

Linking Fathers

Child Welfare Sector Analysis





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By promoting healthy fatherhood, the **Minnesota Fathers & Families Network** contributes to children's well-being, men's development, gender equity, and positive, supportive communities. MFFN enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide. Learn more online at www.mnfathers.org.

Many of the resources identified in this document are available online at www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html.

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“When we have a father who engages with us and wants to parent his children, we have been able to help him succeed.”

— Survey Respondent



Introduction

Dads are important assets for the healthy development of children. The research base to support this truth has grown exponentially in the past decade. At the same time, the level of father-child involvement has also grown dramatically – nearing the same level of mother-child involvement. This is good news for fathers, mothers, and children.

On the one hand, dads are more engaged now than in the past. However, many fathers continue to be left out of the picture. Strong father-child relationships are often difficult to maintain for fathers who are divorced, separated, never-married, incarcerated, deployed, long-distance, and many other groups of dads.

In this publication, we take a look at families who have been engaged with the child welfare system. These families often have many risks for child abuse and neglect. Additionally, they may be experiencing alcohol or substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, incarceration, or various other challenges. These are important risks that must be seriously addressed for the well-being and protection of children, women, men, and communities.

On the other hand, we know that many caring adults have children or grandchildren in the child welfare system. This report is written to take a look at fathers who are among those caring adults. When an abused or neglected child has a father or father-figure who can be a positive presence, it's our duty (and the child's birthright) to support that father-child relationship.

Unfortunately, too often, when a child needs the support of a caring dad, some fathers are hard to find, hard to involve, or have personal challenges that they need to address. And historically our child welfare system has not been father-friendly.

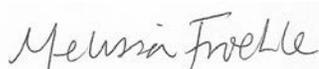
This publication is written to highlight success stories about child welfare agencies that have found effective ways to involve dads. It is our hope that these stories can provide motivation for more agencies to involve fathers in productive ways.

This document has been published by the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network. Many thanks to Tom Fitzpatrick, project director and author, for his commitment to finding good news from across Minnesota's counties and tribal communities. Thanks to the McKnight Foundation for funding this project. And thanks to our advisory committee (listed on inside cover) who helped to frame the document, disseminate the survey, and provide key insights into the child welfare system in Minnesota.

Sincerely,



A. Paul Masiarchin
Executive Director



Melissa Froehle
Policy & Program Director



2. Why Fathers Matter

Father Involvement

The evidence is clear that a healthy father-child relationship can produce positive benefits for every member of the family within a variety of family structures.

“Research has shown that fathers, no matter what their income or cultural background, can play a critical role in their children’s education. When fathers are involved, their children learn more, perform better in school, and exhibit healthier behavior. Even when fathers do not share a home with their children, their active involvement can have a lasting and positive impact.”¹

Research also demonstrates a wide variety of benefits to children, fathers (and father figures), mothers, and communities, including the following:

Young children with involved fathers display enhanced social skills:²

- Greater empathy;
- Higher self-esteem;
- More self-control and less impulsive behavior.

Children who grow up with involved fathers demonstrate important problem solving abilities:

- Increased curiosity;
- Greater tolerance for stress and frustration;
- More willingness to try new things.

Father involvement increases cognitive capabilities for young children:

- Higher verbal skills;
- Higher scores on assessments of cognitive competence;
- Son’s IQ is related to father’s nurturing.

Men (fathers and father figures) can learn from their children in a number of different areas:^{3,4}

- Expanded ability for caring and nurturance;
- Better understanding of sexism and its impact on children;
- Deepened emotions and emotional intensity.

Negative behaviors decrease among involved fathers:

- Less than average contact with the criminal justice system;
- Less substance abuse;
- Fewer accidental and premature deaths.

Communities benefit when fathers become more involved with their children. Men who are involved in their children’s lives are more likely to:

- Participate in the community;
- Serve in civic or community leadership positions;
- Attend church more often.

Mothers benefit in a variety of ways:⁵

- Child-mother attachment is more secure when child-father attachment is secure;
- Positive mother-child relationships are linked with positive father-child relationships;
- Whether or not the parents live together, positive mother-child relationships are linked with positive father-child relationships.

Father Involvement in Child Welfare Cases

A large percentage of children engaged in the child welfare system do not live with their fathers. These men, when engaged early-on, can often serve as positive resources for the children.

Over the last few years, increasing attention has been paid to fathers in child welfare cases. As summarized by an Urban Institute Report for the Federal Administration for Children and Families:

Over the past decade an interest in fathers and their contributions to family stability and children’s healthy development has heightened the attention paid within the child welfare field to identifying, locating, and involving fathers. Many of the children served by child welfare agencies have nonresident fathers. In addition, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 renewed focus on expediting permanency for children in out-of-home placement. Engaging fathers of foster children can be important not only for the potential benefit of a child-father relationship (when such a relationship does not pose a risk to the child’s safety or well-being), but also for making placement decisions and gaining access to resources for the child. Permanency may be expedited by placing children with their nonresident fathers or paternal kin, or through early relinquishment

or termination of the father's parental rights. Through engaging fathers, agencies may learn important medical information and/or that the child is the recipient of certain benefits, such as health insurance, survivor benefits, or child support. Apart from the father's potential as a caregiver, such resources might support a reunification goal or a relative guardianship and therefore enhance permanency options for the child.⁶

More recently, research findings have demonstrated that nonresident father involvement is associated with positive outcomes in child welfare cases:^{7,8}

- Nonresident fathers' involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of a reunification outcome and a lower likelihood of an adoption outcome.
- Children with highly involved nonresident fathers are discharged from foster care more quickly than those with less or no involvement.
- Among children whose case outcome is reunification, usually with their mothers, higher levels of nonresident father involvement are associated with a substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations.



“Over the past decade an interest in fathers and their contributions to family stability and children’s healthy development has heightened the attention paid within the child welfare field to identifying, locating, and involving fathers.”

3. Data on Child Welfare and Fatherhood

The child welfare system covers a broad spectrum of services for families and children. It can include everything from services to prevent child abuse and neglect to removal of children from unsafe homes. The roles and rights of fathers, and how the child welfare agency involves fathers, can vary dramatically across the child welfare spectrum. Here, we attempt to paint a general picture of child protection services, one piece of the child welfare spectrum, to better understand where fathers enter into the picture. We also provide some data for context.⁹

Child Maltreatment Data

In Minnesota, 4,742 children were determined to have experienced child maltreatment in 2009; 44 children suffered life-threatening injuries and 21 children died from maltreatment. However, most children enter the child welfare system due to neglect. In Minnesota in 2008, 61% of reports of maltreatment were for non-medical neglect.¹⁰

Federal statistics from 2008 reveal that almost 80% of perpetrators were parents. The perpetrator having father involvement was 37% (father alone, 18%; father & mother, 18%; and father & other, 1%), while the perpetrator having mother involvement was 62% (mother alone, 38%; mother & father, 18%; and mother & other, 6%).¹¹ In Minnesota in 2009, biological parents were identified as perpetrators in 76% of cases, but no breakdown was made by gender.¹²

These figures demonstrate that mothers overall have a higher incidence of engaging in child maltreatment. However, the statistics do not demonstrate a higher probability of maltreatment per hour of parent-child contact. In many households, mothers spend more time with their children; mothers are more likely than fathers to be single parents; and mothers are more likely to be primary caretakers.

Fathers may become involved in the child welfare system as a perpetrator. More often, however, as the data indicate, fathers become involved when the mother becomes involved in the system – either as her husband, or because he is living with the mother, or much more likely yet, because he is a non-resident father. (In this report, “noncustodial” is synonymous with

non-resident.) In particular, child welfare agencies have become focused on identifying, locating and providing services to fathers when they are non-resident parents because most child protection cases involve single-mother headed households, and because state and federal laws have become more precise in mandating the involvement of these fathers. **Throughout this report, the focus is mostly on how the child welfare system can better engage these non-resident or noncustodial fathers.**

How Children Enter Minnesota’s Child Welfare System

Minnesota has a state-supervised, county-administered social service system. In addition to 87 county social service agencies, two of Minnesota’s eleven federally recognized Tribes administer child welfare programs. Leech Lake and White Earth Bands of Ojibwe are involved in the American Indian Child Welfare Initiative.

