



Focus Group & Provider Survey Report Executive Summary

A growing body of evidence shows that children without fathers actively involved in their lives are significantly more likely to suffer from depression and other mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, school failure, poverty, delinquency, crime and other negative life factors than children with fathers in their lives. Conversely, when fathers are actively engaged, children are far more likely to achieve success in school, careers, relationships and other aspects of life.

The Alameda County Fathers Corps (ACFC), established in 2013, is a collaborative effort of First 5 Alameda County, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency and Alameda County Social Services Agency. ACFC's mission is to promote and support fathers and father figures to be meaningfully engaged with their children and families, and to advocate for family service providers to provide father friendly services and to assist fathers in strengthening their parenting skills. In support of its mission, the ACFC administered an online survey of family service providers about father engagement strategies and conducted three focus groups and seven one-on-one interviews with fathers who are not engaged in the lives of their children.

In May 2015, ACFC conducted a survey designed to gather service provider perspectives on the resource needs and service barriers for fathers, and identify successful strategies to support fathers' engagement in the lives of their children. The online survey was completed by 111 Alameda County family service providers from the County's network of community based organizations as well as the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland, Health Care Services Agency, Social Services Agency, Probation Department, Department of Child Support Services, Head Start, Hayward Unified School District, and the Oakland and Berkeley Public Libraries.

The three focus groups and seven one-on-one interviews were an opportunity for the ACFC to gather information and learn from fathers who were uninvolved in the lives of their children. These fathers are often talked about and judged yet rarely spoken with and asked to share their stories. The focus groups and one-on-one interviews are an effort to ensure that the voice of disengaged fathers is included in planning for services.

Conflict with the mother was mentioned frequently by providers as a significant barrier to fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. Provider assessment of barriers preventing fathers from engaging in services included: work schedules, limited access to services and supports, and the lack of father-friendly services.

The feedback received directly from fathers during the focus groups and one-on-one interviews powerfully mirror those of the provider observations. The vast majority of non-engaged fathers passionately desire to be good fathers. They expressed sentiments of being alone and unsupported in their struggles. Nonetheless, fatherhood was often credited for being a catalyst for making positive life changes for many fathers. They strongly expressed their desire for services and supports that would

help them become better fathers. Fathers cited contentious relationships with the mothers of their children and maternal 'gatekeeping' behaviors as the most common barrier to their engagement with their children. Participants also cited their limited educational achievements and corresponding inability to provide financial support for their children as a significant barrier to their engagement. They cited prior felony convictions that further erode their employment opportunities and unpaid child support payments as additional and compounding barriers. Focus group participants often cited their inability to afford legal representation in Family Court proceedings as a significant barrier to them securing favorable custody agreements. Many also reported substance abuse issues and/or mental health concerns that further contribute to their inability to be engaged fathers. A high number reported that they felt unprepared for fatherhood because their own fathers had been absent from their lives as children.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure all family service program models funded by and contracted out with County funds include a fatherhood component and are effectively engaging and supporting the needs of fathers/father-figures
- Offer family and father- specific services after hours to accommodate the work schedules of fathers
- Train family service providers on how to engage fathers and father figures in a father-friendly manner that welcomes full participation; and increase the numbers of male staff within family service organizations at all strategic levels
- Create an Inter-Agency Fathers and Families Council to monitor proposed and existing policies and practices within the family court system, Social Services Agency, Health Care Services Agency and Probation
- Provide programs, through Alameda County Family Court and family service systems, that support fathers and mothers to develop and maintain healthy co-parenting relationships
- Require that father friendly principles be reflected in measurable contract outcomes for family services providers doing business with Alameda County agencies
- Review the 'best-interest-of-the-child' standard utilized by Family Court staff and the judicial bench to ensure that irrelevant criminal histories are not given undue evidentiary weight by the staff against fathers or father figures
- Adequately fund and staff County expungement resources to remove barriers to employment and housing opportunities for fathers and father figures with past convictions

Respectfully,

Kevin Bremond, Fathers Corps Administrator
First 5 Alameda County