

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Fatherhood in Texas: Texas Supports Fathers, But Can Do More

The state of Texas recognizes the important role that fathers play in the lives of their children and families. Healthy father involvement is linked to better outcomes on nearly every measure of child wellbeing including cognitive and emotional development,¹ academic success,² reduced delinquency,^{3,4} and improved mental health.⁵ In addition to fathers' direct involvement with their children, fathers' provision of financial resources, either formally or informally, reduces material hardship for families and mitigates the negative impacts of poverty on child wellbeing and outcomes.⁶ Texas also understands that fathers' needs are distinct from those of mothers and other family members. Father-specific supports in Texas feature an array of services, including state-funded programs and local initiatives designed to increase fathers' economic self-sufficiency and improve their parenting knowledge and skills. Although Texas has taken important steps to support fathers, opportunities remain for the state to do more for fathers and to contribute to improving the wellbeing of children.

State-Level Father Supports

Future parents

Providing support for individuals before they become parents can help set the stage for a successful transition to parenthood. Texas' Parenting and Paternity Awareness (p.a.p.a.) curriculum, offered in public middle and high schools including those in Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) state-operated facilities,⁷ provides information to students on the rights, responsibilities, and realities of parenting.⁸ The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) provides information for expectant fathers on its Healthy Texas Babies website.⁹

Paternal establishment

Texas offers unmarried parents two paths to paternity establishment: the voluntary Acknowledgement of Paternity (AOP) form, which fathers can complete at a certified hospital or child support office, or a court order. In cases of disputed paternity, the state pays for genetic testing. Paternity must be established for a child to receive child support and for a father to have legal rights to the child, including visitation.¹⁰ DSHS's Vital Statistics Unit also offers a paternity registry where a father can voluntarily file his intent to claim paternity before the birth of a child and no later than 31 days after the child's birth to preserve his parental rights.¹¹

Child custody and visitation

For unmarried or divorced parents, Texas law presumes joint managing conservatorship,^{12,1} meaning that both parents have legal rights and responsibilities, though not necessarily equal possession of the child.¹³ In recognition of the importance of parental involvement, Texas requires child support orders to be accompanied by a parenting time plan to promote access and visitation,¹⁴ and requires adherence to the visitation court orders, regardless of whether the noncustodial parent (NCP) is paying child support.¹⁵ Texas is the only state to require that a child support order be accompanied by a parenting time plan.¹⁶ The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) Child Support Division dedicates resources to assist NCPs in establishing and enforcing access and visitation, including a phone hotline and online resource directory.¹⁷

Child support

Texas requires NCPs to provide financially for their children. However, the state also understands that parents may face challenges and circumstances that make it difficult to meet their financial obligations. NCPs can request a child support order modification because of to a material and substantial change in circumstances through the Child Support Review Process or the court system.¹⁸ To help NCPs meet their obligations, the OAG's Child Support Division, in partnership with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), pioneered the NCP Choices program, providing employment services and enhanced child support compliance monitoring services for NCPs who make a low income and who are unemployed or underemployed.¹⁹ The OAG also provides resources and information about child support to incarcerated, recently released, and paroled parents.²⁰

Support throughout the child's life

Texas has several programs and services in place to support fathers and their families. The Department of Family and Protective Services' (DFPS) Prevention and Early Intervention Division (PEI) offers one of the only state-level father-specific programs, the Fatherhood Educating Fathers for Empowering Children Tomorrow (EFFECT) programs. In addition, DFPS PEI's Military Families and Veteran Pilot Prevention Program, Help through Intervention and

¹ Exceptions are made in cases of family violence or sexual abuse (Tex. Fam. Code § 153.004).

Prevention (HIP), Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Supports (HOPES), Safe Babies, and Texas Home Visiting (THV) provide parenting education and support to parents, including fathers, to increase families' protective factors, and improve children's wellbeing.²¹

DFPS' Child Protective Services Division (CPS) put in place a Responsible Fathering initiative to increase outreach and provide information and support to fathers of children in the child welfare system.²² The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) helps parents locate high-quality, accessible childcare,²³ and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides support and guidance to parents whose children are in pre-K through Family Engagement Plans in each district and the Start Smart Texas initiative.²⁴ The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) partners with local volunteer organizations to offer parenting programs in its facilities²⁵ and offers a resource center for incarcerated parents and their families called GO KIDS.^{26,27} Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, a statewide educational agency that partners with the nationwide Cooperative Extension System of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Texas county governments, developed the Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) program to encourage fathers and father figures to read to their children daily.²⁸

Interagency collaboration

Starting in 2016, as part of the state's larger efforts to support fathers, build knowledge, and raise awareness of the state of fatherhood programs in Texas, DFPS PEI and the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) co-host annual Texas Fatherhood Summits.² The summits bring together hundreds of service providers, researchers, advocates, and representatives from government and state agencies, and community nonprofits.²⁹ From January 2016 to March 2019, CFRP and PEI convened quarterly meetings of the Texas Fatherhood Interagency Workgroup (TFIW). The TFIW seeks to raise awareness of fathers' roles and impacts on family wellbeing, identify ways to better support fathers, and build connections and capacity for cross-agency collaboration. Fatherhood stakeholders from seven Texas state agencies, DFPS, DSHS, OAG, TEA, TJJD, TWC, and HHSC, founded the TFIW, and representatives of TDCJ, Texas Department of Transportation, and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board joined later.