County revenues fund a significant portion of the services provided to children and families. Thus, child welfare resources vary across counties. Child welfare services are coordinated with Children’s Mental Health Services and the Department of Corrections for children who are in multiple systems.

Children enter the system through child abuse - child neglect reports made to the child welfare agency (local social services). Minnesota counties and the Leech Lake and White Earth Bands of Ojibwe assessed 17,218 reports of maltreatment involving 24,499 children in 2009.¹³ When social services staff gets a report, they decide if the report fits what the law defines as child abuse or neglect. Some reports are about concerns that do not involve neglect or abuse. When this happens the family may be offered voluntary child welfare services.

When a report meets what the law says is child abuse or neglect, social services staff makes a decision to take one of the following responses: a family assessment or an investigation. The staff needs to make sure the child is safe. Social services staff decides what to do depending on how serious the report is. The

staff also wants to learn if the family is willing to work together to keep the family safe.¹⁴

A family assessment is done when social services staff accepts a report about a child's safety, but the report is not about threats of immediate and serious harm. State law indicates a family assessment response is preferred practice, except in situations that include alleged egregious harm, sexual abuse and/or maltreatment in a child daycare or foster care home. The screener also considers a history of past reports and level of cooperation from a family.¹⁵ In a family assessment, staff meets with the family to assess their needs and strengths. Social services staff works with families to make sure their child is safe, not to prove or disprove if child abuse or neglect happened.

An investigation must be done when the child is in immediate or severe danger. It also must be done when the family refuses to work with social services staff to make sure the child is safe. Two decisions are made by social services staff in an investigation:

- Did child abuse or neglect happen?
- Are protective services needed to make the child safe in the future?

In 2009, the need for ongoing protective services was identified in 50 percent of investigations and 17 percent of family assessments. Another 17 percent of family assessments were offered optional ongoing supportive services. The most recommended service was individual mental health services or counseling, followed by parent education.¹⁶

Often the services offered, particularly through family assessment, operate without state court involvement.

The noncustodial parent or father may or may not be involved. However, if the risk to the child rises to a certain level of harm or concern, as mandated by state law, the case may be brought into the court system and the child may be removed from the home. If the child is removed from the home, this is called an "out-of-home" placement. The court must get involved when a child is placed out of the home, and the county/tribe must work to identify, locate and involve the father or non-custodial parent. In 2009, 11,699 children spent time in out-of-home placements in Minnesota.¹⁷

When a child is placed outside the home in foster care, state law requires the noncustodial or non-adjudicated

parent to be assessed to see if he/she can provide the day-to-day care of the child, temporarily or permanently. In 2009, 8,667 placements ended with a change/move in a child's placement setting. In only 109 of those cases, the reason for the placement change was for the child to live with the noncustodial parent.¹⁸ This provides some indication that there is much room for

growth to better engage and involve noncustodial and non-adjudicated fathers in the child protection response.

If the child cannot return home within a specified time period, usually one year maximum, the county/tribe must move to "permanency." This may be permanently transferring custody to a noncustodial parent or relative, or terminating parental rights so the child can be placed up for adoption, among other options. In 2009, 652 children became wards of the state when parental rights were terminated in Minnesota.¹⁹



Figure 1: Child Welfare Reports vs. Determinations of Maltreatment, Minnesota, 2009

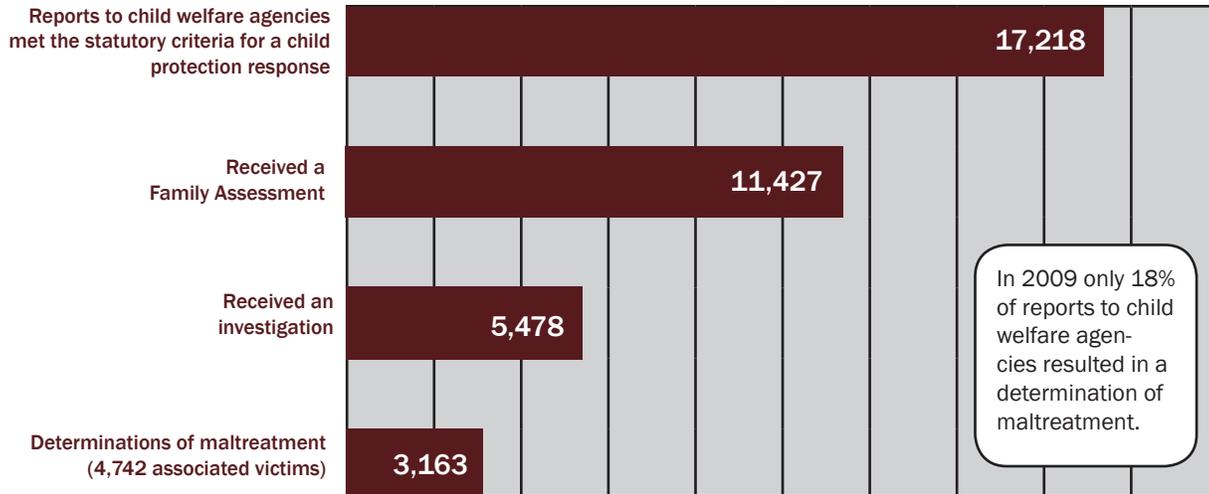
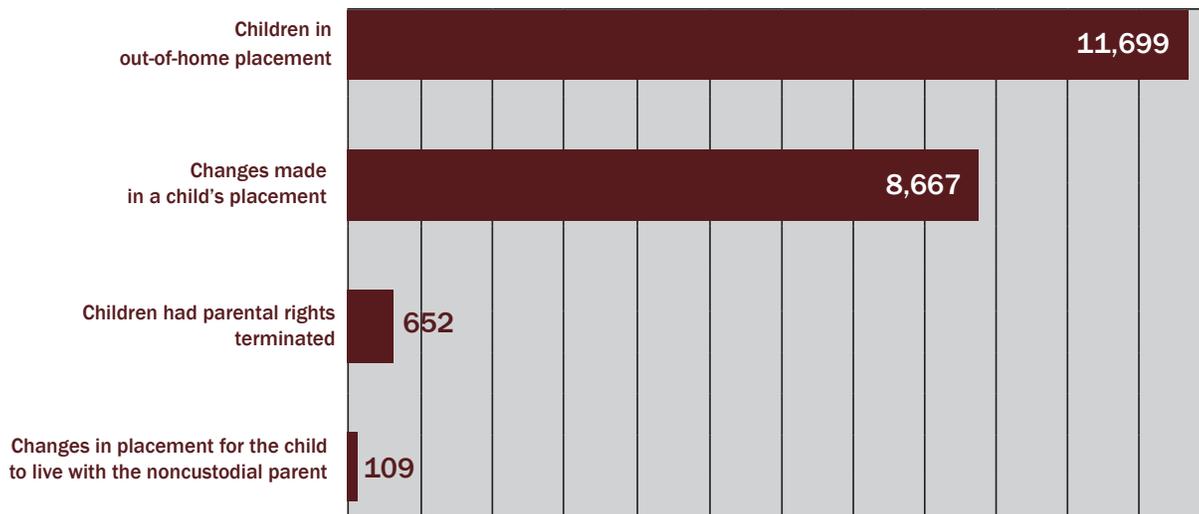


Figure 2: Children in Out-of-Home Placement, Minnesota, 2009



Once the court is involved, there are laws and policies that determine how fathers should be engaged. As explained in Chapter 4, those laws and policies have become stronger and more defined in recent years. If the child welfare case remains outside of the court

system, the law and policy is less clear about father involvement. Some counties, as indicated in this report, have chosen to create more specific policies to define, and “expect,” father involvement.

