enzo in the background here to pull up some poll questions. So we'd just like each of you to respond to this. We're just interested to hear:

- Are you representing a fatherhood program?
- Are you representing a child welfare agency?
- Are you with an organization perhaps that's providing employment or other support services?
- Do you work with families, not fathers specifically?
- Do you work with children, or
- Are you working in some other capacity?

Just check one of these boxes for us, please, so we can let the presenters know who they're talking to. It's one of the challenges of this virtual presentation, that we don't quite get to engage the same way we do when we're in person. But I think you'll find you've got some personable presenters coming up here that are going to connect with you.

It looks like the majority are with fatherhood programs, but we've got a good 10 percent or so of people from child welfare, so that's encouraging. We encourage you to reach out to your local fatherhood programs if you haven't already.

With that, let me introduce Ms. Penny Putnam-Collins, who again is with the Child Welfare Information Gateway. Just move our slides over here. And there you can see Penny. She's been working in the child welfare field for over 28 years, in public and private settings. She began as a frontline caseworker in Georgia, and moved into supervisory positions. She oversaw staff in residence and preadolescent group homes. She worked as part of a statewide implementation team. She's been with the Child Welfare Information Gateway since 2008, where she has various responsibilities. And she has researched and written four reports to Congress. She's very knowledgeable in this field, and you can read more about her by downloading the presenter bios. With that, let me give the time to Penny. Penny, take us away, please.

Penny Putnam-Collins: Okay, great. Good afternoon, everyone. I will begin by saying that Child Welfare Information Gateway is headquartered in Fairfax, Virginia, with ICF. However, I actually live in Georgia still. I live in Cartersville, Georgia. I noticed that we had a gentleman from Chattanooga, so we're almost neighbors. Also saw we have a couple of folks from Georgia, from the university, as well as a program in Atlanta.

So I just want to get started. I have a lot that I want to say about Child Welfare Information Gateway, but what I'm going to do instead is, I want to make sure that you have an opportunity to see—this is the landing page of our website. So Child Welfare Information Gateway is a service of the Federal Children's Bureau. The Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act actually established the clearinghouse of information on all things child welfare in the '70s.

There is a link under Web Links, so instead of me spending a lot time talking about the website, I would just ask that you visit. And know that it is a free service. The information is free to access. You can download, you can print the information. You can order it from us, and we can send you free copies. Just to know that it's there, because it has a lot of really good resources for families that you work with, including a number resources for fathers and paternal family members.

So with that said, I'm going to move on in. I just want to talk a little bit about the goals of child welfare. I've worked in child welfare. I started in 1989 as an intern, and I stayed, and I became a caseworker. And of course, I've seen it evolve over the years, and I've seen the bad, and I've seen the good. So when I say that these are the goals of child welfare, I know they

don't always happen, unfortunately. I also know that when I started, that we didn't always work real well with fathers, and unfortunately I know that we still don't. "We" meaning the system itself.

So the child welfare system is a group of services that are designed to promote and improve the well-being of children and their families. We do this by ensuring safety and by achieving permanency for children, and strengthening families to care for their children successfully.

Now, any of you that have had an opportunity to work within the child welfare system, to observe the child welfare system, or perhaps even be served by the child welfare system, know that it is an incredibly complex system. One of the resources that is included under Downloadable Resources is a list from the Child Welfare Information Gateway. One of the publications that I included in that is how the child welfare system works.

So I'm going to give a brief overview, but I would suggest if you have a lot of questions that you take a look at that. On the last page of that, there's actually a graphic that is like a decision tree almost that you can look at and see how it works.

Starting off, most families first become involved with their local child welfare system because of a report of suspected child abuse and neglect. Sometimes states refer to this as *child maltreatment*. Child maltreatment is defined by the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act as "serious harm." So that can be neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect. And this can be caused by the parents or primary caregivers, such as extended family members or babysitters.

Each state has its own laws that define abuse and neglect for the purposes of—and also it has laws about who is mandated to report this information. We know that in recent years, but especially after everything that happened in Pennsylvania a few years ago, that some states now require anyone who suspects child abuse or neglect to report child abuse and neglect. If not, it's punishable by law. However, some states just have professionals that are required by law to report.

With that said, the majority of the reports that are received by child welfare agencies are actually reported by mandated reporters, or in some states they're called *mandatory* reporters. These reports are generally received by Child Protective Service workers, and they're either *screened in* or *screened out*. A report is screened in when there is sufficient information to suggest an investigation is warranted. A report may be screened out if there is not enough information on which to follow up, or if the situation reported does not meet the state's legal definition of abuse or neglect. In these instances, the worker who receives the report may refer the person reporting the incident to another community service or to law enforcement for additional help.

When a report is screened in, CPS workers, who are often called investigators or assessment workers, respond within a particular time period, which may be anywhere from a few hours to a few days, depending on the type of maltreatment that's alleged, the severity of the situation, the age of the child and requirements under the law. During the investigative process, they may speak with the parents and other people in contact with the child, such as doctors, teachers, child care providers. And they also speak with the child, alone or in the presence of the caregivers, of course depending on that child's age and level of risk. Children who are believed to be in immediate danger may be moved to a shelter, a foster home, or a relative's home during investigation and while court proceedings are pending. An investigator also engages the family in looking at assessing the strengths and needs, as well as initiating connections to community resources and services.

At the end of the investigation, CPS workers typically make one of two findings: *unsubstantiated*, *unfounded*—at one point we actually called it unconfirmed—or *substantiated* or *founded*. Different states, unfortunately, looking at it from a federal standpoint, all have different ways to say this. When it's substantiated, it means that there's a high likelihood that the maltreatment occurred. And if it's unsubstantiated, it means that it's insufficient evidence for the worker to conclude that a child was abused or neglected.

If, say, a child is considered to have been abused, the child welfare agency may, depending on a risk level, initiate a court action if it determines that the authority of the juvenile court is necessary to keep the child safe. To protect the child, the

court can actually issue temporary orders, placing the child in shelter care during the investigation, ordering services or ordering certain individuals to have no contact with the child.

Unfortunately, at this point we don't have a lot of time to go through the entire court process and what it looks like. But we actually do have resources on the Child Welfare Information Gateway that can describe child welfare and the court system.

If a child has been abused or neglected and the case is substantiated, the course of action depends on:

- the state policy;
- the severity of the abuse;
- an assessment of the child's immediate risk;
- the risk of continued or future maltreatment;
- the services available to address the family's needs; and
- whether or not the child was removed from the home.

