

Region 6 RAC
FY15 Recommendations for SAC
May, 2015

After careful deliberation, the Region 6 RAC members identified two areas of focus to develop recommendations for DCF as part of the CRP Grant for FY2015:

- Foster Family Recruitment and Retention, and
- Services/Supports for Single Fathers

Foster Family Recruitment and Retention Workgroup Recommendations:

Subcommittee participants: Lisa Lumbruno, Mary Lou Freitas, Renee Hoff, Jennifer Avenia; Shirley Brinkley, Rosalicea Rodriguez, Elisabeth Cannata, Pascale Herard, Harold Fischer, Maurice Stuckney, Ronald Martin, Millicent Martin, Tom Murphy

Challenge to Address:

There is a shortage of available foster homes for adolescents.

Future vision for Region 6

To have enough homes for all teens, starting with kinship care, and to be able to retain foster families by providing adequate supports

Identified Contributing Factors

- Lack of awareness about the need (people know that there are cats and dogs in need of homes, but don't realize that there are *children in their communities* that don't have a family to live with; messaging about foster care need is not big enough or continuous enough)
- Teenagers are “scary” – foster families wanting younger children because they think that teenagers are more difficult to engage/manage
- Potential families/kin may not be aware of the supports that could be available to support families taking in a teenager (e.g. through Caregiver Support Team, through therapeutic foster care, supported access to array of quality behavioral health and other support services in the region for both the children and families)

Recommendations to get us there

Expand recruitment strategies:

- Increase youth presence at trainings (especially TIPS/MAPS)
- Increase recruitment through other targeted organizations, for examples:
 - Churches (possibly start at the top of the organizational level e.g. diocese)
 - Nurses Organization
 - UConn (e.g. sporting events)
 - Community events, but be BIGGER than just a booth
 - Community Chats to breakdown myths such as what it takes to be a foster parent (for example you can be single or you can rent an apartment)
- Increase recruitment through high schools
 - Start at the superintendent level
 - Use private providers (not just DCF)
 - Target teachers (e.g. during professional development)
 - Target families (e.g. PTO's)
 - Engage youth in recruitment (not just youth in foster care, but youth more generally)
 - using social media to spread the word about the need for foster homes within teen audiences – e.g. through twitter messages or chatrooms that are popular with teens
 - Enlist youth public service groups and clubs at the high school
- Reach out to Pat O'Brian and "You Gotta' Believe!"
- Promote success stories regularly like in newspapers
- Make the need for homes more *personal/local* - "5 children in New Britain need a home tonight" or "kids in your town need families to care for them" ..." or children saying "I need a family" as opposed to the words "foster care".
- Campaigns must present teens in a positive image: Teens are NOT scary! One RAC member wrote script for short video clips depicting teens in everyday contexts with messages that might enlist interest/compassion about teens to promote interest in supporting teens' needs/struggles
- Personal stories from teens (contact Youth Advisory Board, also youth member of RAC willing to present to audiences to share his story and foster care success)
- Use social media (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube)
- Make a 3-minute video for churches and other organizations to use

- Identify and recruit a celebrity (actor or athlete) to become the face of successful foster care. Specifically it should be someone from Connecticut who was in foster care in Connecticut
- Identify which strategies have been successful in the past and repeat them
- Increase use of existing awareness campaigns, for example already existing public service commercials
- Identify college programs where interns can assist with awareness and commercials at no cost

Existing Strengths in Region 6 to draw upon

- Creativity (e.g. one member developed a script of various video “clips” that could be used to decrease the negative perception of adolescents).
- Access to free video-taping for recruitment videos (via Jackie Ford) and potentially through one of the local universities.
- Multiple therapeutic foster care providers to partner with DCF, offering wide range of choices for families
- Active participation of families, including foster families on the RAC
- Youth with foster care experience on RAC
- Local advocate, Pat O’Brian (Wendy’s Wonderful Kids)

Recommendations from the Region 6 RAC Resources\Supports for Single Fathers**Workgroup:**

Subcommittee Membership: Robin Puchala, Sherman Douglas, Miligros Rodiguez, Lisa Palazzo, Mary McCallister, Dave Thompkins, Nydia Dominguez, Tina Jefferson, Manuel Sandoval, Tabor Napiello, Marie Mormile-Mehler, Ashley Miller, Brigitte Brown, Erik Valentin, Michele Ruiz

The Challenge We Want to Address: Need for services and supports for single fathers, particularly those with DCF-involved children, in raising their children, particularly in the New Britain/Meriden Region.