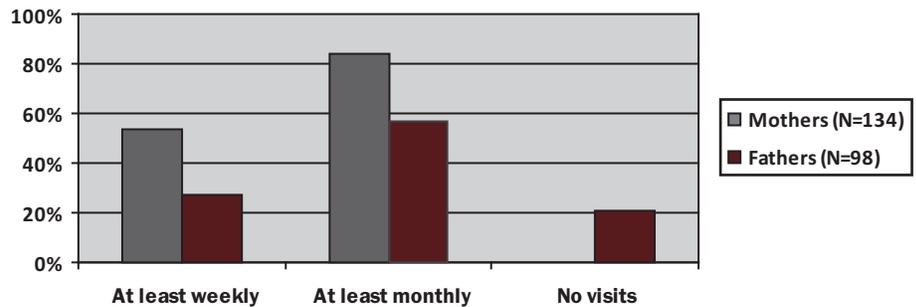
Meeting CFSR Standards

All states are required to participate in the federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR) that measure statewide outcomes in child welfare agencies. Minnesota underwent its second round of federal CFSR in 2007. Minnesota needs improvement in its efforts around father engagement, as do most other states. According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the most recent federal CFSR found: "The onsite case review revealed that a lack of identification, engagement and/or provision of services for fathers significantly lowered the state's performance on Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children and Well-being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs. Greater consistency in promoting relationships between fathers and their children in foster care and more fully engaging fathers in case planning and service delivery process emerged as primary review themes."²⁰

While there is no specific measure for father involvement, there are four items on the CFSR that can be looked at to get an indication of father engagement: parental visitation; needs/services provided to parents; child/family involvement in case planning; and worker visits with parents. The following information is taken from Minnesota CFSR reviews in 2008-2009.

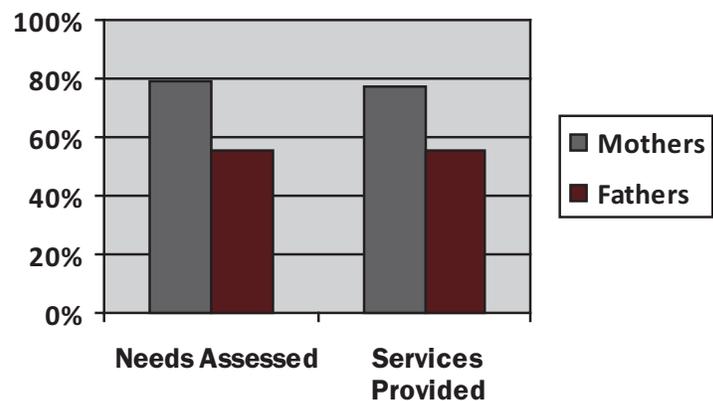
Parental Visitation. One item on the CFSR rates whether the agency makes efforts to ensure the frequency and quality of the child's visits with their mother and father were sufficient to maintain or promote the continuity of the parent/child relationship. Figure 3 shows that fathers were less likely than mothers to visit their children weekly or at least monthly, and more likely to have no visits with their children.

Figure 3: Parental Visitation, 2008-2009, Minnesota CFSR Findings²¹



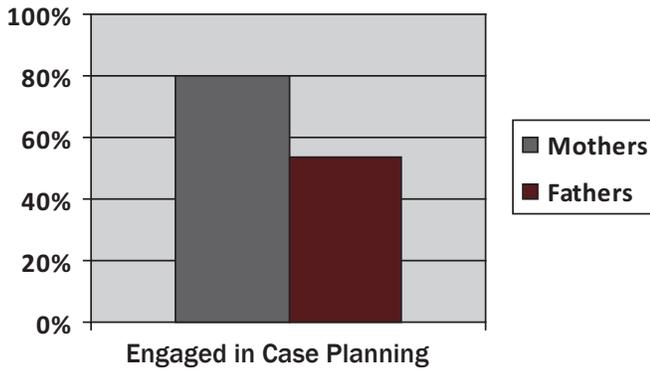
Needs/Services Provided to Parents. Another item of the CFSR rates whether the agency conducts a comprehensive needs assessment of the father's and mother's needs for case planning purposes, and whether appropriate services are provided to address the identified needs. Figure 4 shows that fathers' needs were assessed less often than mothers, and services provided less often to meet those needs.

Figure 4: Needs Assessed and Services Provided, 2008-2009, Minnesota CFSR Findings²²



Child/Family Involvement in Case Planning. The CFSR rates whether the agency made efforts to actively involve the father and mother in the case planning process. Again, as Figure 5 demonstrates fathers were involved in the case planning process less often than mothers.

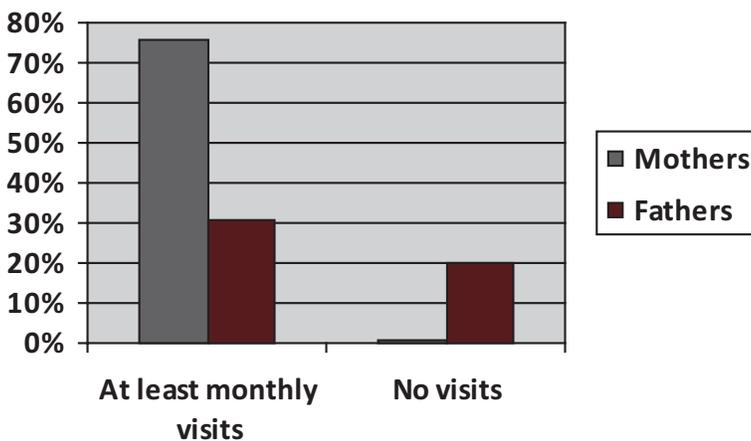
Figure 5: Engagement in Case Planning, 2008-2009, Minnesota CFSR Findings²³



Across Minnesota, the level of awareness and intentionality around father engagement varies dramatically. Through this report, we hope to spur greater attention to the valuable roles that fathers can play in supporting children and families who are engaged in Minnesota’s child welfare system.

Worker Visits with Parents. An important part of case work is meeting with parents. This item on the CFSR assesses whether the agency makes efforts to ensure the frequency and quality of caseworker face-to-face visits with fathers and mothers are sufficient to address issues pertaining to the safety, permanency and well-being of the child and promote achievement of case goals. Here, as shown in Figure 6, there is a big gap between the monthly visits a mother receives from the worker, and those received by the father.

Figure 6: Worker Visits with Parents, 2008-2009, Minnesota CFSR Findings²⁴



“Greater consistency in promoting relationships between fathers and their children in foster care and more fully engaging fathers in case planning and service delivery process emerged as primary review themes.”

— Child and Family Service Review

4. Legal Mandates in Minnesota

Federal law and federal funding for child welfare dictates a certain amount of what must happen in child welfare cases. The landmark 1997 federal law, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), established new timelines and conditions for filing termination of parental rights petitions that speed up the child protection court process.²⁵ Within a year of a child entering foster care or living away from home, there must be a court hearing to look at the child's permanent placement, such as whether the child can safely return home. If not, the court must determine if there should be a transfer of child custody to a relative or noncustodial parent, termination of parental rights, or if another permanency option is appropriate.

Minnesota's statute is even more specific – for a child under the age of eight, the permanency hearing is supposed to happen within six months.²⁶ There is also a cumulative time provision under ASFA, such that if a child has been in foster care for 15 out of the 22 most recent months, the state must file a petition to terminate parental rights at the same time as it works to identify, recruit, process and approve a permanency plan, which may include adoption. This means that efforts to identify, locate and provide services to fathers are even more important than before. Fathers need to be identified and recruited as potential placement options, but also they need to be found quicker if the process proceeds to the termination of parental rights stage faster than before.

