



Pursuing Father Inclusion at the State Level Through FRPN Planning Grants

by Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.

In October 2019, the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN) released a Request for Proposal inviting states to apply for small planning grants to develop long-term plans to enhance father inclusion in state programs and policies. FRPN is led by Temple University and Center for Policy Research, Denver. To maximize policy outcomes, applicants were required to create state planning teams that included the state child support director, a fatherhood or family-policy researcher, and at least one other state leader. Only one application could be submitted per state. Twenty states applied for a nine-month FRPN planning grant and in January 2019, FRPN made awards of \$10,000 to 11 states:

- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Kentucky
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- North Carolina
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Washington
- Wyoming

Grantees included states that were just initiating their father engagement efforts (e.g., **Wyoming** and **Michigan**), as well as states that were seeking to augment existing multi-agency coalitions and enhance funding (e.g., **Connecticut**). Grantee organizations included community-based organizations (**Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Wyoming**), a faith-based organization (**Kentucky**), universities (**Michigan, North Carolina**), two fatherhood service agencies (**Colorado and South Carolina**), and two state government agencies (**Connecticut Department of Social Services, Office of Child Support Services, and Washington DSHS Economic Services Administration, Office of the Assistant Secretary**).

FRPN funders/researchers supported the statewide planning teams by: preparing a logic model for each planning site highlighting their proposed goals and activities; conducting bi-monthly check-in calls to monitor each team's progress; organizing webinars on the origins fatherhood commissions, fatherhood summits, and engaging with state legislators; and providing teams with site specific technical assistance and resources. At the conclusion of the nine-month grant period, each team was required to submit a written "Goals, Activities and Feedback Report" (the "Action Plan"), in which they provided a final summary of their activities and accomplishments as well as their anticipated next steps. The following is an overview of activities and challenges drawn from site-specific Action Plans. A more complete summary is available at www.frpn.org

Activities

Collecting data on the status of fatherhood services and needs: **Connecticut, Minnesota** and **Washington** did focus groups, surveys, and interviews with impacted fathers to better understand their experiences utilizing state and county services. **Colorado** and **South Carolina** conducted stakeholder interviews as well as site visits to key agencies to learn more about their services and identify their priority issues concerning father engagement. **Kentucky** and **Michigan** conducted interviews and focus groups with both fathers and stakeholders, and **Michigan** additionally launched a statewide online survey to map fatherhood programs and resources across the state. Other states including **North Carolina** and **Pennsylvania** worked to develop online guides capable of providing comprehensive, centralized information about state and county resources for fathers.

Planning and/or convening a statewide fatherhood summit: **Colorado** will add a fatherhood track to a planned statewide conference on families in the fall of 2020. **Connecticut** used a Fatherhood Summit co-organized by three state-level agencies to present the results of its focus groups to a wider and influential audience of agency, executive, judicial and legislative attendees. **Kentucky** organized a day-long fatherhood summit for which it enlisted the financial support of the child support agency and a local foundation. **Minnesota** plans to disseminate the results of its data collection activities at the 2020 Summit of the Minnesota Fathers and Families Network. **Pennsylvania** collaborated with the School District of Philadelphia to conduct a statewide conference on early childhood development and the role of fathers. **North Carolina** partnered with the child support agency and the NC Fatherhood Development Advisory Council to augment an annual, statewide fatherhood conference sponsored by the Family Resource Center South Atlantic. **Rhode Island** will be the site of the annual, regional New England Fathering Conference in 2020 and 2021, during which it will disseminate father engagement information to neighboring states. **Washington** conducted a summit focused on the intersection of father inclusion and maternal and child health.

Multi-agency coalition building: A number of states went beyond the FRPN grant requirement to create multi-agency planning teams and brought more organizations to the table. **South Carolina** considered over 70 potential agencies for partnerships, held an introductory meeting with 20, and conducted site visits with 14 to better understand its potential fatherhood integration needs. **Michigan** created a statewide advisory group comprised of representatives of multiple agencies across the state which met monthly to discuss a vision for a fatherhood commission and identify resources and gaps. **Washington** created an Interagency Fatherhood Council comprised of agency and stakeholder representatives as well as fathers. In addition to hosting a multi-agency summit during the planning project, the child support director of **North Carolina** represented the planning team at monthly inter-agency meetings of the Department of Health and Human Services. **Pennsylvania** built support for a statewide fatherhood commission by collaborating with state and county-level child support agencies, legislators, members of the Governor's Cabinet and the judiciary, and business leaders. **Connecticut** strengthened its existing multi-agency coalition by building relationships with additional community agencies as well as executive and legislative branch partners.