When we're looking at risk, we're trying to make determinations. If it's substantiated and it's looking at low risk, a lot of times the case will be closed, with community services put into place. If it's low to moderate risk, the family may be referred for voluntary in-home services with the Child Protective Service agency. If it's moderate to high risk, the family may again be offered voluntary in-home services to address safety concerns and help reduce the risk. If these are refused, the agency may seek intervention by the juvenile court. Once a judicial determination that abuse or neglect has occurred, the juvenile dependency court may require the family to cooperate with in-home services.

In cases where a child has been seriously harmed, and it's considered to be at high risk, or if the child's safety is threatened, the court may order the child's removal from the home. The child may be placed in foster care or with a relative.

If a child goes into foster care at that point, the agency begins to look at the *permanency plan* for the child. A permanency plan for the child is generally at the beginning of the case—it's going to be reunification. And what the child welfare agency does at that point is works with the family to try to improve the situation and put the child back in the home. Family reunification is the first permanency plan. A federal law requires—

Nigel Vann: Penny, if I can just interrupt. I'm sorry, but you are getting a bit tight on your time. If you could just—

Penny Putnam-Collins: Right.

Nigel Vann: —perhaps move to your next slides where you talk more about the fathers.

Penny Putnam-Collins: Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Sorry about that.

So let's talk a little bit about fathers. Each year, hundreds of thousands of children become involved with the Child Protective Services. Although many of these children are living with both parents, some are just living with one parent. Frequently, this is going to be the mother, the mother's partner, or other relatives, but not their father. Through some studies, what has been found is that children who have contact with their noncustodial parent—in this case we're looking specifically at fathers—in the last year are 46 percent less likely to enter foster care.

Higher levels of involvement with nonresident fathers substantially decreases the likelihood of recurring maltreatment allegations. Involvement by nonresident fathers is associated with more reunifications and fewer adoptions, which I just think is an incredible—just really great information. So highly involved, nonresident fathers' children exit foster care faster. What's really interesting about this is that a study conducted by Annie E. Casey and a North Carolina county child welfare agency found that when the cases with father involvement were compared with cases that did not have fathers involved,

the children's length of stay in foster care decreased by more than one-half. It went from 12 months for involved fathers versus 26 months for uninvolved fathers.

In addition, a significant relationship was also found between father's compliance with the case plan and where children lived when they were discharged from foster care. The study also showed that 37 percent of the children who exited foster care when their fathers were involved were reunited with one or both parents.

In some of the research that I reviewed, using a qualitative research design, interviewed fathers about what influenced their involvement, or lack thereof, with a child welfare agency. It was real interesting because there were ten themes that emerged from these interviews.

Some of the perceived factors that inhibited their involvement was the caseworker's negativity towards them. And the caseworker was actually dismissive towards the father or ignored or did not value the father's presence. There was also a lack of understanding about the father and how he disciplined the children. And child welfare's unfair policies and practices, which included, unfortunately, not engaging the father throughout the process. There was also the father's negativity about working with the child welfare agency. And of course, there was economic difficulties, criminal histories, and the social workers visit too often. They felt like they were too involved. And then also the stereotypes of black men.

So factors that facilitated fathers' involvement, and I thought that these were really good—and of course, I don't think that this just pertains to fathers—I think that it is true for mothers also—is the fact that looking at the social worker's helping skills, their understanding, their compassion. They were open and honest about what was expected and how to get it done. They weren't just telling the families that they needed to do it. They were actually showing them or providing resources. They were available to meet with the fathers to answer the questions.

And the case plan goals are realistic and appropriate. They were based on why the family was involved with the child welfare agency. They also had confidence in the fathers as parents. And another interesting factor that really stood out to me was the paternal grandmothers were actually involved, and that facilitated more of the father's involvement.

So I am running out of time. I do want to say that in looking at the next slide, that the Adoption and Safe Families Act, Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions, those have facilitated with the requirement or the processes for child welfare agencies to engage fathers more frequently and on a more systemic basis. Unfortunately, what we have found on the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) is that states still are not engaging fathers like they should.

Finally, looking at working together at a more of a system level. Working with your child welfare agency is letting the child welfare agency know that you're there. Reaching out to them, letting them know the services that you provide. And making a plan to work together. And also to encourage child welfare staff to refer fathers to the fatherhood program. At the practice level, fatherhood programs can help fathers better understand how the child welfare system works. They can partner to use programs as service providers. Families are required to have a case plan. You can put in a step in the case plan—or, well the child welfare agencies can—to have fathers work with the fatherhood programs. Fatherhood programs also can provide parenting knowledge and appropriate services to the fathers.

I do want to show one thing. This is just a little bit of information about Child Welfare Information Gateway. I wanted to draw your attention to our Family Engagement Inventory. The link is included in the Downloadable Resources that is included here on the screen. This is the Family Engagement Inventory, and it actually looks at engaging parents and families across five disciplines. I notice that we have a couple of early education providers, so we have resources on the website for engaging fathers for those programs, as well as education and child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health.

Like I said at the beginning, I have a tendency to have too much information, so I apologize for that. With that, Nigel.

Nigel Vann: Okay. Well thank you very much—

Penny Putnam-Collins: Sorry about that.

Nigel Vann: Yeah. You can see those references there from Penny as well. Those are ones she specifically drew on to talk about the information about what facilitates father involvement and how dads can make a difference. So there's some good stuff there, and then also in that other resource that she's got that's downloadable. We'll be coming back to you, Penny, so there's time to say anything else that you didn't get to say, don't worry.

But now I'm going to move this slide over so you can see Alan-Michael, who is going to tell you what's going on in Project Fatherhood and the Children's Institute in Los Angeles. The Children's Institute is one of the few—they've been a recipient of the Responsible Fatherhood Grant from Office of Family Assistance, I think since 2006, right Alan-Michael? They're one of the few that—

Alan-Michael Graves: Correct.

Nigel Vann: They're one of the few organizations that has been funded for three funding cycles now, so that speaks very highly to the work they're doing there in the Los Angeles area. I have had the pleasure of going out there and seeing firsthand some of the work they've been doing. Alan-Michael and I were on a webinar together just a few weeks ago for the Center for the Study of Social Policy, where we were talking mainly to child welfare staff, and he shared some of the work they've been doing there. That was why I asked him to come and join us here and tell that story again with a slightly different slant to the fatherhood audience as well.