A number of changes have been made to Minnesota laws since ASFA was adopted that strengthen or further clarify the mandates with regards to noncustodial parents and/or fathers. (Most noncustodial parents in child welfare cases are fathers, and most fathers in child welfare cases are noncustodial parents.) In 1999, for example, Minnesota law was amended to state that when a child is in foster care, “diligent efforts” must be made to identify, locate and offer services to both parents of a child, which includes noncustodial and non-adjudicated parents.²⁷

In 2008, another milestone federal law was enacted, the Fostering Connections to Success Act and Increasing Adoptions Act.²⁸ This law aims to promote permanent families for children, including more

recognition of the role of fathers and relatives, among other provisions. It requires states to exercise “due diligence” to identify and notify adult relatives of a child if he or she is placed in foster care. However, the law leaves the definition of “due diligence” and “relative” to state law.

In 2009, Minnesota added a whole new section of law, led by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, to define “diligent efforts” in identifying and locating both parents, such as asking the custodial parent for information about the other parent, obtaining information from the child support enforcement system, and requesting a search of the Minnesota Fathers' Adoption Registry 30 days after the child's birth. The judge can require sworn testimony from a known parent about the identity or location of the other parent. And the courts must now make inquiries regarding the identity and whereabouts of both parents and establish that the county social services agency has made reasonable efforts to locate both parents. Changes in 2009 also require both parents to receive a summons to appear after a Child in Need of Protection or Services (CHIPS) court petition is filed; prior law only required that the noncustodial parent receive “notice.”²⁹

In 2010, with advocacy by MFFN, legislation was passed in Minnesota that gives all parents, including noncustodial parents, a right to be heard in the child protection court proceedings, as well as making other changes that are protective of fathers' rights in the court process.³⁰

These changes have given further guidance, and a clearer mandate, to county/tribal social service agencies about how fathers must be involved. In addition, they have strengthened the rights and roles of fathers and noncustodial parents in the child protection court process.

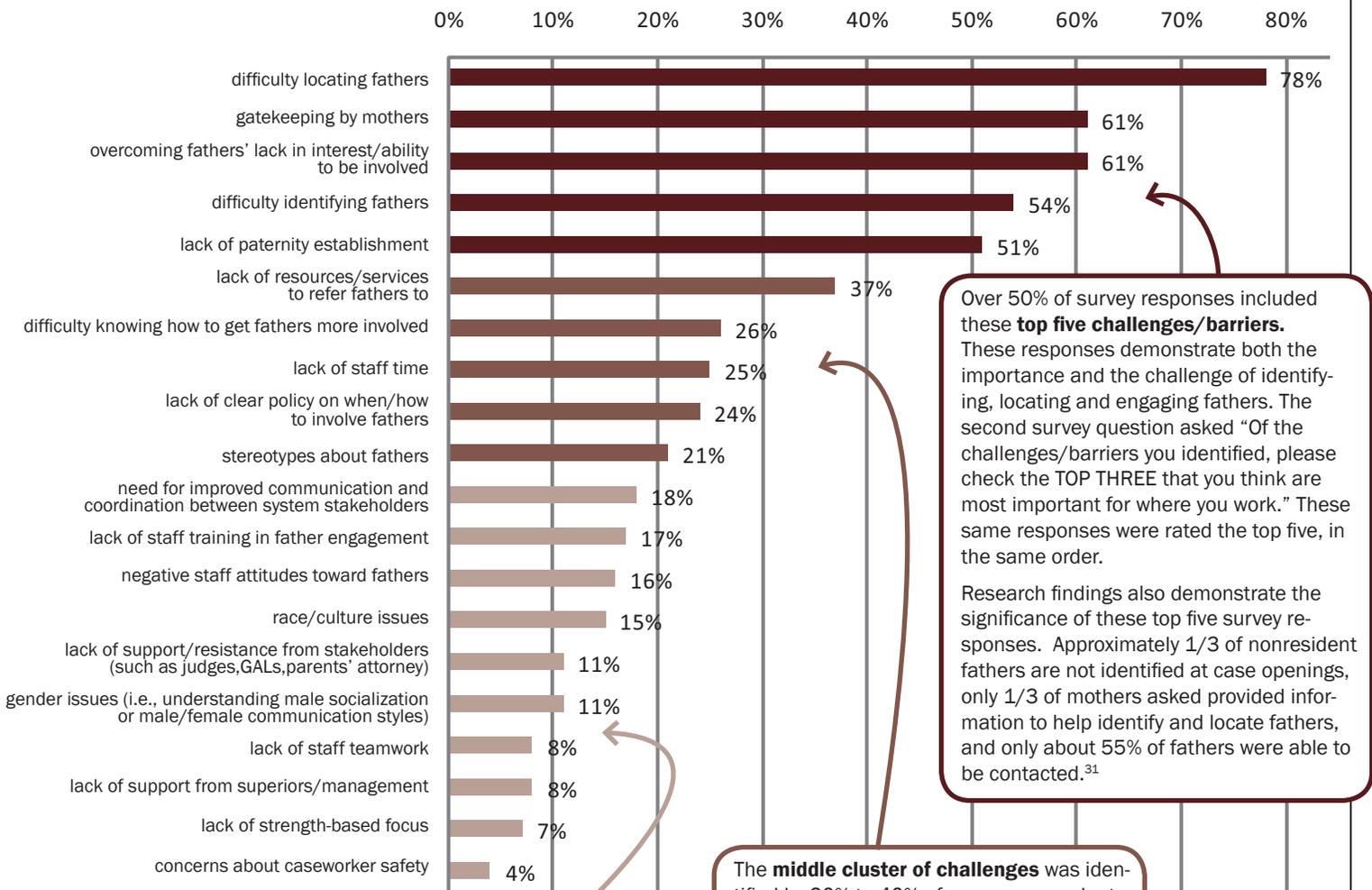
5. Challenges/Barriers

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network (MFFN) surveyed agencies across Minnesota that involve fathers in child welfare matters. A total of 261 child welfare professionals responded to this survey in October and November of 2010. The respondents included professionals who represent 47 of

Minnesota's 87 counties along with 5 of 11 American Indian tribes.

The first question of the survey asked respondents to identify all challenges/barriers that limit their child welfare agency's ability to work with fathers.

Figure 7: Agency's Challenges That Limit Their Ability to Work with Fathers



Over 50% of survey responses included these **top five challenges/barriers**. These responses demonstrate both the importance and the challenge of identifying, locating and engaging fathers. The second survey question asked "Of the challenges/barriers you identified, please check the TOP THREE that you think are most important for where you work." These same responses were rated the top five, in the same order.