Vision : Single fathers raising their children, particularly those involved with DCF, should have identical and equal access to services and supports as any female headed families with children. Fathers will receive equal treatment to mothers by DCF and community providers.

Needs:

1. Housing Resources for Fathers and Their Children – There is a gap in services for single fathers and their children in accessing Emergency Shelters, Transitional Living Programs and Permanent Supportive Housing. According to the CT Coalition to End Homelessness and anecdotal evidence from numerous programs that support single fathers, there are very few emergency shelters in CT which will accept a single father and his children. Shelters may make special arrangement to house a father and his children but it is difficult and it is the exception, not the rule. In Fiscal Year 2014, only 73 families headed by dads were able to access emergency shelter beds in CT (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness Database: 2014). The data shows that three (3) families headed by dads were able to get emergency shelter in 2014 in New Britain. However, data from 211 Connecticut shows that 31 calls were received from fathers with accompanying children in Region VI looking for shelter between March 2014 and March 2015 (personal communication with Bo Anderson, MIS Director, United Way CT, April 22, 2015). This data shows a service gap between community need and service availability.

Very few shelters are designed to take a single dad and his children and these are consistently full. Alpha Community Services in Bridgeport, Marshall House in Hartford and the Access Emergency Shelter in Killingly are designed for families and have taken families headed by single dads. Very few Transitional Living Programs are designed for father-headed families – thus Transitional Living Programs are also needed.

Emergency/bridge funding for dads to pay security deposits for apartments or to tide

them over until they can be placed in Transitional Housing is also needed. Permanent Supportive Housing is also needed for dads transitioning from Transitional Housing.

Thus, the group recommends that DCF fund a pilot program for emergency shelter and transitional housing in the New Britain area for families headed by fathers.

2. Feedback from the Fatherhood Community Forum, sponsored by the Connect Initiative on December 13, 2015, and from fathers on this subcommittee indicates that fathers are not treated and supported equally to mothers by DCF and community providers.

Thus, the group recommends that DCF sponsor staff training for DCF workers and community providers in creating father friendly-environments, practices and policies. DSS has provided such trainings and can serve as a trainer. DSS partners with DCF to offer Fatherhood Trainings as part of the DCF Training Academy. DSS can assess each organization to determine how father-friendly they are and tailor the training accordingly. DSS Fatherhood Initiative can also do trainings for a specific DCF Regional Office. According to conversations with Anthony Judkins, DSS Fatherhood Program Coordinator, he provided a basic training to DCF staff in New Britain office about four (4) years ago. This training can be repeated to address staff turnover issues. Community providers may also benefit from this training.

3. Lack of funding for fatherhood programs. There are three (3) programs which support fathers in New Britain. Klingberg runs a 24-7 Dads Support Group and Human Resources Agency (HRA) also runs a Fatherhood Program. Hartford Hospital/The Hospital of Central Connecticut also runs a certified 24/7 dad's group program. The Klingberg 24-7 Dads Support group is funded through private resources. The HRA program is funded through Federal Head Start Funds. The current state budget eliminates funding for 6 certified DSS funded fatherhood programs. While this funding cut does not directly affect the New Britain Programs, fathers from nearby towns/cities, such as Hartford, may seek help from the New Britain Programs, putting a strain on these already constrained resources. Additional resources are needed to support these programs, particularly in light of the proposed DSS cuts to the Fatherhood Initiative.

Thus, the group recommends additional support for local fatherhood programs, particularly those that support the parenting aspect of fatherhood.

