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Court initiative puts fathers back in children's lives

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The D.C. Superior Court held a town hall meeting on Dec. 5, to discuss the establishment of a Fathering Court Initiative. Over 130 community leaders, clergy and District of Columbia court officials gathered to kick off an unprecedented initiative to build relationships with fathers found delinquent in paying child support.

The goal of the initiative is to help the thousands of Washington, D.C., children who grow up without meaningful contact or guidance from at least one parent.

"We are coming off an intense reorganization of the Family Court. We redesigned the way things have been done for decades to improve the way the way the court serves children and families in the District," said Chief Judge Rufus G. King III.

The initiative will look at what the courts can do with fathers who get into trouble for non-child support payments to assist them in the areas where they are failing to help make them better fathers.

"We have an obligation to help children in the courts by helping to equip fathers, to be fathers and future generations of children who have been robbed of their childhood," said Family Court Presiding Judge Anita Josey-Herring of the Fathering Court Planning Committee.

The Fathering Court would provide these parents, especially those who have recently been incarcerated, with the tools to become emotionally and financially responsible for their children.

The D.C. model will be based on Kansas City's "fathering initiative."

"We will offer what ever assistance we can to help ensure the success of the program. It breaks my heart that many children can't touch their fathers for holidays and their birthdays," said Carey Casey, chief executive officer of the Kansas City-based National Center for Fathering.

"The true benefit is to give a long lasting relationship and child support," said King. Based on the success of the Drug Court and the Family Treatment Court, the proposed Fathering Court will combine needs-assessment, case management, and community resources (with an emphasis on employment) to give non-custodial



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parents the ability to meet the needs of their children.

The program will begin next spring and will continue for nine months.

David R. Jones Sr., executive director of Falconsedge Male Task Force, handed out flyers at the gathering to recruit young fathers to participate in his fatherhood program.

"We started our organization to respond to children with so many absent fathers in their lives. Many of their fathers are in prisons far away, unemployed, on drugs or dead," said Jones.

According to court officials, 40 percent of children grow up without a father, generation after generation. They learn their behaviors by social modeling.

"We are giving the children a life sentence without the possibility of a father," said George R. Williams, executive director of the National Center for Fathering Urban Father-Child Partnership, in an emotional skit he performed.

Court documents indicate in 2005 that 90,000 children were affected by outstanding child support subpoena orders. It was also mentioned that many fathers have problems obtaining employment because of prison records, drug problems and illiteracy.

"There's a big difference between dead beat dad and dead broke dad," said Williams. "Every child needs a dad and every man needs help to be that dad."

The overall goal is to increase the number of fathers contributing to the children financially and to involve the fathers in the wellbeing of their children.

"If the fathers are not empowered to meet their responsibilities, children will be left with no chance but to meet their fathers in their world," said Williams, a marriage and family therapist.

"We must raise a new generation of men to be fathers in their children's lives," said Casey.

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