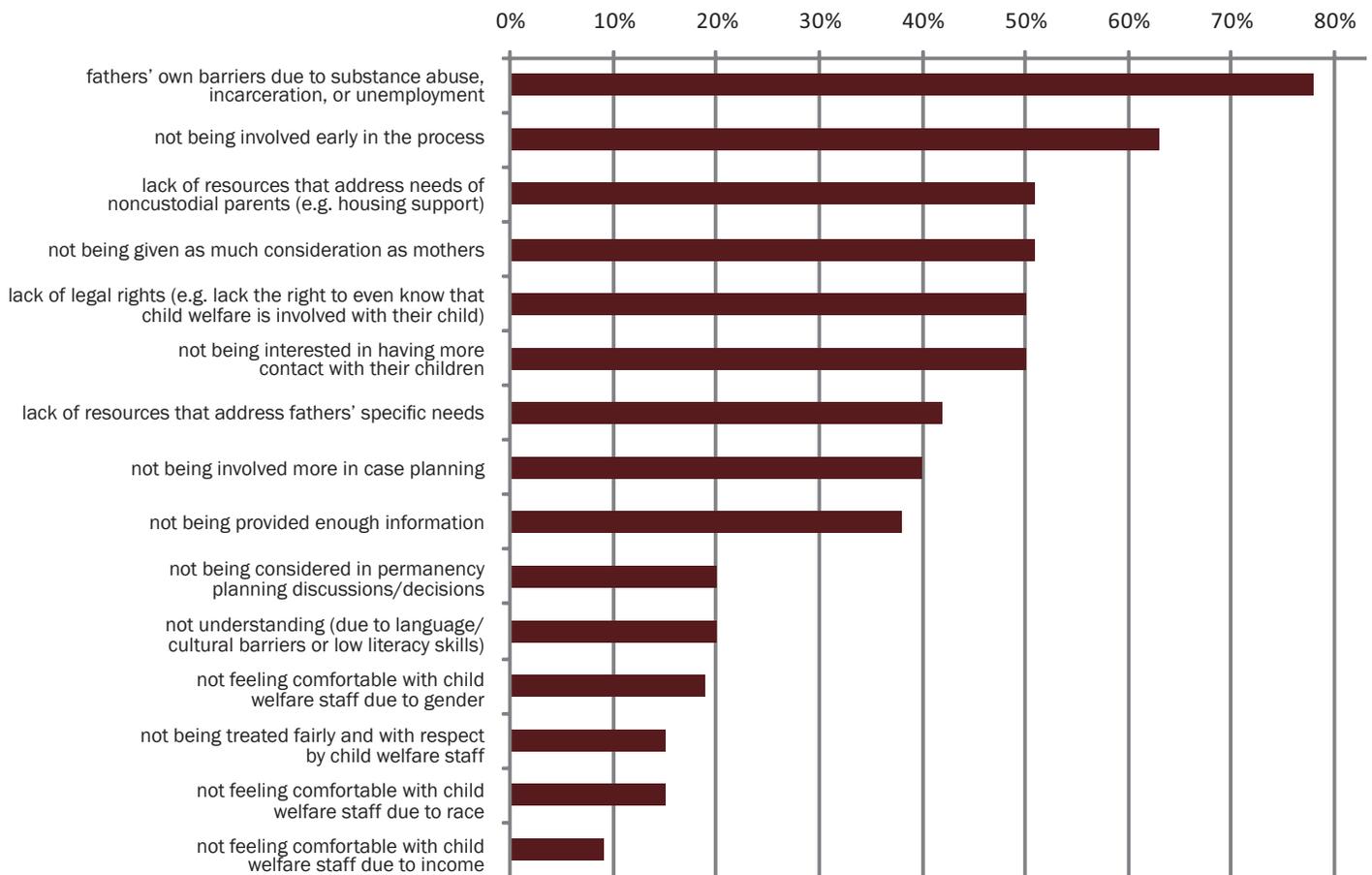
Research findings also demonstrate the significance of these top five survey responses. Approximately 1/3 of nonresident fathers are not identified at case openings, only 1/3 of mothers asked provided information to help identify and locate fathers, and only about 55% of fathers were able to be contacted.³¹

This **bottom group of survey responses** reflects a variety of themes including the personal feelings of child welfare workers; communication and support with stakeholders; training needs; and issues involving race/culture/gender.

The **middle cluster of challenges** was identified by 20% to 40% of survey respondents. This grouping of survey responses addresses child welfare organizations and their ability to provide staff with adequate time and support to better serve fathers, along with the need for more resources and services for fathers.

The survey also asked child welfare professionals to think again about barriers and challenges from the perspective of fathers.

Figure 8: Fathers’ Barriers That Limit Them from Accessing Child Welfare Services



The top responses for this question seem to fall into three main categories:

- Fathers own barriers and lack of interest;
- Case workers’ late involvement or non-involvement of fathers;
- Lack of resources for supporting fathers.

Meanwhile, very few respondents attributed fathers’ barriers to issues of respect, comfort or fairness in regards to gender, race, income, or educational level.

6. Success Stories

There were 99 survey responses to the survey question asking for examples of child welfare agencies that have successfully addressed any of the challenges/barriers around father engagement.

Those success stories were all reviewed, and further communication was attempted to obtain additional information from 20 survey respondents. From the survey responses, email communications, and phone interviews, the following five success stories have been developed:

1. Identifying and Locating Fathers
2. Involving Fathers
3. Working Through Mothers' Reluctance
4. Making the Commitment to Better Serve Fathers
5. Utilizing Three Processes

1. Identifying and Locating Fathers

The challenge of identifying and locating fathers was emphasized strongly in the survey responses; "difficulty locating fathers" was the top ranked challenge (from 78% of respondents) and "difficulty identifying fathers" was the 4th highest challenge (from 54% of respondents).

Despite the challenges around identifying and locating fathers, many child welfare professionals and organizations shared success stories in this area. In the first example, below, a decision was made not to identify the staff person, organization or county in order to protect the anonymity of the father, child and family.

This story took place in a rural county in Minnesota. A mother with drug and mental health issues could not take care of her baby. The boy has some special needs and was initially placed in foster care, but after some additional work was moved to live with an aunt and uncle on the mother's side. Staff explored the possibility of father involvement with the mother, and she provided the name of the man she felt (and hoped) was the father. He agreed to be tested but it was determined that he was not the father. So staff continued to talk with the mother, who was often reluctant to discuss the matter, but finally remembered and disclosed the name of an over the road trucker where there had been a one night stand. With some

staff work and assistance from the mother, this man's contact information was obtained. When staff communicated with the trucker, he agreed to take a genetic test and was found to be the father of the baby boy. The father had some personal issues as well, but was interested in his son. Staff worked with him on a slow, gradual process that moved from supervised visits to unsupervised visits to overnight visits to weekend visits. The father switched jobs to a day trucker and was also supported by a live-in girlfriend, so when the maternal relatives became reluctant to keep the boy, custody was changed to the father. The mother willingly agreed to change the boy's last name to the father's, and he moved back to the same town where the mother lives so she can have some contact with her son. So far, the new family is doing well and the boy will celebrate his third birthday in the upcoming months.

Rhonda Antrim from Traverse County Social Services provided this success story:

We had one boy, 3 years of age, whose father was incarcerated but wanted involvement. He was due to be released in a year, but given the 6 months permanency requirements, wasn't an option for the child. We identified his mother and father in Texas (the child's grandparents) as an appropriate placement but they had never met. The foster parent let the child call both dad and grandparents every night to talk with them. She showed him pictures of each while he spoke to them. Dad sent him some books that he had recorded on a tape so the child got to listen to the dad tell him his stories before bed. When we transitioned the child to Texas, Grandma said it was like they already knew, had met and had bonded. Dad continued to be in contact until he was released.

Several survey respondents emphasized perseverance and patience as two important components in identifying and locating fathers. Some of their comments include:

- We always try to find the dad and many times have found that the dads want to be involved, or at least their families do, and children benefit from having many adults who love and support them.

- We take the extra steps to completely search case history to identify fathers, and then use our resources to find addresses and legal paternity status.
- We use different systems to locate fathers (child support, financial). We send them invitations to meetings and court notices, and call them to include them in planning for their child, visitation, etc.
- We can usually locate the father through his mother - the paternal grandmother. Our success in working with dads is sometimes directly related to our ability to locate and talk with the paternal grandmother as she normally knows an address/phone number for her son.
- We look to obtain information from other relatives and check with "suspected" fathers.
- We utilized child support data to locate fathers.
- We have a good working relationship with our parental fee unit which has worked very well in identifying fathers.

Carole Cole from Carver County Social Services stresses the importance of locating dads as soon as possible to get them involved early on in the process. Her organization has developed a Father Inclusion Checklist to assist in their efforts to locate fathers, available at www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html. Additionally, the State Courts have an "Affidavit of Diligent Efforts to Locate Parent and Order for Service By Publication" which has a checklist of efforts that must be made to locate parents, available on the State Courts website.