Community Strengths:

1. Much parent representation/participation in the New Britain/Meriden RAC; a parent, Manny Sandoval, is the RAC co-chair.

2. With the help of the DCF RAC, a Connect sponsored Regional Fatherhood and Family Resource Fair was held at CCSU on December 13, 2014. The fair drew participation from over 60 families, community members and provider agencies (see attached summary). This identified the needs of area fathers.
3. New Britain Fatherhood Programs are strong - Human Resources Agency (HRA) and Klingberg 24-7 Dads Program; Pathways Senderos also has a Young Men's Group.
4. Concerned, strong provider community – Klingberg Family Centers, Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC), HRA, Central CT State University, Friendship Center, Salvation Army Shelter, Community Mental Health Affiliates, Inc., Churches, DCF, DRS, DSS, DMHAS, CSSD, 211, FAVOR, System of Care, YWCA, YMCA, Wheeler Clinic.

THE CONNECT REGIONAL FATHERHOOD & FAMILY RESOURCE FAIR

The first ever **CONNECT Regional Fatherhood & Family Resource** event was held on Saturday, December 13, 2014 at CCSU's Student Center. Our theme was Fatherhood and a panel of fathers explored the special challenges fathers face. Over 30 providers and community agencies came out to provide information and resources to attendees; and in addition, 55 families along with 5 youth attended. A panel of fathers who shared their struggles with personal testimonies addressed the group and spoke to the way that fathers are marginalized by the system's unfair practices. The panel included fathers from our own Parent Champions group from Region 6 -- Erik Valentin, Isaac Gonzalez and Manny Sandoval; in addition we were honored to have Rep. Robert Sanchez on hand to share some of his struggles and speak to the importance of the Fatherhood Initiative that he heads. Other members of the panel included Beresford Wilson (AFCAMP), Kevin Woodward, Kevin Outar (Klingberg Family Centers), Kevin Daly (Bristol Fatherhood Initiative) and Cisco Santiago.

Elisabeth Cannata of Wheeler Clinic facilitated the lively discussion at the close of the event.

The panelists discussed the plight of fathers; how each father had struggled with their concerns to find support for their child or children or sought custody many times alone and with great difficulty. They searched for resources for their children -- educational, mental health services, custody, applying for services such as SNAP or housing and in each case were met with barriers, little or no support, little or no resources, poorly advertised resources and services and a general negative attitude. It became very clear that these fathers were not favored in the courts as caretakers for their children; were not treated fairly in the community or in getting services from agencies that normally deal with mothers and had difficulty with many resources and a variety of public agencies including DCF and DSS.

The story that affected the audience most was that of Isaac Gonzalez, now a Single Father of five (5) children. The highlight of his story is when his five (5) children were "dropped off" at his door at a time when he was without resources himself and told that he had to have them in uniform and in school the very next day or lose custody of them again. He has not lost custody to this day and his children are thriving. The severity of his story affected everyone very much and he is now our "poster boy" for this event.

Suggestions from the audience and a summation from Elisabeth Cannata, our Facilitator included these 10 "Next Steps" or Action Plan:

ACTION PLAN:

- 1) No wrong door – point of entry to the full range of services (from CONNECT Transformational Plan)
- 2) Access to services, resources, etc. as fathers.
- 3) What services are available? How does the public find & become informed and updated about services, events and resources for families?
- 4) Insurance issues -- what services can be paid for under insurance?

- 5) Transportation -- Is transportation paid for by insurance companies? Is transportation available?
- 5) How to change different standards for fathers from those appearing to prefer mothers?
- 6) Improving systems access for fathers, all parents and grandparents
- 7) Legal issues for fathers -- how to get custody? How incarceration affects custody & visitation.
- 8) Training and Assistance for Fathers -- how to parent when separated, encouragement for fathers, support from shared experiences.
- 9) Advocacy for fathers – how can the system change to recognize caring fathers as equal caretakers for their children? And how can they be treated more fairly? How to change the system for fathers?