



The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families

Assisting the Low-Income Parent with Access and Visitation Services

Pat Littlejohn, Executive Director
SC Center for Fathers and Families

Lisa Potts, Policy Director
SC Center for Fathers and Families



South Carolina Fatherhood Initiative

- The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families was founded in 2002
- The Center is an outgrowth of the Sisters of Charity Foundation's Fatherhood Initiative launched in 1997
- The Center supports seven fatherhood programs operating in 11 rural and urban communities across the state with funding and technical assistance.
 - Established between 1998-2000
 - Programs provide holistic services to approximately 1500 fathers annually
 - 65 % are voluntary and 35% are court-ordered
- The Center also raises awareness, addresses policy, and works to integrate fatherhood services and outreach into existing systems.



Target Population

- Low-income
- Mean age: 32 years
- Race: 77% are African American and 19% are Caucasian
- Marital Status: 52% never married; 23% married not living w/spouse; 21% divorced; 4% married
- Children: Average number of children: 2.4; median age of children is 8 years old; 77% of fathers with children under 18 did not live with them
- Education: 40% do not have a high school diploma
- Employment: 37% reported working for any one employer 0-2 years and 36% stated that they worked for any one employer 3-5 years



Why Are Access and Visitation Services Needed?

- Majority of fatherhood participants have never been married to the mother of at least one of their children
 - As a result, they do not have legal parenting time rights with that child
- Without a legal right to parent, participants must rely on the relationship with the custodial parent to have access to their child(ren)
- A custodial parent will often deny access to a father's right to parent:
 - If he does not consistently pay child support
 - When the custodial parent does not trust the father's ability to parent
 - If a new relationship causes ongoing conflicts between the two parties



Why Are Access and Visitation Services Important?

An active and engaged father who shares the parenting responsibilities of his child:

- Is able to participate in the joy and fruits of his labors through bonding with his child
- Is able to better identify the financial needs of the child
- Offers the child the emotional security and co-parenting that only a father can provide
- Demonstrates to the child their worth through involvement – father is one-half of the child's mirror image
- Is a more consistent payer over time



The Intake Assessment

At each fatherhood program, Access and Visitation services begin at the initial intake assessment:

- During intake, the participant is asked how much time he spends with his child each week/month/year
- If father indicates that little or no time is spent, staff ask about the quality of the custodial parent relationship, the quality of the relationship with the child and whether or not there is a legal visitation order established
- Father and staff develop a *One Man Plan* for the father who expresses a desire to spend more quality time with his child

* A Legal Visitation Order almost never exists



Access and Visitation Services

Fatherhood Curriculum addresses skills fathers need to succeed in increasing time spent with their child by:

- Addressing communication skills, healthy relationships, economic stability (including job readiness/retention), co-parenting and self-esteem issues
- Legal Curriculum focuses on navigating through common legal concerns such as past due child support and the legal right to parenting time
- Fathers learn, often for the first time, that because he and the mother of the child were not married when the child was born, he does not have automatic parenting time rights. Once paternity is established, a legal visitation order can be pursued.



Conflict Mediation

- At least one staff member at each of the seven fatherhood program sites is a Certified Family Court Mediator
- Custodial parent is invited to participate to address concerns with father's visitation and meet with staff mediator and father
- Custodial parent is given a brief orientation of fatherhood program including overview of curriculum and critical employment services provided to increase father's ability to provide consistent financial support in the future
- Custodial parent learns, often for the first time, that visitation has many shared benefits for her and the child



Results of Conflict Mediation

- Mediation meetings often take place periodically throughout the course of the father's progress in the program
- Initial meeting may only result in an increased understanding by the custodial parent of why visitation has shared benefits and the steps the father is taking
- Father's actual demonstration of consistent payments, better communication, etc., often leads to a custodial parent willing to negotiate reasonable access and visitation for that father
- Staff mediator assists by creating a written agreement for both parties



Legal Visitation Order

- Custodial parent and father understand that a legal visitation order is a safeguard for both parties to ensure the terms of the written agreement are followed
- Pro Se Form packets for legal visitation rights are available at each site for fathers who both express a desire for the packet and who are ready to visit
- Staff is trained to answer “process” questions about completion of packet.
 - Packet is written in plain language with details on completing, service of process, hearing attire and what to expect
- Legal Curriculum contains skits, performed by staff at program meetings, to illustrate the court process and reduce anxiety



Program Outcomes

January 2009 – December 2009

Total number of participants: 1594

Of the 983 new participants,

68% were unemployed; 43% gained employment

Paid \$602,584 in child support and arrears

47% reported hostile relationship with the other parent; 22% improved the relationship

51% had not seen their child at all or a few times per year; 40% increased time with their child

Of the 555 existing participants,

17% improved their relationship*

54% increased time with their child*

Of all participants, 10% established a formal visitation order.

**Improvements of existing participants' relationships may have occurred during prior year. These percentages reflect continued progress.*



Access and Visitation Policy Work

To date, the Center's Policy Office has:

- Advocated for Pro Se packet to be included in forms provided by Clerks of Court and posted on the Court Administration Website
- Worked with the SC Access to Justice Commission who have utilized the Pro Se packets to create a visitation packet that will be available statewide
 - These forms list the Center as a resource for non-custodial parents who are seeking access and visitation services
- Participated in creating training videos to educate Judges and Clerks about the importance of assisting the self-represented litigant and acceptable boundaries



Access and Visitation Policy Work

Currently, the Center Policy Office:

- Continues to advocate for visitation centers to increase the ability of low-income fathers or mothers to spend quality time with their children
 - Particularly relevant for parents who have not been actively involved in their children's lives as a way to transition to more active parenting
- Is involved in expansion of the Child Support Enforcement Access and Visitation pilot project
 - Limited in South Carolina both in geography and in ability to serve fathers who have passed establishment phase of child support order
- Advocates that sample parenting time guidelines be a part of adopted state regulations, similar to child support guidelines, to assist the self-represented litigant and Judges in defining “reasonable” visitation in legal visitation orders



Resources

Lisa Potts, Esq.

Policy Director

SC Center for Fathers and Families

pottsla@aol.com

Sample Parenting Time Guidelines, Pro Se Modification and
Pro Se Visitation information can be found at:

www.scfathersandfamilies.com

Fatherhood Programming → Child Support and Visitation