As you'll see in Alan-Michael's bio, he has a real focus on engaging fathers to utilize effective strategies to significantly and positively impact the lives of their children. That is a passion of Alan-Michael, and that's what we see so much in this fatherhood field. I know there's a lot of people on the line who share that passion. So let me give the time to Alan-Michael.

Alan-Michael Graves: Thank you so much, Nigel. Good afternoon, everybody. I'll start off by saying one of the things that I constantly remind myself and our staff. That the work we do, although we talk about fathers and male involvement and outcomes—the main focus that I'll say at the beginning, and you'll hear me repeat it at the end, is that this is about the kids. We believe that father absence is considered one of the major social problems in our society today. And that until we bring men and fathers back into the equation and back into the families and back into our communities, a lot of this work isn't as positive as it could be.

With that said, in addition to working with fathers to improve their parenting skills, we think it's extremely important, if not essential, to develop strong, effective partnerships with not only child welfare agencies, but partners of child welfare agencies, to improve the outcomes of these families.

Children's Institute has been around for about 110 years, treating families affected by trauma. But like a lot of other organizations, when we say "family" we really mean mother and child. In 1996, Project Fatherhood was born to really address including father in the equation. Not to negate moms, but specifically to make sure that Dad's part of the equation.

So developing strong and effective partnerships has been one of the goals of our program, outside of our federal grant, for about the last five years. We know that fathers can no longer be ignored as it pertains to child welfare because, similar to the reasons that Penny stated before, we know that the outcomes are better when fathers are involved. So regardless of whether they live in the house with the kids or not, it's important to examine how father-child relationships, as well as mother-child relationships, influence a child's outcome.

Just a quick overview of Project Fatherhood. We've been working with fathers prior to the grant funding, and it's interesting that our goals of the program kind of mirror that of, have always mirrored that of the federal grant, which is surrounded around providing fathers with responsible parenting tools. "Healthy relationships," we call them. Not everybody's married, but under Healthy Marriage. And then economic stability with work. You'll see some of the services that are provided

through the program. And you can take a look at those, but I really want to focus on the relationship part of the presentation.

I want to talk about what we know. Children, when involved and engaged with fathers, tend to have more positive outcomes, physically, cognitively, and also socially and emotionally. All the research indicates that a father, no matter how much he's involved, again whether in or out of the house, those outcomes increase. And when children become involved in [the] child welfare system, involving their mothers and fathers often resulted in a greater chance of returning home, fewer placements, and reduced trauma from separation anxiety.

Penny listed again some of those factors that contribute to the challenges we have with child welfare. But through our research, we know that there's four main areas, reasons why fathers are not involved. Poor self-esteem, self-explanatory. Almost every guy that I've encountered, there's some type of intergenerational factor as to why he's not involved. You'll hear a guy, and excuse my language, say, you know, "my dad wasn't [expletive], my granddad wasn't [expletive], and I'm probably not going to be." So generationally, there's a factor. Stress. But the one I want to focus on today is social and psychological isolation.

Which leads to our partnership with the Department of Family and Children Services in Los Angeles. We know that it is easier for social workers and a lot of systems in general to operate if they don't deal with Dad. I've met and encountered social workers who say, "I can decrease my caseload a lot easier if I just say I don't know where Dad is." That, on top of a lack of education on how to engage with men, were the main two factors that we identified when we began the work.

But we knew we wanted to create a positive relationship because there has been some friction between fatherhood programs and child welfare agencies and fatherhood programs and DV agencies. So we wanted to make sure that it was very positive. So we started by creating a network. And anybody and everybody who was interested, and/or believed that father involvement was a positive indicator for outcomes of kids, joined this network in Los Angeles called the Los Angeles Fatherhood Network Group.

And so we met, probably over a six-month period, kind of [to] determine what were some of the areas that we would like to address. And what we found is that we really didn't know. Everybody could hypothesize about what some of the problems were with the social workers, and what the problems were in one area or not. But we decided to create a positive and engaging survey for the social workers within the Department of Children and Family Services. And we interviewed about, and conducted surveys for about 214 workers. And our results kind of showed what we knew already, but it put the social workers on the offensive [as] opposed to defense.

I'll explain that through the results. So 75 percent of workers that we surveyed felt that they needed more training on engaging fathers. They went through social work school, they graduated from the academy at DCFS, never having had a class or an official training on male engagement. And several would say, "the first time I encountered a male, specifically a man of color, when he was standing in front of me very upset because we had detained his child." And so they acknowledged that it really needed more training.

Fifty-six percent of them felt that the policies were unclear as it pertained to fathers. And so they really didn't have a guideline to go by in working with fathers. But of that, 58 percent of the workers felt that DCF policies were not clear on how to get the fathers involved. Again, that was a training opportunity for us. And lastly, 84 percent of the workers agreed that fathers were a good alternative resource to placing the child in foster care. Again, giving them a positive place to stand firm, as opposed to what's usually done when talking about fatherhood and DCFS, which is negative.

So we got that information, and so we knew where we were with social workers. So we wanted to engage the fathers that were involved in child welfare. So we surveyed about 240 of those. And you'll see the same thing, some very clear results. Seventy percent of the fathers felt that the child welfare system didn't value them as a parent. Fifty-six percent of the fathers reported that social workers did not visit them on a regular basis. And those numbers were extremely higher when

you talk about incarcerated fathers, which wasn't included in this presentation, but I just wanted to make sure that that was out there. Thirty-two percent of the fathers felt that social workers were not comfortable talking to them. So this goes back to what the social workers said about the same thing, "we haven't been exposed or we haven't been introduced to working with men."

Forty-seven percent of fathers felt that social workers didn't understand their story. And then 62 percent of the fathers felt involved in the process of getting their children back. Lastly, 44 percent of fathers felt that social workers were helpful in making sure that they visited their child, if engaged properly.

From that, the big takeaway from both of those surveys was that there was some work [that] needs to be done on both sides. And we started with the professionals. Not only did we train social workers, but through that network we trained individuals that were influenced by the social workers. So we trained doctors that worked with DCFS. We [indiscernible] teachers for their professional development through the Los Angeles Unified School District. The judges and lawyers in our dependency courts. Our child support staff, social workers, therapists and other employees.

Again, not making it that you're not doing anything wrong, but we realize that this hasn't been an area that you have been exposed to in the past, and people were very, very receptive. And then the social workers from DCFS became our partners in these trainings to outside agencies as well.