Overall, the vast majority of individuals and organizations in Minnesota that responded to this survey understand the importance of identifying and locating fathers as soon as possible, but still find it challenging.

2. Involving Fathers

The challenge of "overcoming fathers' lack in interest/ability to be involved" was ranked third in the survey (from 61% of respondents). Some survey respondents shared interesting thoughts about strategies for involving fathers:

- I persistently contacted the father to give

information and establish that it was important for his child for him to be involved. I let the father know that the child requested to see him more, and I praised and encouraged the father's efforts to become more involved.

- The use of family involvement strategies such as Family Group Decision Making and case planning conferences increase the likelihood of father involvement or engagement.
- Contacting and engaging fathers from the get go continue to lead to success stories in my cases.
- I have been persistent about engaging fathers. I currently have a father who was released from prison and I began speaking with him 2 months prior about his involvement with his child. The prison systems that I have encountered have responded well to any attempts I have made to contact a father who is incarcerated.
- When we have a father who engages with us and wants to parent his children, we have been able to help him succeed.

Ronda Morehead from Waseca County submitted the following two stories:

Our Child Support Officers have been instrumental in assisting with information pertaining to non-custodial fathers. On more than one occasion, we have been able to locate fathers who didn't realize they had children and established paternity. On one occasion, the child was in foster care and dad attended the Emergency Protective Care (EPC) hearing. He was accompanied by his father, with whom he resided and who had helped him retain an attorney. I spoke with both dad and grandpa regarding the child's situation. The child had been injured in mom's care, and I believed that dad was the only one who could stand up and be a life-long advocate for this very young child. Dad was hesitant as he hadn't even known about the child, much less ever parented a child. They went home that evening and talked and the next day they called to say they wanted to be considered for placement. At the next hearing, the child was placed in their

care. After several visits, it was obvious that the child was loved and cared for in their home. They had “redecorated” their “bachelor” home with crayon drawings and many toys. At our closing visit, dad told me that he was glad we were persistent in finding him and encouraging him despite his reluctance. I continued to get photos from them years later, which encouraged us to continue supporting paternal placements.

In the second story, I was assigned a case where the children, both of whom had different fathers, were placed with paternal relatives. One of the dads had just enlisted in the military. He was in basic training when the placement occurred. The military was very supportive of his need to appear by phone at the EPC and subsequent hearings. The child was placed with dad’s family, pending his assignment to a permanent base. The child was able to attend dad’s graduation from basic training, and dad used his leaves to visit the child. We conducted a Family Group Decision Making conference over a holiday weekend and asked the commanding officer for permission to have dad in attendance. The families met and decided that custody of the child would be transferred to dad, and the child would join him at his permanent station. Dad was deployed to active duty just after the transfer of custody and the child remained with his family until his return to the States. He is able to keep in touch with the child, who has their own set of “military” camouflage, via Skype and webcam.

Several respondents reported that they have received training to better involve fathers – and lack of staff training was listed as a challenge by 17% of survey respondents. The Minnesota Department of Human Services offers a course titled “Engaging Fathers” that offers opportunities for participants to: identify and examine barriers confronted by fathers; develop effective strategies to overcome engagement barriers; learn and apply legal requirements for working with fathers; and increase child safety, permanency and well-being. Kevin McTigue from Hennepin County Child Protection Services teaches the course and

recommends it to county and tribal child welfare staff (with their supervisors’ approval). He works with participants (mainly women) on “understanding their internal biases” and helps them explore issues, such as safety and sexuality, that can impact their success in engaging fathers.

3. Working Through Mothers’ Reluctance

The second ranked challenge in the survey was “gatekeeping by mothers” as indicated by 61% of survey respondents. Several respondents questioned the term “gatekeeping” as an interesting word choice which led to the recommendation by one respondent “that professionals should be very careful with their choice of words in contacts with moms, dads, and everyone else with potentially high emotions in child welfare cases.”

In the survey, the term “gatekeeping” was not defined, but the term has been used in other contexts and can be described as the mother’s behaviors that act as a gate to open or close the door to father involvement. Gatekeeping is not always a bad thing. It can occur for positive reasons (to protect the safety of the child, for example) but it may also happen for reasons unrelated to the child (to punish a father after a breakup, for example).

A number of survey respondents reported a strong reluctance by many mothers to engage in discussions about their children’s fathers, as many of those mothers did not want the fathers to become involved in their children’s lives. It should be noted that there are often valid reasons for this reluctance, such as domestic violence. However, several respondents described how some mothers provided false information about the fathers to discourage staff from trying to engage the fathers. As one respondent stated “dads aren’t always what the moms make them out to be.” There are always two sides to a story. Child welfare workers may find a good dad, despite negative stories from a mom. Or they may work with fathers to successfully lessen the safety concerns described by mothers.

While gatekeeping by mothers was determined to be a significant issue, there were also some responses that featured success stories about how the issue

was addressed. One survey respondent stated “I have had success in two situations when the father is the non-custodial parent getting them involved simply by contacting them to ask if they want to be involved. Sometimes the simplest things lead to better outcomes. In those cases the previous workers had dismissed too quickly that the father didn’t want involvement based on mother’s responses.”

Tanya Sabol from Carver County Social Services felt that it’s important “being upfront with the mother about how we have to notify the father, but we also need to be clear about why we notify him - that contact with the father is for the sole purpose of child safety and continued well-being. We need to address the mother’s concerns about involving the father, and allow her to play a role in engaging the father, whether she makes the phone call or we do it together.” Another survey respondent from a different county had a similar perspective, stating that they address the “importance to mom in the beginning for father to have information regardless of their relationship with each other. This works well when mom knows that she does not have to have contact with the father. We need to address children’s best interest at all times and that means that we look at all family members.”

MFFN has developed two InfoSheets that can assist child welfare staff on this issue: “Gatekeeping: Mom as a pathway to healthy father involvement,” and “Talking with Moms about Engaging Dads.” Both documents are online at www.mnfathers.org/resources.html.

4. Making the Commitment to Better Serve Fathers

While advocacy efforts, legislative changes, organizational restructures, professional development, and technology advances can all be important regarding child welfare and fatherhood, one cannot underestimate the commitment that many individuals and organizations have made across Minnesota to better serve fathers. The “commitment” theme carried through many of the survey responses.

Kari Hohn from Olmsted County Child and Family Services described her organization as having “a clear expectation of engaging fathers” which aligns with the challenge of “lack of clear policy on when/how to involve fathers” from 24% of survey respondents.

The organization developed a formal policy “to ensure a family-centered practice in which frequency and quality of contacts between workers and parents is sufficient to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being of child and promote achievement of positive outcomes”. The management team heavily promoted this policy with staff. Staff have become more flexible in meeting with fathers during times that fit into their schedules. Kari added “a father’s work schedule can be thrown out by workers as a potential barrier to engagement in services.” They are also sharing their successes, challenges and questions with colleagues, fostering a positive teamwork approach that has led to increased father involvement and better outcomes for children. Various other Minnesota counties have policies that set an expectation of father engagement including Hennepin, Winona and Scott Counties. (The Olmsted County Child & Family Services Expectation for Parental Involvement is online here: www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html.)

Lack of services specifically for fathers (a challenge listed by 37% of survey respondents) can be an issue, especially in rural counties. But Deb Tuper from Aitkin County Health & Human Services feels that “services for fathers can be provided well in rural counties.” She cited several examples where the commitment of her organization led to positive outcomes for children and fathers. In one case, the father obtained legal permanent custody of the child after a lengthy process that involved locating and obtaining both formal and natural supports. Urban counties face different challenges, among them high caseload numbers, but the commitment can still be strong as voiced by one staff who commented that “efforts to involve fathers is accepted by every level of service providers and management at Hennepin County Child Protection.”