Local-Level Father Supports

Many programs exist, but most are in urban communities and target both parents, not fathers specifically

More than 70 programs exist across Texas to provide fathers with the tools they need to be effective and involved parents. Although funding information is not available for all of the programs, state or federal sources, or a combination of the two, appear to fund the majority of programs. Nonprofits and other local organizations operate these programs at the local level,

² The 2018 Fatherhood Summit: Engaging Communities, Strengthening Families will be held at the University of Texas at Austin on June 29, 2018.

serving just one city or county, with only a handful operating in multiple counties.³⁰ Organizations direct many programs toward fathers and mothers, and offer general parenting skills education or resources. Organizations aim other programs toward specific parent populations, such as the parents of teenagers, parents in the child welfare system, NCPs, current or former members of the armed forces, and incarcerated parents.³¹

The Fatherhood Coalition of Tarrant County,³² the San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign,³³ and the Central Texas Fatherhood Group provide local models for serving fathers through fatherhood programs, mentorship, and support groups, as well as partnerships with local agencies, organizations, and businesses.³⁴

Gaps in Services to Fathers

State Level

No official state-level body exists to promote comprehensive policies and services for fathers

Acknowledging the gap in comprehensive services and programming for fathers, some states have developed broad state-led initiatives to support fathers and address some of the systemic challenges they face. Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Ohio, and Virginia have created state fatherhood commissions to raise awareness about the importance of father involvement, advise state agencies on best practices for providing and coordinating services for fathers, and review policy and legislation to assess the impact on fathers and families.^{35,36} In particular, Connecticut, Ohio, and Virginia help build capacity at the local level by supporting local responsible fatherhood programs through funding or training.^{37,38}

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Texas was on the forefront of promoting father involvement. At the Texas Fatherhood Forum: A Statewide Call to Action in 1998, then-Governor Bush announced the creation of the Texas Fatherhood Initiative (TFI), which consisted of a statewide public awareness campaign and the creation of an organization to provide referrals, educational materials, and technical assistance to community-based fatherhood programs across the state.^{39,40} The TFI also provided seed grants for local fatherhood programs.⁴¹ The TFI did not last beyond Governor Perry's administration.

Agencies need greater coordination of efforts to support fathers

As mentioned previously, CFRP and PEI convened the TFIW on a quarterly basis from 2016 to 2019 and maintained an email listserv from 2019 to 2021 to share the work they are doing to support fathers and their families and identify opportunities for collaboration. Despite the value of this workgroup, Texas state agencies need further support to coordinate their work with one another. For example, multiple agencies have platforms to share information with parents, including HHSC's Healthy Texas Baby Initiative,⁴² TEA's Start Smart Texas,⁴³ and DFPS' Help and Hope campaign.⁴⁴ However, agencies could do more to link to one another's resources or go further to create a no-wrong-door portal where parents can access information about all the state agencies and available resources at one location. Similarly, agencies can do more to

collaborate at the service planning stages and create policies and programs informed by and using the services and policies of other state agencies. Texas does not comprehensively identify or assess the needs of fathers in the state

Most states, including Texas, lack a way to accurately count and identify fathers. Collecting accurate data on fathers has proven challenging; large-scale surveys, the census, and research studies do not use consistent measures,⁴⁵ and mothers are often used as proxy respondents to provide data about fathers, which can result in biased information.⁴⁶ Without information on all fathers—both custodial and noncustodial, residential and nonresidential—Texas lacks important context on families and their needs.

Noncustodial parents need options for managing child support arrears

Many NCPs enter the child support system already in debt because of retroactive child support orders, and subsequently cannot meet their current obligations and settle their debts because of their low incomes.⁴⁷ Research indicates that debt compromise or forgiveness programs can support child support enforcement and collection.⁴⁸ Child support offices in California, Kansas, Maryland, and Minnesota have partnered with local fatherhood programs to provide debt relief and assistance in regaining licenses, in exchange for an NCP's participation in responsible fatherhood programming and contributions to a current child support order or debts.⁴⁹

Social services and programs focus mostly on mothers and children, not fathers

Texas state agencies strive to offer a whole-family approach in their policies and programs, but often leave fathers out. When program names such as Women, Infant, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program or the Maternal and Child Health program do not mention fathers, it is not surprising that some fathers may struggle to see their role and value in the lives of their young children.⁵⁰ Moreover, because mothers are often perceived as the primary caregiver, even in two-parent families, many fathers do not understand that they are welcome or expected to participate in programs and for parents, such as Texas Home Visiting or parenting education programs, unless they are explicitly invited.⁵¹

Local Level

Programs meet some, but not all of Texas fathers' needs

Currently, efforts to serve Texas fathers through fatherhood programs remain disjointed in terms of the populations they serve, the rigor of their evidence base, and the services they offer, including employment assistance or parenting skills. About two-thirds of the programs we identified are located in Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, or San Antonio.⁵² As a result, fathers may access programs that only meet some of their needs, if they can access a program at all. Moreover, although previous research on fatherhood programs indicates that men strongly value a “fathers-only” approach, in the programs we identified, only about one-third specifically direct their approach to fathers.⁵³

Local programs often work in isolation from one another and state-level efforts.

Although many programs target similar populations of fathers and may even operate in the same communities, programs frequently work in isolation from one another and from larger systemic efforts to provide services or promote awareness about responsible fatherhood. Many of the program providers express a desire for more opportunities to meet one another to share lessons learned and best practices. State-level fatherhood commissions or practitioner networks play a valuable role in connecting program providers and practitioners to facilitate communication and learning.⁵⁴

Next Steps

Texas should continue working to establish a formal state-level council to support fatherhood with a clear, measurable statement of purpose, and resources to support its agenda. In addition to providing guidance to the state on policies and laws that impact fathers and families, the council can provide and share resources for policymakers and fatherhood providers on research and best practices, and share a publicly accessible platform that would allow organizations to share information about the programs they offer and provide updates on their programs as necessary. This inventory would also allow fathers to more easily identify the resources available in their area. The council could also facilitate state and regional networks for fatherhood stakeholders to facilitate and support information sharing.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

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