Some of the lessons we learned in that is that it's key to have strong male leadership. Not that women can't do it, but using men to market, recruit, and facilitate programming in both the fatherhood programs, as well as DCFS, was key. It was extremely helpful to find female champions within child welfare. That's kind of where I would say that Project Fatherhood and Children's Institute really shined. We found about four or five, and not just social workers, but administrators in child welfare, who may not have really got it initially, but through the training really got how important it was to engage fathers. And so not only were they advocating for their subordinates under them to make sure that they included, they also helped us change policy within the department to their superiors.

Our respective culture of the men involved. This was demographic age, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity. We had, in our partnership with DCFS, allowed fathers to be included and families to be included in telling the story. You hear this story all the time where people say, "oh I don't know where their dad is." But if you listen to the story of the family and have them tell it, sometimes the children were able to say where my father was, if the worker or the department asks the right questions.

We found it very helpful to allow the fathers to spend time celebrating success, reunifications, and including the department in those reunifications. Often in our groups, when a father is reunified with his family or he increases visitation, we invite the social worker to celebrate with us. And it improved the relationship between the worker and the father.

Stay professional, but be unapologetic about fatherhood work. This was very important for us. We wanted to again make sure that we maintained a positive relationship with them, but we really wanted it to be known that this was intentional. All of this work was intentional. And again, not because we're father advocates or male advocates, but like the last one says, that we wanted to make sure that we kept the focus on the kids. And this was about doing what was best and increasing outcomes for kids themselves.

I ran through that very, very quick. And Nigel, I don't even know how much time I have left. I wasn't timing myself.

Nigel Vann: You still got a couple of minutes, Alan-Michael. I actually—

Alan-Michael Graves: Okay.

Nigel Vann: I was going to ask you one thing, if you could perhaps expand a little bit on. You had talked about one way that you got started with reaching out to child welfare was just forming the wider network organization in Los Angeles. What kind of organizations were involved in that network? Can you just speak to that briefly?

Alan-Michael Graves: Absolutely. So again, we went back to anybody that the child welfare department, as well as our community-based organizations, dealt with. We invited child support to the table, members of the Los Angeles Unified School District, Cedars-Sinai and Kaiser hospital is part of our network. The goal originally was that if we identified areas that needed improvement, we wanted to go to those areas strong in numbers. An example that I use quite frequently, if we go to the mayor and talk about policies about father engagement that we want to see changed, it's a little different saying, "Oh Children's Institute wants to see this," than "We have 45 large agencies, plus all of these departments and services that are interested in this change." And so our response was a lot different with the fatherhood network in engaging people from all walks of life.

Nigel Vann: I just think that whole networking thing is so powerful. It just speaks to the value of these partnerships. And we've been seeing that in a few places around the country. We were in Dallas just a couple of weeks ago, and they're trying to build some networks there as well. I was also taken by the fact that you talked about if you include families, then children may know where the father is. I just watched a movie about John Lennon last night, and I hadn't realized. I knew he didn't have his dad involved, but he was actually raised by an aunt who didn't know that he was in contact with his mother. Kids are in touch with their parents more than we may realize sometimes. I think he wasn't living with his mother. John wasn't.

So anyway, thanks very much, Alan-Michael. We'll come back to you with some questions.

Alan-Michael Graves: Okay.

Nigel Vann: Again, encourage everybody to submit your questions in the Ask a Question box. Any questions for Penny or Alan-Michael. And you're going to hear from LaRon in just a minute. But first we're going to have our next poll question, if we can bring that up, Enzo. We're just interested to know how many people on the line are already involved in some kind of partnership work between a fatherhood program and child welfare. You see the responses there. You can check as many of those as apply to your situation.

So if you're a fatherhood program, have you provided training for child welfare staff, like Alan-Michael was talking about? Does the child welfare agency send you referrals? Are you working together in other ways? Or have you just started conversations or are hoping to start conversations?

We'll just give you a bit longer to respond to that. [Pause] It looks like more than a third of you have got something going on in one way or another. And a lot of people trying to get that conversation started or have begun. So it's encouraging stuff. So hopefully there will be some helpful things to kickstart a few more conversations. We've now gone up to—well, I can't add those numbers, so I'm not going to say that yet.

Okay. Well thank you very much. So now, let me bring up our final speaker. And this is Mr. LaRon Burris from the Fathers Engagement Project in Washington state. LaRon has been working with fathers of children involved in the child welfare system specifically since 2007. He has a personal story of addiction and incarceration that led to him becoming involved in Child Protective Services, but then eventually being able to work his through that and get reunited with his wife and children. He became involved as a facilitator as part of a national project that you may have heard about. The final report for that is the first resource in the Helpful Resources list. It comes from the American Humane Association. That was the National Quality Improvement Center on Nonresident Fathers and the Child Welfare System Demonstration Project—big mouthful that is usually referred to as the QIC NRF project.

He has since then been working with fathers in various parts of Washington state and impacting the lives of a lot of men and their children. And again, as Alan-Michael said, we want to keep the focus on the kids, for sure. And if you download the video that's linked in the Helpful Resources section, you can see LaRon in action. Now we have the pleasure of hearing from him. So tell us what it's all about, LaRon. Time is yours.

LaRon Burris: [laughs] Good morning. My name is LaRon Burris. And I need to take Nigel with me wherever I go. That was a wonderful introduction. One of the things that I most definitely want to talk about is people say I'm an advocate for that fathers. And that is true. But I'm an advocate for fathers because the research says that the children desperately need their fathers. And having been a father myself and going through the system, I always remember in the beginning, when a judge once said to me that I was a monster. And I said to the judge, "Well what do monsters have, your honor?" And he just kind of looked at me, and I said, "Little monsters. So if you can give me the opportunity to become a better man, then I can help my children." So that's always been the premise on which I based all this work.

Having said that, let's talk about the work. Father Engagement Project. Services are provided in King County and Pierce County, Washington, in collaboration with Washington State Children's Administration. Classes for fathers are facilitated by me. Public and private agency representatives provide additional contact. The project began as a demonstration project in 2010, which actually isn't correct. It was actually 2007. Expanded during 2010 through 2013 to provide services for fathers in additional regions of the state. Classes are now provided at the Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center in Tacoma.

And I'd like to give a big shout out to our area administrator at that time, Denise Revels Robinson. She was actually—I don't think I got the title right, to tell you the truth. She's now retired, but she championed the cause, so to speak.