Many survey respondents shared individual stories about engaging fathers; but reading “between the lines” it was clear that the individual commitment of these staff was a key factor in the positive outcomes, despite the issue of lack of staff time (cited by 25% of survey respondents). Several respondents stated that “dads do want to be involved”. When staff built strong working relationships with fathers, many stated that they became even more motivated to provide top-quality services and resources to children and their fathers. Angela Starling from Carver County Social Services

echoed that feeling when she stated “when a dad shows some interest it makes me work harder.”

JanMarie Weidenbach from the Inside Out Coalition and Circle of Parents in Morrison County shared a story of an incarcerated dad who talked about wanting to get his life back together, go back to school and gain custody of his child. He was “pretty obstinate in the beginning,” but they slowly built a relationship of trust and understanding. He contacted Jan, as promised, when he got out of jail and followed through on his commitments. Jan provided encouragement and assistance, and while it took some time, the dad completed college and gained custody of his child. When asked what made the difference in this case, Jan remembered the dad telling her “it was finally someone who gave a damn about me.”

Survey respondents demonstrated a vital commitment of child welfare staff, their organizations, and especially the fathers themselves – and the relationships between/ among those parties – to work together for the safety and well-being of children.

5. Utilizing Three Processes

Many survey respondents described successes in child welfare cases involving fathers when specific processes were utilized, especially:

- Family Group Decision Making
- Wraparound
- Signs of Safety

Family Group Decision Making

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) recognizes the importance of involving family groups in decision making about children who need protection or care. It can be initiated by child welfare agencies whenever a critical decision about a child is required. In FGDM processes, a trained coordinator who is independent of the case brings together the family group and the members. FGDM processes position the family group

to lead decision making and the statutory authorities agree to support family group plans that adequately address agency concerns. FGDM processes actively seek the collaboration and leadership of family groups in crafting and implementing plans that support the safety, permanency and well-being of children. Several studies have found that the Family Group Decision Making process contributes to a high level of father and paternal relative involvement.³²

The Minnesota Department of Human Services provides funding for 70 counties and 8 tribal service agencies to utilize Family Group Decision Making. One survey respondent commented that “when workers refer to FGDM it makes a huge difference as it can empower the father and his family and support people,

helping keep the father accountable to people he respects, when needed. I believe every child/ father should have the right to a family involvement meeting - especially when their children are in placement. [It’s especially helpful to have] policies and forms that include timeframes and details of what must

be done to include fathers.” Several other respondents, including Scott Maloney from Family Service Rochester, advocate utilizing FGDM early on in child welfare cases, as this process can be effective in involving fathers.

Additional information on Family Group Decision Making can be obtained online here: www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html.

Wraparound

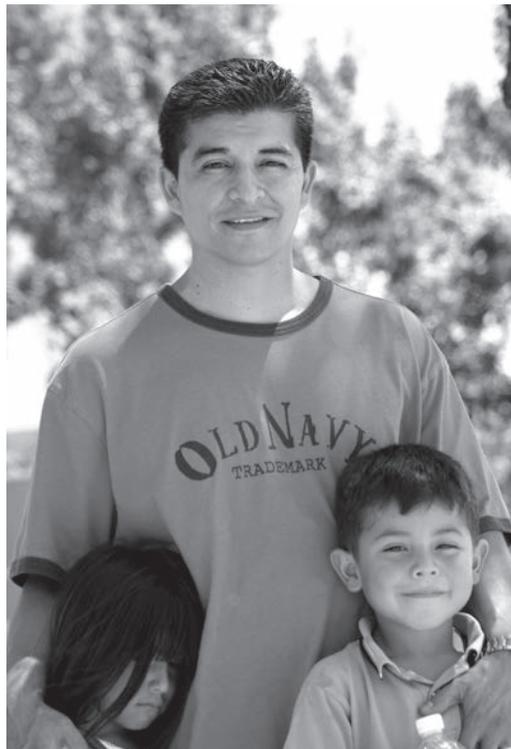
Wraparound is a type of intensive, individualized care coordination involving a team process that wraps services, supports and resources around a child or youth with a severe emotional or behavioral disorder to meet goals set by the team. Wraparound focuses on collaboratively serving those children and youth with complicated issues who are involved with multiple



service systems and often at risk of out-of-home placement. The child and family are at the center of the team and are actively involved in planning and setting goals that build on the strengths, including culture, and needs in the child's life. This process also utilizes trained and credentialed facilitators.

As part of their commitment to integrated services and interagency planning, many of Minnesota's Children's Mental Health and Family Services Collaboratives and Systems of Care promote wraparound in their work with families. Reports of the U.S. Surgeon General's Office and President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health highlighted wraparound as a promising practice.

Three grants to multiple county programs to utilize wraparound have been awarded in Minnesota. Rosemary Cyr from Wright County Human Services is an ardent supporter of wraparound. She feels that it's a very flexible process that often includes fathers because "kids want dads involved" so they are invited to participate. She cited one case "including a father in the wraparound approach to case management, even though there were issues between the parents. Through the wraparound team meetings, many of the issues were able to be resolved and both parents and their respective extended family members were able to effectively communicate and plan for the best interest of the child(ren) to meet the mental health needs identified. Coordination with all collateral agency personnel was more effective as both parents and their extended family were able to gain knowledge from those collateral agency representatives (therapist, school staff, etc) of the child's needs and support the child in interventions determined necessary by the wraparound team."



Additional information on wraparound can be obtained online: www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html. Also, contact Wright County Human Services – Rosemary Cyr, rosemary.cyr@co.wright.mn.us or 763-682-7445, or Tammy Peterson, tammy.peterson@co.wright.mn.us or 763-682-7501.

Signs of Safety

The Signs of Safety is an innovative strengths-based, safety-organized approach to child protection casework, created in Western Australia by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards working with over 150 front-line statutory practitioners. The Signs of Safety fosters the ability of the child welfare worker to approach child protection situations in an open minded manner by pursuing a balance of information from the first intake contact. The worker must gather information about past and potential harm and family deficiencies, but to balance the picture it is also vital to obtain information regarding past, existing and potential safety, competencies and strengths. This approach has attracted international attention and is being used in jurisdictions in North America, Europe and Australia.

Julie Terdan from Hubbard County Social Services commented that the Signs of Safety approach is being tried in over 15 counties in Minnesota. She states "we have a very good track record working to involve/re-involve dads. We are using Signs of Safety, which is getting parents to think about how to involve

ALL family/friends that support a child into a support network that takes ownership of checking in with kids/family in a support role long after we have gone away."

The first intensive Signs of Safety training to be offered in North America will be held in Chaska, Minnesota from April 4-8, 2011.

Additional information on the Signs of Safety is online at www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html. Also, contact Hubbard County Social Services – Julie Terdan, MSW jterdan@co.hubbard.mn.us or 218-732-2422.

7. Advancing Father-Engagement in the Child Welfare System

There were 69 survey responses to the survey question asking respondents to identify their good ideas, that have not yet been tested or implemented, to better serve fathers.

Most responses were related to staff/organization issues, but some were directly related to fathers. Many responses reflected similar themes, so they have been edited as follows:

It is our hope, at the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network, that Minnesota’s child welfare agencies will continue to make strides in connecting with fathers. We know the strong benefits that can accrue to men, women, children and communities when we nurture strong father-child relationships. Although budgets are tight and regulations can be difficult to navigate, families do well when men are included in healthy ways.