Strategic planning and state policy review: **Wyoming** organized a formal, two-day, multi-agency strategic planning retreat that was facilitated by the National Fatherhood Initiative to help the planning team develop a short-, mid-, and long-term vision for fatherhood advocacy. **Kentucky's** strategic planning effort consisted of monthly meetings of a multi-agency planning group that was facilitated internally and led to the development of plans for a fatherhood summit, strengthened relationships with child support, and the creation of the Commonwealth Center for Fathers and Families. **Michigan** examined how current policies impact fathers and

developed internal policy briefs for potential action in the areas of child support, child welfare and criminal justice. **Rhode Island** held monthly steering committee and monthly workgroup meetings to develop a plan outlining eight top priority areas for action to be met over the next two years. And **Pennsylvania** worked with its child support director to develop a project to enhance father engagement by analyzing the current policies and practices of its local and state offices and by establishing Advisory Councils to guide the agency on new policy.

Legislator education and cultivation of legislative champions: The planning team in **Pennsylvania** organized meetings with key representatives from all three branches of government to educate state elected leaders on the value and urgency of fatherhood advocacy. **Rhode Island** held a “legislative policy roundtable” that brought together impacted fathers and state legislators to engage in conversations about fatherhood policy, held an outreach table at the State House in connection with a Family Policy Academy, and met with the policy director of the Governor’s Rhode Island Children’s Cabinet. **North Carolina** held a policy breakfast the day before its annual fatherhood conference for similar educational and relationship-building purposes. **South Carolina** held 12 breakfasts for elected leaders to discuss a vision for proactive fatherhood policy and met with the Governor and heads of eight cabinet agencies to discuss a public/private partnership for father inclusion. **Connecticut** and **Kentucky** connected with legislators and state leaders at fatherhood summits that they organized or joined.

Funding and creation of a permanent statewide fatherhood commission. **Colorado**, **Kentucky**, and **Michigan** began discussions about the types of entities that could host a statewide fatherhood commission, comparing the relative benefits of housing such a commission within a state agency versus a private non-profit. In tandem with this, state teams worked to uncover funding opportunities to sustain their long-term fatherhood work. **Colorado** obtained a \$1.8 million annual appropriation of state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to support county-initiated work programs for noncustodial parents. **Connecticut**, **Kentucky**, **Michigan** and **Rhode Island** all began exploring the possibility of applying for unobligated TANF funds. The **Pennsylvania** Strong Families Commission plans to introduce legislation in 2020 that includes an appropriation.

Main Activities Pursued by FRPN Planning Grant Teams						
	Interviews & Focus Groups	Multi-Agency Coalition Building	Strategic Planning & State Policy Review	Fatherhood Summits & Conferences	Legislator Education & Cultivating Champions	Trying to Create a Fatherhood Commission & Funding
CO	+			+	+	+
CT	+	+		+	+	+
KY	+	+	+	+	+	+
MI	+	+	+			+
MN	+			+		
NC	+	+		+	+	
PA	+	+	+	+	+	+
RI			+	+	+	+
SC	+	+			+	
WA	+	+		+		
WY			+			

Challenges

Time and distance: **Colorado, Pennsylvania, Michigan, North Carolina** reported that geographic distance made statewide organizing difficult. For example, while **Colorado** hoped to address the father inclusion needs of rural counties, project activities were conducted in only 3 of 64 counties. States came up with different strategies to overcome geographical challenges. **Michigan** held planning meetings in different parts of the state and discussed the possibility of regionalizing future organizing efforts. **Pennsylvania** hosts its annual statewide conferences in different parts of the state and created regional citizens' policy teams to work with state leaders on barriers to father involvement. And **North Carolina** realized it needed to host meetings in locations that are central to multiple state-level agency directors in order to best accommodate various schedules. As to time constraints, **Washington** said it was hard to keep state agency policy-level leaders "in the room and engaged." **Wyoming** learned that it needed to give potential attendees more advance notice of meetings and do more reminder calls and emails. **Pennsylvania** found that it needed to reschedule meetings with legislators about fatherhood when other events occurred that turned its attention elsewhere.

Changes in political administration and agency personnel. While **Colorado** hoped to create a statewide fatherhood commission, the new administration appears to want to reduce the number of governor-initiated commissions. **Kentucky** enjoyed strong state-level participation and support during the planning process and seeks to maintain key partnerships and endorsements despite a November change of governor and cabinet leadership. One state, **South Carolina**, described the difficulty of working with elected leaders when the legislature was out of session while another, **Pennsylvania**, encountered difficulties when was conducting a shortened session.). And following four changes in the director of the Department of Social Services in six years, **South Carolina** decided to focus its planning efforts on middle managers in various state agencies who are influential but tend to be more stable than top leadership.