With that being said, I'd like to touch on just a couple of things. The classes were initially 20 weeks. And of course, you know 20 weeks is a very long time to get a guy to say "yes" to anything. But once you get them—I guess my real expertise was the ability to keep a guy engaged for 20 weeks. Through that, I really learned a lot about how to engage fathers. I'd like to think that I've gotten better at it through the years.

As I've already stated, my name is LaRon Burris. I'm a veteran parent who has successfully navigated the child welfare system. This presentation is to inform you about the father engagement class and what it entails. We will also provide you with proven concepts that will help you engage and recruit fathers and recommend services. I think I can do that.

So this was an excerpt from the practice improvement plan. If you read in it, you will see that engaging fathers, "Washington State Children's Administration acknowledges that the engagement of fathers has been a challenge for our administration. However, we continue our efforts to improve in this area." That's how all this really started. It started with our region basically knowing that there was a problem with engaging fathers. It started with a report from our CFSR that basically says that we weren't doing that well.

Later, when we had another review, the work that we had been doing through the QIC reflected that we were making improvements. So that became part of the practice improvement plan. And as such, the goal was to replicate father engagement throughout the entire state. Now, to this very day, that's what's happening.

We are basically taking the model that we started out with, which is the classes, the curriculum, the partnerships with social workers, with child support, with mental health, with DV, and having a basis and condensing it all into 12 weeks now, so that a father can't necessarily solve all his problems, but he has a roadmap as to how to do it. Some tools to be able to ask the right questions when it comes to dealing with the social workers, lawyers, and so on.

Fathers are a fundamental part of the case plan. All of the presenters, which have been great before me, have spoken pretty much the same thing. Contact with fathers is to be established immediately for all intakes. Assigned social workers ask fathers if they are interested in father's support groups, and if so refer immediately. Other referrals come from the courts, defense attorneys, and Court Appointed Special Advocates, CASA.

Now this is where our program in Washington has really jumped leaps and bounds, I believe. Parent 4 Parent Program and Dependency 101 and the Father Engagement Project work in unison to help fathers understand how and where to find father engagement classes. We enlist the help of our veteran parent advocates as frontline volunteers in Pierce County.

I'd like to say when I first started doing this work, for me it was fathers—I felt we needed our own little silo, almost, in order to push the work forward. I was wrong. We need the help of everyone in order to do that. And [there's] been some very, very strong women who have definitely helped me along the way, when it comes understanding what we should be doing to support fathers.

As such, Dependency 101 and Parent 4 Parent Program is basically—I was director over both of those—those are mothers and fathers. And I found that if I got the mothers to buy into it, it was much more successful because they had a better chance at convincing a father that he should come to the classes. And as such, basically my numbers doubled. So I went from approximately eight to 12 guys in a cohort to 12 to 24 guys in a cohort. So working with women, I believe, is a very good thing in order to help work with fathers.

The information packet was one of those things that was a deliverable from the NQRC. We had to have certain things that we came up with. One of them was a video. But one of the things - even though I appreciate the video and it's been seen by quite a few people – but one of the things that I am really proud about was our ability to put this packet together. This packet is information written in layperson's language, so that a father, no matter what walk of life he came from, he can understand what we're talking about. Definitions, terms, processes, and roles are clearly explained. Because this whole process can be overwhelming, we want fathers to have as much information in writing as possible. Social workers should have access to these packets and hand them out to fathers. If fathers have not already received a packet, they will receive one in Father Engagement classes.

Some of those things that are in there are:

- Your Rights and Responsibilities
- How to Work with Your Lawyer
- A Father's Guide to the Court Process
- A Father's Role in Court
- Who Will Be in Court?
- Common Court Terms
- The Role Outside of Court
- When You Owe Child Support
- If You Are or Have Been in Prison
- Paternity Establishment in Washington State
- What is Expected of You as the Father in Working with Social Services

I find that if we get into a dialogue about any of these things that are on this list, a father begins to open up about other things that you probably wouldn't have known about. And out of that, we create a relationship, one of which, I'm not your friend. And in all reality, I'm really not an advocate. What I am is a facilitator to get you the tools that you can go forth and get your kids. I guess I support you. And the reason why I say "I guess" is because I'm kind of stiff when it comes to actually hearing a lot of things that fathers would be talking about. Not that they're bad people, but being the type of father that I was, and knowing the struggles that we go through in this cold world, I know that men can tell me anything. But if they start getting information that can actually be used to help them get their children back, we tend to get a much better rapport with one another, and my classes tend to work.

Topics covered with fathers; this is from the actual curriculum itself.

- Introduction, individual goals - I want to know what's really going on, how did you get involved with Children's Services.
- Dad as a Planner, [and] Understanding the Child Welfare System. These two, when they first initially started the groups, those both were cofacilitated by a friend of mine by the name of John Allen. Many of you may know him or not. But shout out. He's always been there for me. He's always been there for the fathers, and he has been integral in helping me understand practice in Washington.
- Dad as Part of the Juvenile Court Process.
- Dad as a Provider (Child Support).
- Dad as Safe and Sane (Counseling Mental Health Issues).
- Dad as Clean and Sober.
- Dad as a Parent - including co-parenting, whether living with the mother or not.
- Dad as a Nonviolent Partner - which in all reality is domestic violence.
- Dad as a Healthy Parent (Making Healthy Choices) - which is in all reality, we're talking about a lot of those things they don't want to talk about: drug use, pornography, whatever it is.
- Dad as a Community Leader - understanding that it's one thing to be a father, but it's also important to move past just fathering the kids that are in your house, but also helping the kids that are in your community.
- Strategic Sharing and Celebration - that's the graduation where we do it big. We want fathers to definitely feel an appreciation for their achievement.

This is all the places so far that father engagement, from the initial start in 2006 to now, this has covered a lot of miles. If anybody knows anything about Washington, this has been a long road. But I will say that the implementation, we do have a model that works. Once it's set up, if you have the right facilitator, and you have the right partnerships in your community, it should go off without a hitch. We have everything that you need in order to implement, from how to take your initial intakes, your referral process, your surveys, collecting the data. Working with the father through those rough times, when he's not getting visits or he's snapped on a social worker. All these things we've managed to now understand what to do.

So engaging fathers. Everybody on this call I'm sure agrees that it works. Not only does it work, it's absolutely necessary. It's necessary because if you work with fathers, you're giving a child not just 50 percent chance of him being reunified, but he has a hundred percent, whether it's with the mother or with the father. But he now has a better chance at actually coming out of care, which is what everybody wants.