Ideas & Suggestions on Training	Ideas & Suggestions on Identifying and Locating Fathers	Ideas & Suggestions for Fathers	Ideas & Suggestions on Programs and Resources
Provide more training for staff on locating and engaging fathers	Make sure to know the legal status of the father	Fathers need to know their rights better throughout the process	Locate more programs and resources to support fathers
Provide more training for supervisors	Increase efforts to identify and locate fathers as early as possible	Fathers would benefit from parent training and support groups specifically geared for them	Advocate for more programs and resources to support fathers (in similar ways that currently support only mothers)
	Educate mothers better on the importance of father involvement for the benefit of their children	Fathers need better housing, employment, and transportation to better support their children	Contract with outside agencies (i.e., the FATHER Project and MAD DADS) to support fathers
			Consider culture and gender specific staff in certain situations
			Allow noncustodial fathers to make their own case plans of identified needs as partners to the process rather than treating them as if they are the parties that have done wrong
			Allow adjudicated fathers to be parties in the court proceedings without them having to wait until the permanency timeline
			Provide “web time” or “Skype” for children to visit with fathers who do not live in close proximity
			Increase supervised visitation center locations and hours

Endnotes

- ¹ US Department of Education, "A Call to Commitment: Father's Involvement in Children's Learning." June 2000.
- ² Kyle Pruett, "Fatherhood: Why father care is as essential as mother care for your child," New York: Free Press, 2000.
- ³ "The Effects of Father Involvement: A Summary of the Research Evidence," Father Involvement Initiative Ontario Network, Fall 2002 newsletter.
- ⁴ Glen Palm, "Involved Fatherhood: A Second Chance," Journal of Men's Studies, November 1993.
- ⁵ Adrienne Burgess, Keynote presentation at 4th annual Minnesota Fatherhood Summit, January 2007, St. Cloud, Minnesota.
- ⁶ Urban Institute. From the executive summary of: Literature Review: Study of Fathers' Involvement in Permanency Planning and Child Welfare Casework. Prepared under contract to ASPE, with funding from ACF. August 2002. Online: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cw-dads02/>.
- ⁷ Urban Institute, "What about the dads? Child welfare agencies efforts to identify, locate and involve nonresident fathers," US Department of Health & Human Services, Washington, DC, April 2006.
- ⁸ Urban Institute, "More about the Dads: Exploring Associations between Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Welfare Case Outcomes," US Department of Health & Human Services, Washington, DC, February 2008.
- ⁹ Note: Unfortunately, the data that we have about fathers' involvement in the child welfare system is limited. This is particularly true when the court is not involved, but this is true even when the court is involved. For example, we don't know how often custody of a child is permanently transferred to the father if the child cannot return home. (Fathers are lumped in with "relatives" in the transfer of custody statistics.)
- ¹⁰ Minnesota Department of Human Services, "Child Abuse and neglect prevention: Strengthening families is fundamental," July 2010.
- ¹¹ US Department of Health & Human Services, "Child Maltreatment 2008."
- ¹² Minnesota Department of Human Services, "Child Abuse and neglect prevention: Strengthening families is fundamental," July 2010.
- ¹³ Minnesota's Child Welfare Report 2009: Report to the 2010 Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services, July 2010.
- ¹⁴ Family's Guide to Child Protection, Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2010.
- ¹⁵ Minnesota's Child Welfare Report 2009: Report to the 2010 Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services, July 2010.
- ¹⁶ Minnesota's Child Welfare Report 2009: Report to the 2010 Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services, July 2010.
- ¹⁷ Note: Some of these are children who are placed outside of the home, particularly teenagers, are in a correctional placement. They are not there because of abuse or neglect, but because of juvenile crime/delinquency matters. Minnesota's Child Welfare Report 2009: Report to the 2010 Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services, July 2010.
- ¹⁸ Minnesota's Child Welfare Report 2009: Report to the 2010 Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child and Family Services. July 2010.
- ¹⁹ Minnesota's Child Welfare Report 2009: Report to the 2010 Minnesota Legislature. Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child and Family Services. July 2010.
- ²⁰ Program Improvement Plan Report, revised 12/7/2009, Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division, www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/children/documents/pub/dhs16_149037.pdf. Note: In addition to the federal CFSR, starting in 2003, child welfare quality assurance protocols in Minnesota were modified to closely resemble the federal CFSR process, so that each county in Minnesota now goes through a similar process as the federal CFSR.
- ²¹ Minnesota Department of Human Services, Quarterly Supervisor's Forum: Assessing and Involving Fathers / Non-resident Parents in Child Welfare Cases, 11/12/2009.
- ²² Minnesota Department of Human Services, Quarterly Supervisor's Forum: Assessing and Involving Fathers / Non-resident Parents in Child Welfare Cases, 11/12/2009.
- ²³ Minnesota Department of Human Services, Quarterly Supervisor's Forum: Assessing and Involving Fathers / Non-resident Parents in Child Welfare Cases, 11/12/2009.
- ²⁴ Minnesota Department of Human Services, Quarterly Supervisor's Forum: Assessing and Involving Fathers / Non-resident Parents in Child Welfare Cases, 11/12/2009.
- ²⁵ Public Law 105-89.
- ²⁶ Minn. Stat. § 260C.201, subd. 11a (2010).
- ²⁷ Minn. Stat. § 260C.212, subd. 4 (2010).
- ²⁸ Public Law 110-351. See a summary, online here: www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/FosteringConnectionsSummary.pdf.
- ²⁹ See, e.g., Minn. Stat. § 260C.150 (2010) "Diligent efforts to identify parents of a child; procedures for review; reasonable efforts."
- ³⁰ For a summary of the legislation, see www.mnfathers.org/May2010.pdf.
- ³¹ Urban Institute, "What about the dads? Child welfare agencies efforts to identify, locate and involve nonresident fathers." Washington, DC, April 2006.
- ³² Lisa Merkel-Holguin et. al., Learning with Families: A Synopsis of FGDM Research and Evaluation in Child Welfare, Protecting Children, 18, No. 1 & 2, 2003.

8. Additional Information

There are a number of resources and research documents related to child welfare and fatherhood. The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network strives to keep their listing of this information up to date and with accurate links. **All of the following information can be found here: www.mnfathers.org/childwelfare.html**

Advocating for Nonresident Fathers in Child Welfare Court Cases describes ways to work with fathers, practice tips for working with men, ways to navigate the court system, and issues related to incarceration, ethics, and male help-seeking behaviors.

Child Protection Workers: Engaging Fathers discusses research on child welfare agencies' efforts to identify, locate, and involve nonresident fathers.

Father Engagement Practice Bulletin provides expectations and strategies for child welfare workers to utilize regarding father engagement .

Father Involvement – Meeting CFSR Standards helps child welfare agencies improve their practice and outcomes regarding fathers' involvement with their children and their children's cases.

Fathering After Violence offers a framework for enhancing the safety and well-being of women and children by motivating men to renounce their violence and become better fathers.

Fathers' Rights and Roles addresses parents' perspectives of father involvement.

FrameWorks Institute: Talking about Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention offers tools and research about how to talk about abuse prevention, how Americans think about child development, and how to improve public policies and programs to lessen abuse and neglect.

Gatekeeping: Mom as a pathway to healthy father involvement describes how the behavior of mothers can act as a gate to open or close the door to father involvement. Additionally, **Talking with Moms about Engaging Dads** is intended to help professionals engage mothers to engage the fathers of their children.

Identifying, Interviewing, and Intervening: Fathers and the Illinois Child Welfare System examines the Integrated Assessment program used in Illinois.

The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children is part of the Child Abuse and Neglect User manual series from the United States department of Health and Human Services.

Literature Review on Non-Resident Fathers, Paternal Kin and the Child Welfare System was written by Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers.

National Quality Improvement Center on NonResident Fathers and the Child Welfare System is working to determine, through a research design, the impact of non-resident father involvement on child welfare outcomes.

The Protector: Dads as Assets for child safety and well-being describes the 5 protective factors developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy that focus on the prevention of abuse and neglect.

What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresidential Fathers examines child welfare practices with respect to identifying, locating, and involving fathers of children in foster care. Also, **More About the Dads: Exploring Associations between Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Welfare Case** explores child welfare case outcomes.

Working with Fathers: A Program Improvement Resource offers practice tips organized around the five basic child welfare casework functions of engagement, assessment, case planning & implementation, monitoring & evaluation, and case closing.



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