



## MAKING FAMILY-FOCUSED PUBLIC ASSISTANCE, SYSTEMS, SUPPORTS, AND SERVICES ACCESSIBLE TO NONCUSTODIAL FATHERS

Since the Social Security Act of 1935 provided federal funding for [economic assistance programs](#) to help families with low incomes meet basic needs, noncustodial parents — the majority of whom are fathers — have experienced programmatic barriers to eligibility.

Under Aid to Dependent Children — the first iteration of need-tested aid to families with children — federal funds were restricted to families with single mothers or incapacitated fathers. In 1961, states were given the option to aid families with two able-bodied parents if one was unemployed (The Family Support Act of 1988 converted this option to a mandate effective October 1, 1990). Renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1962, federal law required aid to families under the option be paid on more restrictive terms than those with single or incapacitated parents. The US saw the share of minor Black children living in single-parent households [increase](#) from 22 percent in 1960 to 32 percent in 1970 and 46 percent in 1980. By 1988, more than half (54 percent) of Black children lived with single parents. We see similar disincentives for two-parent households today. Need-tested benefits can be reduced or eliminated entirely if additional household income puts a family over income eligibility thresholds — regardless of whether or not that additional income economically advantages a family beyond the need for assistance.

Created in 1975, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which returns a portion of the Social Security tax paid by persons with low incomes, required children be in the tax unit for eligibility before a mid-1990s addition for tax filers without children. Still, the majority of EITC expansions applied to tax filers with dependent children. Of the \$59.2 billion in credits totaled in 2009, less than \$1.4 billion was credited to taxpayers who did not reside with children. Eligibility for the EITC is restricted to unmarried, childless filers (including noncustodial fathers) who earn up to \$13,980. A person who works full time at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour earns \$15,080 annually.

The 1996 welfare reform law established restrictions to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits — which provide assistance to families with low incomes to purchase food — for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD). The ABAWD rule places a three-month cap on assistance to able-bodied adults without dependents who are either unemployed, work less than half time, or do not participate in work or training programs.

On the rare occasion when noncustodial fathers meet public program eligibility requirements, access is often complicated by administrative inefficiencies that burden families and undermine program intent to make it

easier for families to meet their basic needs. Arduous and duplicative application processes, varying eligibility requirements, and lack of systems modernization to allow for technology-assisted information gathering are some of the barriers to access for families already experiencing stressors associated with poverty.

A 2011 Urban Institute report found higher public program participation rates among families headed by single mothers and those where all members of a household have US citizenship status. This brings into focus structural inequities felt most acutely by BIPOC communities.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

The [two-generation approach](#) is grounded in research that establishes inextricable links between the health and well-being of children and the adults in their lives. We know, for example, that a \$3,000 increase in parents' income is associated with a 17 percent increase in children's future earnings. If we are to maximize the effectiveness of federal programs to help families meet their basic needs, we must consider policy options to remove barriers to access of such programs for noncustodial caregivers.

In a 2020 update of [Two Open Windows: Infant and Parent Biologic Change](#), Drs. Pilyoung Kim and Sarah Watamura, professors at the University of Denver, highlight research suggesting that brain changes happen in all primary caregivers — including fathers and nonbiological caregivers in addition to biological mothers — in response to the caregiving role.

Medicaid — the state-administered program that assists eligible individuals and families with medical care — provides [coverage to pregnant women](#) for all care related to pregnancy, delivery, and any complications up to 60 days postpartum. The [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#) similarly provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women; infants; toddlers; and children up to age 5.

The Medicaid and WIC programs have an opportunity to expand coverage during the perinatal period to include fathers and the full universe of biologic and nonbiologic caregivers to ensure whole families — as they define themselves — get off to healthy starts.

While states are permitted to provide TANF benefits to noncustodial parents, there is little evidence of this population being a priority. And although a federal mandate might undermine intended flexibility of the program, there are a few options stakeholder groups at federal, state, and local levels could pursue to encourage states to use more TANF funds in support of noncustodial caregivers.

- Congress could include a requirement for states to address intent to use TANF funding for noncustodial caregivers as part of state plans.

As a condition of receiving TANF block grant funds, most states and territories are required to submit [plans](#) to HHS for eligibility determination. Basic requirements for what a state must provide as part of a complete plan include:

- Outline of plan to assist needy families
- Objective criteria for delivery of benefits and determination of eligibility
- Certification of intent to operate child support, foster care, and adoption programs
- Certification of consultation with local governments and private sector organizations with at least 45 days for submittal of comments
- Basic maintenance-of-effort funding information

- Congress could require states to report on the number of noncustodial caregivers who receive TANF benefits and services.
- Local stakeholders could submit comments on their respective state plans with an emphasis on supporting noncustodial caregivers.

The TANF program has been due for reauthorization since 2010. With reauthorization, Congress has the opportunity to reimagine the program to support more families more holistically by guiding states to use funds to support noncustodial caregivers. At the same time, states should consider opportunities to align and streamline access to systems, services, and supports for fathers.

## THE EXAMPLE

A 2009 Congressional Research Service analysis found that refundable tax credits (including the EITC, child tax credit, and temporary 2009 and 2010 “Making Work Pay” credit) reduced the poverty rate for families with children by 29 percent but barely reduced it at all for single individuals without custodial children. There have been a couple recent attempts to expand the EITC to tax filers without children, including noncustodial parents, or noncustodial parents who pay child support.