Based on pre- and post-test response in 2010, fathers had increase in:

- Awareness of community supports, from 27 percent to 92 percent.
- Knowledge of how to engage in quality activities with their children, from 50 percent to 92 percent.
- Ability to build relationships with those able to provide support, from 43 percent to 83 percent.
- Parenting confidence and knowledge of how to care for children, from 54 percent to 85 percent.
- Understanding of the value of children having other adults in their lives, from 50 percent to 75 percent.

This is really huge, considering that men come with built-in egos. And the idea that somebody could help them outside of their normal wheelhouse of expertise is a really big thing because we can be kind of possessive, or we can be apprehensive about outsiders. For the father to be able to loosen up and really know that other people can help him too was really big.

Father Engagement Project, from 2010 to 2017. As a contracted service provider to Children's Administration from 2010 to 2017,

- 557 fathers were referred for services;
- 88 percent (488) of these fathers graduated from the program;
- 72 percent (351) of program graduates were reunited with their children or got increased visitation.

Those numbers for me are good, but what's most exciting to me is to be able to see men years later, after they've been engaged in services, actually help other men. I get referrals from men now where I asked them how'd they find out about it, and they say you know, from a former graduate. And a lot of times, the former graduate actually brings them to the class.

But before I go, what I'd really like to touch on is the importance of understanding practice, and how it really works. I was told, and I'll say who it was, it was John Allen who told me, that if I continued to do the work, and I continued to really learn about practice, that someday the knowledge that I accumulated would be invaluable. I think he's right at this time.

What I would like to say is that we have to understand that it's more than just working with fathers. In order to actually work with fathers, you have to be in position to work with fathers. And in order to do that, you have to have funding. And many of the times, it appears, having been on several grants, several, some of them came through, some of them didn't. But a lot of times, we got so caught up in who was going to get what and where it was going to be allocated that the work that we really needed to be done kind of suffered.

I would just like to say if we continue to do the work, but understand the importance of our political connections, our relationships throughout this whole process, eventually we should have a net that no father falls through. And I'm not saying that we turn all our focus to fathers and not look at the mothers. What I'm saying is that we have the quality of work for fathers that has already been in place for mothers for many, many years so that each parent has an equal opportunity of doing the right thing and getting their child out of the system that sometimes doesn't work so well. Nigel?

Nigel Vann: Thank you, LaRon. Words of wisdom indeed. And for those of you who don't know John Allen, who he gave a couple of shout-outs to there is our new contact officer for the Project, and you saw his name on that slide I showed you at the beginning of the presentation. I think John has certainly done a great job in nurturing you there, LaRon. A lot of wisdom shared there.

And I think what you said at the end there really underlines the importance of these networks and partnerships. I've long believed that at some point we need to get to the point where we stop talking about services for fathers. It should be a part of any program, any funding source there to improve the well-being of children and families. Dad's a part of that. We shouldn't even have to be having these kind of conversations, really.

One other thing that you said LaRon that just really struck me that you said. "When I'm talking to fathers, I guess I support you. I'm kind of stiff in listening," and I think that's really key as well. Understanding who the men are and the situation they're in. And it made me think of—I've not done a lot of direct practice work, but I've led groups with fathers, I've led groups with men who've been referred to anger management because of domestic violence.

LaRon Burris: Mm-hmm.

Nigel Vann: And what I heard there was something akin to that anger management side. There's guys who have got to sort of admit first of all that they've done something and own up to that, and face the fact that they've got to change some things. It's a bit different than just talking about positive fatherhood and seeing the best in everybody. So I took that point as well. And also took the point that both Alan-Michael and LaRon mentioned about the role of strong women in this work. You can't do it without strong women.

I want to ask our first question to the strong woman on our presenting team, Penny. Just wondering, Penny, if you could tell us a little bit about what kind of training do child welfare staff typically get? And where is the option for fatherhood programs to offer to play a role in that training so they can share more of the fatherhood side of things?

Penny Putnam-Collins: I think the majority of child welfare caseworkers have to have training before they go into the field. The states, although they have the oversight of the federal Children's Bureau, they have a lot of autonomy in what they develop. And I was a child welfare trainer for the state of Georgia for many years. And we didn't specifically—now this was

before 2008, before I came to ICF—but we didn't specifically train on engaging fathers. I do believe that it's an opportunity at the system level for the fatherhood projects to engage the local or even the state-level child welfare agencies, to let them know again about the services that are available through the fatherhood projects. And perhaps even trying to make sure that father engagement is a specific part of the training. Again, I think it's going to be the fatherhood projects engaging the child welfare system.

And I just want to say—and I heard it from the speakers talking about that child welfare staff were not comfortable engaging fathers. And I have to say, and I am, I believe, a strong woman, but I'm also a Southern woman. And that we actually kind of—we're from a patriarchal society. With so many women being in the field, I think that it is a little bit more uncomfortable for us to talk to fathers. So I think I answered your question, and then I went down a whole new rabbit trail [laughs].

Nigel Vann: No, I think you spoke really to the importance of giving the female staff the opportunity to sit back and reflect on what their feelings are about fathers, about how they engage with dads, and about ways they can look at things in different light.

Penny Putnam-Collins: Right.

Nigel Vann: Absolutely important.

Penny Putnam-Collins: And I think especially as a young caseworker, and we do know that a lot of the caseworkers that initially engage families are very young. I can remember being very intimidated by some of the older fathers that I came in contact with. Thank you, Nigel.

Nigel Vann: Okay. So we've got one comment and question here. Somebody pointed out that when they're talking with professionals, they'll begin the conversation by saying that dads can make a difference. And I think that's a much easier conversation to have nowadays than it was 10, 15, 20 years ago. But still, we do need to have this conversation. You can give them a flyer that shows how important dads are to child development.

But the question was for Alan-Michael and LaRon. I'm wondering, what has been an effective opening for you in terms of your networking and partnerships? You can answer that in terms of child welfare or more generally if you like. But how do you start that conversation with somebody who is perhaps not engaging dads at the moment, and you want to try and help them change the way they do things?

Alan-Michael Graves: This is Alan-Michael. I'll start. And again, I go back to, and I think LaRon said it too, how important it is that it be about the kids. So when I go out and have conversations, I typically start talking about because of the work that we've done, these are the areas that we've seen growth. And I'll talk about the increases of academic success, the academic performance because their fathers were involved. If you keep the focus on the kids, people are more apt to want to participate and pay attention, as opposed to it being about the fathers themselves.

