

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SUPERIOR COURT FATHERING COURT
INITIATIVE
A Coordinated Approach Among DC Agencies

The Honorable Milton C. Lee, Jr.
Presiding Judge

PURPOSE

It is the Fathering Court's belief that by empowering fathers in the District to become financially responsible informed parents, many children will also be strengthened and empowered to become, well-situated, successful adults. Thus, breaking many of the negative, perpetual cycles that consistently face families in the District of Columbia.

The primary purpose of the Fathering Court is to provide persons who are currently unable to pay court ordered child support with long-term, substantive employment and to reunite them with their minor children after providing them with the tools to become fully participating, active parents. The Fathering Court's primary objective is to strengthen the family structure in the District of Columbia. Statistics have consistently proven that fathers play an immeasurable role in the healthy development of minor children. Currently, due to Grant funding, the Fathering Court is limited to a re-entry population in terms of providing its services. In currently providing these services, the Fathering Court has formed a number of partnerships with various governmental and private agencies.

GOALS

According to information contained in the most recent Access To Justice Report, there are over 75,000 active child support cases in the District of Columbia. Literally thousands of non-custodial parents in these child support cases are delinquent in their child support payments and have very little hope of attaining full-time, substantive employment. Moreover, many of these parents have strained or poor relationships with their minor children. The current model for processing child support cases is ill-equipped to address the needs of these families in a holistic manner. It is this population that the Fathering Court Initiative intends to service in the future.

The goal is to expand services to a population that is in desperate need of assistance, but may not have served any period of incarceration and are thus are not classified a member of re-entry population. It is ironic that the current Fathering Court Initiative model can provide service only to those individuals who have recently released from prison while not being in a position to extend those same types of service to fathers who are not currently under some type of law enforcement supervision. These individuals do not have access to many of the services that agencies such as the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) may provide in terms of employment assistance, and a host of other services, including parenting classes, financial planning assistance, and assistance with continuing education that Fathering Court is currently providing its participants.

PARTNERSHIPS

Some of the agencies that currently assist Fathering Court include: Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), the Child Support Services Division of the

Office of the Attorney General, the Department of Employment Services, Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative Council, Capital Area Asset Builders, the Department of Human Services, and the University of the District of Columbia.

CSOSA - CSOSA, particularly former Director, Paul Quander, has served a substantial role in the development, planning, and implementation of the Fathering Court Initiative. CSOSA has been particularly supportive of the efforts, goals, and objectives of the program and consistently attended our monthly Executive Planning meetings prior to his departure from the agency. CSOSA vehemently believes that the Fathering Court is a necessary tool to take job placement of its clients to a higher level and to fill in the substantial gap of "similarly situated" fathers in our community who do not have criminal records or have not served a period of incarceration. Wil Parker and Calvin Johnson, both of CSOSA helped design and implement the operational flow chart of the Fathering Court as well as developed the current legal policies and procedures of the program. These policies and procedures were honed and developed as part of a committee that was formed in 2006 and met on a monthly basis for over a year and still meet on an occasional basis.

Currently, CSOSA is providing referrals for Fathering Court participants through its Case Supervision Officers as well as working closely with the Program Manager in terms of assessing participants for services and developing a plan of action for success. The Program Manager and officials at CSOSA are currently developing a MOU to memorialize this referral process. CSOSA also provided successful drug rehabilitation services for seven (7) Fathering Court participants upon request by the Program Manager. Further, CSOSA has hosted several teleconferences at CSOSA for Rivers Penitentiary inmates for Fathering Court to recruit potential participants for the program.

CSSD – Child Support Services Division – The Fathering Court currently has a Memorandum with the Office of the Attorney General which provides for allowances for program participants, such as abeyance of Contempt proceeding for persons enrolled in the Fathering Court, arrearage forgiveness, decreased and incremental increased child support orders for program participants, as well as general support for the program's success.

The Fathering Court holds hearings for Fathering Court participants on Fridays in Courtroom 203. During these hearings, potential participants are interviewed, assessed, and possibly enrolled in the Fathering Court program. These individuals are also made aware of their child support duties and responsibilities by a team of CSSD representatives. There are currently (43) forty-three individuals enrolled in the Fathering Court program. During these hearings, CSSD send over a team of (2) trial attorneys and one paralegal who have been specifically assigned to prosecute the non-custodial parents in the Fathering Court Initiative. These individuals have been requested to work within the confines of the Memorandum created between the Fathering Court and the Office of the Attorney General in regard to its participants. Thus far, there have been a total of one hundred two (102) Fathering Court hearings conducted over the course of 2008 - 2009.

CSSD currently has the Fathering Court Initiative listed on its website as a resource for eligible potential participants.

Department of Employment Services – DOES – The Department of Employment Services currently has a MOU with the Fathering Court. The Department of Employment Services program, named as Project Empowerment provides Fathering Court participants with “soft-skills” training, such as interviewing, resume writing, and appropriate work behaviors. Upon successful completion of Project Empowerment, program participants are provided with an entry-level, subsidized job that is intended to last between 6 – 9 months. Fathering Court has acquired a professional job coordinator, named as Educational Data Systems, Inc. that will assume responsibility for finding participants long-term, substantive employment upon completion of Project Empowerment employment. DOES also provides referrals for program participants in need of other services such as housing assistance and substance abuse treatment.