- The Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2011 included an increase in the EITC amount paid to filers without children. This bill would have raised the maximum credit for such filers from 7.65 percent to 20 percent of earnings.
- Then-Senator Barack Obama co-sponsored a bill with then-Senator Evan Bayh in the 110th Congress to expand the EITC for noncustodial parents who pay child support. This bill would have doubled the credit paid to filers who were noncustodial parents who paid the full amount of child support owed in a given year.

### [Request for Information on Federal Coordination to Promote Economic Mobility for All Americans](#)

In July, HHS’ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation published a request for information (RFI) to gather input on development of a federal, interagency Council on Economic Mobility. Information provided will help inform the council’s priorities and strategies to promote economic mobility, recovery, and resilience. The council will focus on cross-cutting issues and establishing a more integrated and effective long-term federal strategy to promote cycles of opportunity.

Guiding questions for stakeholders responding to the RFI included several issues with implications for fathers and other noncustodial caregivers.

- What are the most significant challenges that prevent participants in federal workforce, work support, and housing programs from fully participating in such programs? Do these challenges present obstacles for participants in meeting their economic and employment goals?
- What federal rules do you wish had more flexibility? What flexibilities do you need to respond to economic crises?
- Are there existing workforce programs or strategies that have not historically been widely accessible to individuals and families with lower incomes that could help them achieve economic mobility, recovery, and resilience if they had better access to them?

## Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative

Connecticut became the first state to pass legislation on fatherhood in 1999. For more than two decades since, state and local partners have worked together to make policy and practice work for fathers and families — with an emphasis on those who may not live in the same households. The initiative is a statewide effort led by the state’s Department of Social Services (DSS) to help systems more effectively engage fathers for child and family well-being. The work of the initiative reflects objectives outlined in the initial legislation:

- Promote public education concerning the financial and emotional responsibilities of fatherhood
- Assist men in preparation for the legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of fatherhood
- Promote the establishment of paternity at childbirth
- Encourage fathers, regardless of marital status, to foster emotional connections to and provide financial support for their children
- Establish support mechanisms for fathers in their relationships with their children, regardless of marital or financial status
- Integrate state and local services for families

Partners in the initiative include:

- Connecticut Department of Children & Families
- Connecticut Department of Correction
- Connecticut Department of Education
- Connecticut Department of Housing
- Connecticut Department of Labor
- Connecticut Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services



**“IT’S REALLY HARD TO ENCOURAGE FATHERS TO TAKE MORE OF A ROLE IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LIVES WHEN THERE AREN’T SYSTEMS, PEOPLE, AND PROGRAMS THAT ARE SUPPORTIVE OF THAT.”**

– Lamont Thompson, Community Outreach Worker, REACH Ashland Youth Center, Alameda County Healthcare Services Agency

- Connecticut Department of Public Health
- Connecticut Office of Early Childhood
- Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

A full list of state and local partners can be found [here](#).

In 2007, five state agencies agreed to a memorandum of understanding to pursue efforts (specific to each agency and detailed in the agreement) that further the objectives of the Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative within and across agencies with the recognition that it is in the best interest of their respective agency goals and objectives to offer coordinated services, ensure continuity of service, increase impact and avoid duplication of services, and provide comprehensive services for fathers and their families. Fifteen state agencies have entered into this agreement since 2007.

Over the years, fatherhood programming across state systems and agencies has been funded by legislative appropriations, federal grants, and DSS' budget. Problem-solving court and employment pilots have been funded through the state's judicial branch, and community-based providers seek and use funds from private foundations and other external stakeholders. The level of funding for fatherhood programming across the state, however, has never been sufficient to meet families' needs.

### **Ohio Commission on Fatherhood**

Established through an amendment to Ohio's 2000-2001 biennial budget bill, the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood is a statewide body to support the well-being of Ohio's children by providing opportunities for fathers to become better parents, partners, and providers. Initial legislation appropriated \$10 million in TANF funds for the commission.

Commissioners are appointed according to statute and intended to represent the whole of Ohio's community of stakeholders committed to fathers and families. They include:

- Bipartisan members of Ohio's state legislature
  - Two Ohio Senators
  - Four Ohio House Representatives
- Directors of state agencies
  - Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
  - Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
  - Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction
  - Ohio Department of Health
  - Ohio Department of Education
- Community members, governor's office, and court
  - Governor or a designee
  - Five community members appointed by the governor
  - Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet member

- Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio appointed representative

Housed within the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood funds community-based programming for fathers with low incomes to build whole family prosperity. Commission-funded programs work with fathers and families to:

- Improve economic stability by helping fathers prepare for, find, and retain employment
- Build parenting skills through trainings and individualized mentoring
- Engage in healthy co-parenting relationships through conflict resolution and communications skills training

Commission-funded programs provide services for fathers who are currently experiencing, or have recently experienced, incarceration and advocate for the important role of fathers in building strong families and communities.

In addition to funding direct-service programs, the commission makes policy recommendations to the legislature, state agencies, and the federal government to support fathers and offers workshops to build leaders and organizations' capacity to support fathers and mobilize their communities in support of engaging fathers for child, family, and community well-being.