Nigel Vann: Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm, yeah.

LaRon Burris: I would agree. One of the things that I've done from the beginning is just being absolutely honest about where I come from, where I was when I first initially had contact with the department. And I was wrong. I was wrong, not because I wanted to be wrong or because I didn't want to get along with you, but I didn't have the tools. So what I do is I try to convince whoever that I'm trying to partner with that in order to really make a difference, we have to understand that we can't just put people in boxes and look at fathers as some of the stereotypes that we've been looking at through the years. Because if you do that, then you're going to have a problem explaining me.

With that being said, I always say, try to help me reach the fathers, so that the fathers can do the heavy lifting when it comes to their kids. If we're supposedly keeping kids safe, keeping kids safe, I believe, should be keeping their parents knowledgeable. Giving them the best opportunity to be the best parents that they can. And we can all fall through some cracks, but that doesn't mean we have to stay there. I always talk to them not to advocate for fathers, but really advocate for education of parents, and therefore looking for better outcomes for children.

Nigel Vann: Great point. There was a question asking about if you see any differences if you're dealing with a rural area. If you're in a small community in a rural area, do you think it'd be best to approach Child Protective Services at the state level perhaps first, or would you go at the local level to try and get them on board?

[voices overlap]

Nigel Vann: Yeah, Okay.

LaRon Burris: I'll take that one first. Having done it in bigger places and definitely rural areas, I believe that the main focus should be able to build a rapport with the department. Coming from my angle dealing with Children's Services, I had to humble myself. It doesn't mean that I dummy all the way down where they have all the answers, but I humble myself so that they don't feel threatened. And I always suggest to whatever environment that is.

When I first did classes, for instance in Bremerton, which is a different kind of off-the-beaten-path place, I didn't really understand those fathers until I just sat and listened. And I had an all-staff with the department, asking them about their fathers. What kind of fathers do they normally have? What's their ethnicity? What are some of the barriers? And that prepared me so that when I got there, I didn't get bent out of shape or start talking about things that didn't have anything to do with them.

So the biggest thing is to do your homework. To really have the time to carve it out, to go and sit down with your area administrator, sit down with the leads of the department and ask them for permission to help. Because everybody doesn't necessarily think they need help. So asking them for their permission and coming with strong stats and a program that's already been proven, that seems to do a lot to make people say, "maybe we'll try it."

[voice overlap]

Penny Putnam-Collins: Oh, I'm sorry.

Nigel Vann: Penny and then Alan-Michael, however you want to do it.

Penny Putnam-Collins: And I think that approaching [at] the state and the local level can be advantageous. Especially considering, and I just touched briefly on it during my presentation, that the federal Child and Family Services reviews are showing such poor results across the country for father engagement, and that states are actually including that. And I believed you mentioned, one of the speakers mentioned that, as part of their program improvement plans, they're looking at the fatherhood engagement programs. So I do think approaching at the state level [is] a great place to start. But also to approach at the local level can make it more personable and will actually reach at the practice level, which is really where the change is going to have to happen.

Nigel Vann: Alan-Michael?

Alan-Michael Graves: I was just going to say, I agree with both of you. I will say that most of our success has come from our partnerships with line staff. We started out trying to have meetings with the director and the board of supervisors, and although they concurred with the data and "oh yeah, fathers are important," there was never any policy change or never any procedural change as it pertained to working with men.

But it wasn't until we started including the social workers in some of our training and visiting their offices, and like I said, including them in on the successes of the dads, that now they become our advocates to their supervisors. It's not me coming into the Department of Children and Family Services, who thinks I'm coming in to get a contract or a grant. It's their own staff saying "hey, I've been exposed to this fatherhood work, it works. We need to include it more. We need to do more to engage fathers." It's been the success in Los Angeles.

Penny Putnam-Collins: Right.

Nigel Vann: That was a great set of answers, guys, because you really do speak to the fact that it can be a different beast in different places. Maybe you've got to come at it from different angles. I know that I've done a lot of training with line staff, and then they'll go back home and speak of frustrations because they can't get supervisors on board. So sometimes you've got to come at it from the top, sometimes from the bottom, but ultimately you want everybody to buy into this. So I guess hit it as far as you can.

LaRon Burris: May I add to that? That one other thing. Understanding practice. When I first started this, I really had a passion, of course, because I'm a father and I've been through the system. But I had some really great bosses. I've seen my guy Bernie Dorsey is on there too, who also made me understand that you got to do your homework. You have to really understand what it is that your community really needs.

In Washington, we did both approaches from the line staff by training them in all-staffs. Having brown bag lunches, with just departments, just driving there. But the real thing was we were blessed to actually be part of the QFC. That really opened a lot more doors because it was the area administrator, the regional administrators that were involved. Once I recognized that and kept my eyes on practice, I realized that we had a chance to do it a little differently, where we didn't just have to start from the bottom and work our way up. We could approach it from both ends. And it seems to be working.

Nigel Vann: Penny, did I hear you wanted to say something else on that?

Penny Putnam-Collins: No, I was just actually agreeing, no.

Nigel Vann: Okay. I've got a couple of questions here that perhaps we can pose together. Somebody asked how do you go about engaging with the extended family, and then somebody else asked about engaging with the mother, because obviously the parents may not be together. So actually, that is probably two different questions. Let's take the extended family one first. So beyond just involving fathers, can you speak, anybody, about how child welfare can engage the extended family, particularly on the paternal side?

LaRon Burris: I can. Hello?

Nigel Vann: Yes, go ahead.

LaRon Burris: Most of the fathers that I've been involved with, they don't really have a lot of extended family, or they're not on good terms with the family. I can't concentrate on everyone. But I feel that if I concentrate on getting the father the tools he needs, as he starts improving and his behavior starts improving, and he starts doing things differently, the extended families tend to start embracing him. Like they'll show up for graduation. I always tell the fathers, it's all about you and this situation. They look at you and they have a certain perception of you, but when you start changing from that and they start seeing that, then everybody around you is going to be more invested in you. So that's my approach. I approach everything through the father when it comes to his family, his kids, how he's getting along with the mom. All of that is part of it.

[voices overlap]

Nigel Vann: Go ahead, Penny.

Penny Putnam-Collins: No, go ahead. I was just going to add a couple things. But no, please go ahead and respond to that.