Health Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative Council – HFTCC – HFTCC has been instrumental in the design, creation, and formation of the Fathering Court Initiative. Through grant funding, and after a competitive bid process, HFTCC has been designated, through a contract, to provide the Fathering Court Initiative’s case management services for the forty-three (43) individuals currently enrolled in the program. Grant funding allows for a total of forty-five (45) participants over the course of the funding period, which is not to exceed two (2) years. HFTCC is currently providing the case management for all these individuals.

Capital Area Asset Builders – The Fathering Court has created a MOU with this organization to provide program participants with various types of financial assistance. These services include: opening checking and saving accounts, financial counseling and planning, saving for and opening small businesses, as well as saving for a first home.

Concerned Black Men – The Fathering Court has created an informal agreement with this organization to provide its programs participants with mandatory parenting classes – which are conducted over a fourteen (14) week period. Additionally, Concerned Black Men provides program participants with a weekly group sessions, where “similarly-situated” non-custodial parents in the community meet with a mediator/facilitator to discuss various issues they face in regard to becoming better parents and ways to achieve this objective.

University of the District of Columbia – UDC- The Fathering Court has created an informal agreement with the University of the District of Columbia to provide program participants with access to a variety of free certification and continual educational programs offered by the University. Additionally, the University has committed to assist participants to become enrolled in Associate as well as Undergraduate programs in the future. The Provost of the University has also regularly attended the monthly Fathering Court Executive meeting and has personally assisted participants to become enrolled in University programs.

The Current Treatment Model under the District of Columbia Superior Court Fathering Court Initiative – The Fathering Court Initiative functions within the Family Court of the Superior Court. The Presiding Judge of the Fathering Court is Judge Milton C. Lee, Jr. He has been integrally involved in the success of the program and oversees the hearings for each case. He convenes the interagency workgroup to review progress and maintain input from the stakeholders each month. He works closely with the program manager to make the initial review each case and to monitor the progress made by each participant. The program manager is a full-time grant funded employee of the Court. The Fathering Court currently has forty-three (43) participants, and has conducted a total of one hundred twenty-five (300) Court hearings thus far.

The Fathering Court Initiative currently receives referrals from CSOSA through a quarterly list of individuals scheduled for released from custody. Those individuals on the list are cross-referenced with a CSSD database that identifies pending child support cases. The program manager has overseen and staffed all hearings as well as interviewed, enrolled, and drafted enrollment documentation for all participants during the conduction of these hearings before the Presiding Judge of the Fathering Court Initiative. The program manager has designed and created a file and program plan for all participants, documenting all activities, meetings, and appointments. Prior to every court hearing, the program manager conducts a team meeting where each participant's progress and goals are discussed. The team meeting is attended by the case manager, employment coordinator, staff members from CSSD and the custodial parent. The team meeting provides all parties with the opportunity to provide input on the treatment plan for each participant. The program manager has also established and maintained all relationships with the partners of the Fathering Court, including the production and implementation of MOUS, as well as conducting the monthly executive and various committee meetings. Additionally, the program manager has managed and provided service to all participants in regard to their employment and the provision of various other services, including educational assistance, housing assistance, drug treatment, financial assistance, parenting classes and mediation services.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Currently twenty-nine (29) of program participants are gainfully employed, with one participant currently enrolled in a drug treatment facility. All twenty-nine (29) participants are current in their child support payments, with no delinquencies as of their enrollment in the Fathering Court. In addition, many of the program participants are enrolled in educational programs designed to enhance employment opportunities. One participant recently graduated from the Excel Institute automotive training program and is actively pursuing employment in that field. The program manager has conducted several videoconferencing and outreach sessions at CSOSA, the Office of the Attorney General, and Rivers Correctional Institution. The program manager has drafted and implemented the design and processing operational charts of the Fathering Court, the eligibility criteria, legal policies and procedures, as well as an informational brochure created specifically for the Fathering Court. As of June 2009, the Fathering Court has two full-time case managers that are being provided by a contractual relationship with the

Healthy Family Thriving Collaborative Council. Additionally, the Fathering Court has two (2) job coordinators. Their service is being provided by a contractual relationship with Educational Data Systems, Inc (EDSI). EDSI has been highly successful in placing Fathering Court participants in full-time employment opportunities with benefit packages. (EDSI) is currently being housed by office space secured and provided by the Office of the Attorney General.

It is this model that the Fathering Court Initiative hopes to extend to a broader population. The benefits of the Initiative are well documented and could deliver this innovative approach to child support and co-parenting to many families that are not part of the re-entry population. The Family Court currently operative three child support calendars with approximately forty (40) cases scheduled each day. There are countless instances of non-custodial parents who have fallen behind in support payments because of lost employment, limited employment and educational opportunities and who are facing contempt without any meaningful way to change their circumstance. In most instances the options available to the parties to address these types of situations are limited. The Fathering Court model is particularly well suited to address the needs of these families and to provide immediate and long-term assistance designed to address child support and parenting issues. The Initiative has consistently serviced families and produced compelling results that are far greater than simply producing financial assistance to custodial parents.