Lack of data on fatherhood: Since there are few indicators of father inclusion and absence at the state level, many planning teams feel that fathers are "invisible," and that there are few "baseline measures" against which a father inclusion initiative might be measured. **Rhode Island** used the planning initiative (in part) to work with data managers of various state agencies to create a State Father Engagement Dashboard that will include measures of father engagement drawn from established data sets maintained by state agencies. They also developed and circulated a Father Friendliness Index to assess father engagement in state and local agencies and programs. **Kentucky** cited the lack of data on father engagement as a challenge for its efforts to create a father engagement initiative and to identify the laws, policies and procedures within different agencies that need to be changed. The lack of information of fathers' experiences with the perinatal period, or the "transition to fatherhood," led **Washington** to create and deploy a statewide electronic survey that elicited 338 responses, 85 of which involved fathers with children having a child 3 or younger. The lack of information on fatherhood services and resources, led **Michigan** and **North Carolina** to collect and map information on existing efforts to engage fathers through programs and supports across their states. And **Connecticut** used the Fatherhood Summit to highlight the issue of data development/sharing.

Difficulty engaging impacted fathers: **Connecticut** was interested in hearing from fathers who were not affiliated with an existing fatherhood program, but faced challenges recruiting them for focus groups and interviews. **Minnesota** and **Washington** conducted focus groups and surveys with impacted fathers but reported that participation was either not broad enough to be representative of fathers throughout the state or needed to include more marginalized

populations since they are overrepresented in state systems. **Wyoming** hopes to engage fathers in an advisory capacity in the development of agency priorities and programs but struggles with obtaining the “authentic voice” of fathers. **Michigan** decided not to conduct surveys with fathers due to a lack of incentive funds. **Washington** had the opposite problem: so many fathers were interested in being leaders in statewide advocacy, the planning team is working on how to effectively engage them.

Table 3. Main Challenges that FRPN Planning Teams Encountered

	Political and Organizational Issues	Difficulty Engaging Fathers	Geographic Distance and Time Constraints	Lack of Data on Fatherhood
CO	+		+	
CT		+		+
KY	+		+	+
MI		+	+	+
MN		+		
NC	+		+	+
PA	+		+	
RI				+
SC	+			
WA	+	+	+	+
WY		+	+	

Conclusions

The FRPN Planning Grant Initiative shows that many states are interested in pursuing father inclusion and that small awards coupled with technical assistance and support can be impactful. It shows that an intermediary, like FRPN, can accelerate the policy process by helping to define the road map for change, providing supporting capability, and coordinating planning efforts across multiple sites. Requiring that child support directors be involved lent resources and clout to the planning teams and promoted communication across state agencies and with the fatherhood community. The federal government has urged states to use TANF funds for fatherhood programs and child support incentive funds for workforce programs for noncustodial parents and adopt approaches to enhance paternal involvement in all human service agencies (OFA, 2018¹). The FRPN Planning Grant Initiative is an example of how the Administration for Children and Families might begin to realize these goals.

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¹ Office of Family Assistance (2018). Integrating Approaches that Prioritize and Enhance Father Engagement.” Information Memorandum-18-01. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/acf-acf-im-18-01-integrating-approaches-that-prioritize-and-enhance-father-engagement>

represent the official views of OPRE, **ACF**, or the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**.

Dr. Pearson founded the Center for Policy Research (CPR), a Colorado nonprofit, in 1981, to provide research, evaluation and technical assistance to human services agencies and policy makers on issues affecting children and families. Her research includes leading evaluations of new initiatives in child support programs including family-centered services, collaborations with workforce agencies, early intervention strategies, methods of avoiding and addressing child support debt, and addressing parenting time orders and access and visitation problems. Dr. Pearson directed the evaluation of the OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs in eight states, as well as state-specific fatherhood initiatives in Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas and Tennessee. She co-directs the national Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (www.frpn.org) with Jay Fagan, Ph.D. which made grant awards to 20 research-practitioner teams to evaluate fatherhood programs and build the evidence base in the fatherhood field. FRPN also made mini grants to organizations in 11 states to conduct multi-agency planning efforts to engage fathers in programs and policies for children and families. Pearson and Fagan are currently preparing a book on new research on fatherhood programs for Routledge Press.