Nigel Vann: I was just going to add an anecdote. I was on a site visit in Texas a week or two ago with the Alliance for North Texas Healthy Effective Families. And there was a father there who graduated, and he shared a story about how his grandmother had invited him to Thanksgiving for the first time, and sent a big thank you to the program for actually helping the guy change his behavior. That's exactly to the point that you just made, LaRon. You give the guys the tools, and then the family and the mother are going to start seeing you a bit differently. Go ahead, Penny.

Penny Putnam-Collins: That's a great story, Nigel. I'm so glad you shared that, just showing the power of the program. I think that's great. Some of the federal mandates or federal laws that have been enacted over the last several years actually require that extended families be engaged earlier in the process, or they're supposed to be. And I know it doesn't always happen, but they're supposed to be engaged. ASFA has that requirement, as does the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act [*sic*] requires that families be engaged.

New processes are being used, such as—well, they're not new everywhere, but family group decision-making, and family committees to involve more of the families to be involved in decision-making for the families, as well as family-finding processes to try to locate family members that can be a resource, not necessarily just placement resources, but to be resources to support the families.

As we find through the years, and I'm sure that other people have seen this, that sometimes the informal resources work a heck of a lot better than those formal, pat resources that we try to put into place. Being an aunt and a grandmother, I know that I would want to know if something was going on with my extended family. And I think most people feel that way.

Nigel Vann: Mm-hmm, Okay. Alan-Michael, let me just pose one quick question to you based on that discussion. And then I'm going to give everybody a chance to have one final quick takeaway message for everybody.

Can you, Alan-Michael, just respond to how you might approach the relationship between the father and the mother when you're dealing with these cases?

Alan-Michael Graves: Hmm. I'm sorry, repeat the question.

Nigel Vann: If you're trying to engage the father with the child welfare, with the family, to try and get them reunified, there's most likely been some—particularly with a nonresidential dad—there's probably some issue between him and Mom. So the question was asking, let me give you the specific question here: What's your experience in working on engagement with the mothers involved in the system? Because if the dad is nonresident, the kid's in the system—

Alan-Michael Graves: Part of our program itself is making sure that the dads know that they need to put the needs of the child before. In their weekly MIRG groups, Men in Relationships Groups, we spend a lot of time talking about the mother of the child, and how we need to parent beyond conflict. And we know that that's a curriculum, but we really push it that your child needs to think that you and their mother are the best of friends for the sake of the child. Our fathers come into the program with a lot of resentment against the mothers of their children. But in the end, and I keep repeating it, because we place the focus on the child and not them, that they end up leaving the program having a relationship with the mother.

Nigel Vann: Okay. We can get more into that in some written responses as well. I'm going to give you each just a quick 10 seconds to leave us with a final thought. And John Allen, if you've joined the presenter line and would like to say a few words as well, I'll give you just a minute. But we are running out of time now. So Penny, ladies first, just a final thought from you.

Penny Putnam-Collins: Well thank you. I just think that the child welfare system is so complex, but to improve outcomes for children, we have to engage the fathers. And I think that becoming more and more comfortable with that is relevant for improved outcomes. So that's it. I hope that we'll see more and more working collaboration. Thank you.

Nigel Vann: Absolutely, absolutely. Alan-Michael.

[voices overlap]

Alan-Michael Graves: I'd have to echo that for me, we have to place training at the top of the list. Far too often, people are expected to know how to engage with people without the exposure. The key to a good partnership is understanding on both sides. That would be my recommendation.

Nigel Vann: Okay. LaRon.

LaRon Burris: [unintelligible]

Nigel Vann: You're breaking up on us, LaRon. We can't hear you, I'm afraid.

LaRon Burris: I'm sorry. Can you hear me now?

Nigel Vann: A little better, yeah. Yes, go ahead.

LaRon Burris: I'd like to see us, all across the nation, put a little less emphasis on MSWs and Ph.D.s, and actual people who understand the practice, who understand what it is that we're trying to do. We're trying to improve fathers so that they can be a healthy part of a child's life. I don't necessarily think that it's always the people with the most degrees that actually supply the best information. I don't know if I'm really getting that across the way I mean it. But there's just so many more people that would be helpful, and they just happen not to have degrees, or they may have convictions, or they may have been on drugs before. Very helpful resources that we should utilize.

Nigel Vann: Absolutely. I think you said it at the end of your presentation as well. You said somewhere along the lines of how gratifying it is that years later, you see the men you helped are now helping other men. I do think that a great model for this work is that guys who go through these programs and graduate and change their lives, change the lives of those around them, they are excellent candidates for staff positions to work with other men. That program I mentioned where I was just in Texas, I think more than half their staff there are program graduates. I think that's a powerful message for the way the field grows.

Let me just see if John Allen has joined us. Are you there, John? Would you like to say a word?

John Allen: Yes, yes I am. Thank you, Nigel. I want to thank you and National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse for being such a great resource for practitioners and all folks that are into and are seeking to improve practice around healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood. I just want to emphasize that a webinar like this is really important to highlight the main theme, and that's the collaboration of relationships, from the bigger state agencies all the way down to the private agencies. And those areas, like in Los Angeles, and Washington, and Texas, and New York, and all these other various places where these relationships are established, we notice that there is a collaboration there that is really fruitful for the 90 Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grantees that are funded through Office of Family Assistance.

And I just want to thank everybody on the line. I want to thank all the presenters for providing all that in-depth knowledge. And more so than anything is to resonate the importance of collaboration to really see this big piece of practice being resurrected in social services. So thank you all very much for your time and efforts in this webinar. Thank you, Nigel.



Nigel Vann: Okay. Well thank you, John, and let me just reiterate that if we didn't get to your question, we will send those to the presenters to respond and write. If you have additional questions, send them to [info@fatherhood.gov](mailto:info@fatherhood.gov) and we'll be happy to get back to you and connect you with anybody we can. With that, I'm going to wish you all the best for the rest of the day, but more importantly in continuing this work around the country. It really is an important area - partnerships in general but child welfare, in particular. And if you just stay on the screen for a minute, there's going to be a survey pop-up, so you can tell us what you thought about the day and what you thought about the presenters. So all the best to everybody. Thank you very much, bye-bye.

Alan-Michael Graves: Thank you, Nigel.

Nigel Vann: And if the presenters could stay on the line.

Male operator: Once again, ladies and gentlemen, that does conclude today's program. We appreciate your participation. You may now disconnect.

[End]