

Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support

Hearing on Celebrating Fathers and Families: Federal Support for Responsible Fatherhood
Witness Testimony of Halbert Sullivan
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Good afternoon. Thank you to Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and the members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing. Fatherhood is an important issue for families all over the country, and I have been involved in helping fathers and families succeed for over 21 years. Currently, I am the founder and CEO of the Fathers' Support Center in St. Louis, Missouri.

The Fathers' Support Center St. Louis (FSC) has been providing father centered services for over 21 years, during that time we have reached over 16,000 fathers and impacted over 40,000 children. Our agency is rooted in our community: we receive referrals from Family Courts, Probation/Parole, our City and County Justice Centers and Child Support Enforcement, in addition to other organizations that work on family reunification issues.

FSC is a current recipient of an HHS New Pathways for Fathers and Families Grant. We provide services to over 500 fathers annually and our current grant is at \$2M annually, of which over \$400K goes towards evaluation. Annually we need to raise an additional \$500K to support the services we provide to our fathers which cannot be covered using grant funds. Fatherhood programs need to take a comprehensive approach to impact the problems faced by children growing up without a father in their lives.

In **2018** our Program Return on Investment (PROI) was over \$13M on an investment of \$3.6M. Amongst other factors, this PROI included:

- *In 2018*, 183 fathers in our Responsible Father program gaining employment that equated to \$5.8M going into our local economy,
- *In 2018*, 216 fathers from our Reentry Programs gaining employment that equated to over \$3.8M going into our local economy and a reduction on recidivism (down to 12%), and
- *In 2018*, 120 fathers paying over \$368,000 into the Child Support System (Since 2016 FSC has participated in a pilot with our State Child Support Enforcement and as a result of this pilot, by June 30, 2019 FSC clients will have paid over \$1M into the Child Support System).

Our program is built around teaching responsible behavior, first. We attempt to assist that father with changing the way he thinks about himself and how he thinks about his involvement with his child. For example, one of our clients who has two children, ages 8 and 11, recently made this statement to his Educator/Facilitator, "During my first week of class Mr. Sullivan asked me why I'm in this program you and your family are small business owners; I'm in this program because I needed to be a better father and I'm a better father today than I was when I started that's why I'm in this program." This father came to FSC to get assistance with visitation. The child is at the center of what we do and employment is the most urgent area that we address.

FSC staff work to help our fathers find employment by creating personal relationships with employers. Through these relationships we learn exactly how likely an employer is to hire a person with the barriers our fathers may have i.e., criminal record, no high school diploma and not work history. Each employment staffer will have a minimum of 25 prospective employers that they work with. At FSC we conduct “hiring fairs” for each class – a hiring fair is not to be confused with a jobs fair – employers are invited only if they are prepared to hire on the spot.

An investment in responsible fatherhood programs is an investment for children, families and communities. Programs that seek to change the direction of our families and in particular our low-income families should be built to be comprehensive and take a holistic approach and should include:

- Provide a therapeutic and trusting environment (*To develop trust our staff is very father friendly and FSC has hired most of our Educator/Facilitators from fathers who had a one-time been an actual client in the program. The Educator/Facilitator is with a Social Worker/Therapist and a Job Developer, these three staff will be with the client from the beginning to the end. The Educator/Facilitator provides the day-to-day curriculum content along with the Social Worker/Therapist. The first activity each morning is a therapeutic circle where the participants are allowed to vent their frustration – with the Therapist/Educator – the fathers are given a chance to be heard and not just lectured to.*)
- Parenting Skills Training (to include activities that can enrich the father/child interaction where appropriate)
- Economic Stability and Employment Readiness (employment readiness starts with addressing literacy skills, GED and ends with providing skills training)
- Employment Placement
- Healthy Relationship Skills Building (how to interact with the mother of the child)

In building a comprehensive approach the program needs to include:

- Interventions with Child Support Enforcement
- Provide Trauma Informed Care interventions (remove or redefine the restriction around providing services for this activity)
- Assistance with obtaining legal visitation and other rights
- Feature opportunities for father/child bonding (remove or redefine the restriction around purchasing food for this activity). Father/child bonding activities combined with parenting classes allow for our staff to observe the fathers actual parenting skills in action. An example of the father/child bonding activities we promote normally are centered on taking the father/child (and on occasion the mothers) to the art museums, history museums, movies and to the science center. I/we tend to focus on the arts but we occasionally will receive group tickets to sporting events. Most of our bonding activities take ½ a day or more, food is a requirement when you have children at these events for that length of time. The objective of this activity is to get the father some time with his child and to observe his interaction and parenting skills with his child. On one of our last bonding outings (*Client expressed his thanks for the opportunity to spend this time with his child. The child was 8 years old and the father had not had time with his child for*

*over 2 years and the father learned during this outing what his child's favorite color was.
This Father came to FSC to get assistance with employment placement).*