



U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services
Administration for Children
and Families
Office of Family Assistance



NRFC State Profiles: Wisconsin 2009

Strategies Intended to Promote Parenting and Responsible Fatherhood

State-Funded Direct Service Parenting/Responsible Fatherhood Programs

The Wisconsin state government formed the Wisconsin Fatherhood Initiative in 1998 with the goals of: 1) eliminating any government program or policy disincentives to father involvement; 2) increasing public awareness of the importance of fathers in children's lives; 3) strengthening the ability of individuals and communities to improve fathering skills and relationships; 4) serving as a resource for programs and policies that support fathers; and 5) offering statewide leadership in linking public and private efforts toward these ends. Though not currently in operation, the initiative previously brought together scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and community leaders to exchange information and develop strategies to reduce the rates of fatherlessness in the state. It also delivered a successful public awareness campaign aimed at helping parents understand the critical role that fathers play in children's development. Finally, the initiative held a series of policy forums on responsible fatherhood throughout the state.ⁱ Wisconsin's Children's Trust Fund also operates 17 state-funded Family Resource Centers that offer parenting-skills training and support services, programs to promote responsible fatherhood and to increase fathers' capacity to provide for children's emotional needs, and activities to promote parent access and visitation.ⁱⁱ Finally, the Rosalie Manor Community and Family Services organization is currently using federal funds to support their Promoting Responsible Fatherhood program, which serves low-income fathers in Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha. Program services include parenting education (using the Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum), responsible fatherhood activities, mentoring, employment workshops, and a marketing and media campaign.ⁱⁱⁱ

State-Funded Programs to Prevent Unwanted or Early Fatherhood

Wisconsin provides funding for programs aimed at preventing unintended childbearing, with a special focus on preventing adolescent childbearing. State TANF funds are used to encourage delayed sexual activity and to provide access to contraceptive and related health services for adolescents. To this end, the state formed the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Committee (APPC), which collaborates with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and service providers and stakeholders throughout the state. APPC supports abstinence programming and also developed a statewide sexual health listserv for reproductive health practitioners and partners who serve adolescents. In addition, Wisconsin's W-2 state welfare program is designed to discourage out-of-wedlock childbearing among welfare recipients. For example, the W-2 program provides flat cash payments that are based on workforce participation rather than family size. The program also has family caps so that additional children do not result in additional benefits. W-2-provided case management services may refer families to family planning services or counsel couples to delay additional births. To help make families aware of family planning resources that are available to them, the state also has produced a guide for W-2 participants on employment-focused family planning. Furthermore, the state offers a Family Planning Waiver that allows low-income women to receive free contraceptive and family planning services. Finally, the state is also directing resources toward addressing men's roles in reproductive health.^{iv}

The Family and Medical Leave Act

In Wisconsin, any company with 50 or more permanent employees must allow both women and men who have worked for the company for at least 52 consecutive weeks and at least 1,000 hours to take up to six weeks of leave in the 12 months following the birth or adoption of a child. Employees are also allowed up to two weeks of leave in a 12-month period to care for a seriously ill family member or in the event that the employee develops a serious health condition. Upon

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

their return to work, employees have the right to fill either the same position or one that is comparable in terms of compensation, benefits, hours, shift, and other conditions.^v

Domestic Violence Services

Wisconsin's Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) provides state funds to support grants to domestic violence agencies that target families with incomes at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty line. Grants are used to fund additional services for domestic violence victims and their children, including programs for children who witness domestic violence, legal services, and programs that promote families' safety and self-sufficiency. Additional grants are available for agencies that provide domestic violence services to underrepresented populations, such as racial/ethnic minorities or people with disabilities. In addition, DHFS offers up to five months of safety services to families who are referred by the child welfare system. These families work with an assigned safety services manager and provider to attain child safety, stable family functioning, and any other necessary supports.^{vi}

Child Custody Policy

Wisconsin makes custody decisions based on the best interest of the child. If parents agree on a custody arrangement the courts will honor that agreement unless it is determined to violate the child's best interest. If parents cannot agree on a custody arrangement, either parent may ask the courts for help in making a decision. Courts may order the parents to undergo mediation or divorce education classes to help them reach a decision.^{vii}

Paternity Establishment

Paternity may be established in three ways in Wisconsin. The first is through voluntary paternity acknowledgement, in which both parents sign and notarize the Voluntary Paternity Acknowledgment form, which is available at hospitals or through child support agencies. Both parents must be over the age of 18 to establish voluntary paternity. The second way to establish paternity is through a court ruling, which occurs when paternity is disputed. Both parents are scheduled to attend a court hearing, at which the man's rights and responsibilities are explained and the judge decides paternity. Parents have the right to ask the courts for genetic tests at this time. Finally, paternity may be established through the acknowledgement of a child born within marriage. Parents who marry following a child's birth may sign an Acknowledgement of Marital Paternity form that names the man as the child's legal father. Paternity can be established at any time following a child's birth, but a court action to establish paternity must occur before the child turns 19. The establishment of legal paternity gives the father the right to be considered before the child is placed for adoption, the right to request custody and visitation, and the right to submit a parenting plan to the courts. Children gain the rights to inheritance, child support, health insurance, fathers' Social Security benefits, access to the fathers' family medical records, and tribal enrollment rights (for Native American children).^{viii}

Child Support Assistance

Wisconsin's child support program is administered by the state, but is operated locally by county child support agencies. The purpose of the program is to ensure that both parents provide support for children. If the noncustodial parent is unable to pay the full amount of support that has been ordered due to a substantial change in circumstances, he may ask the child support agency to review the court order. If the agency decides that the amount is too high, it can request that the court change the order.^{ix} Fathers may receive assistance through participation in the state's Children First program or Non-Custodial Parent (NCP) program, which helps noncustodial parents earn enough money to pay child support by providing job-search assistance, skills training, basic education, or opportunities to gain work experience.^x

Child Support Enforcement

In Wisconsin, cases with past-due child support can be enforced up to 20 years after the youngest child turns 18. Mandatory income withholding is in effect in the state, meaning that support is automatically deducted from paychecks, bonuses, commissions, unemployment

benefits, workers' compensation checks, pension payments, Social Security disability income, and tax refunds.^{xi} If payments are not made, child support agencies can enforce the order by charging interest, intercepting tax refunds, placing liens on property, denying the parent a license, or taking court action.^{xii} Finally, fathers who are unable to make support payments may be ordered to participate in the Children First program, which provides job services and training services aimed at enhancing parents' ability to pay child support.^{xiii}

Strategies Intended to Promote Healthy Marriage

State-Funded Marriage Preparation Activities

Wisconsin does not currently use state funds to support marriage preparation activities.

Other Marriage Initiatives

Recently enacted federal legislation allocates substantial new funding for healthy marriage efforts. Embedded in the legislation are funds aimed at improving the relationships and parenting skills of couples who already are married. Enactment of this legislation has allowed the state of Wisconsin to organize and fund an array of marriage promotion projects. Some examples include the following:

- *The Healthy Marriage Initiative in Wisconsin:* Two programs are currently offered through the Foundation for a Great Marriage, one targeting the state's Latino population and one targeting English-speaking couples. Services include public advertising campaigns, marriage education for high school students, premarital education, marriage skills training, and divorce reduction programs.
- *Parents Plus, Inc.:* This program targets low-income, unmarried, and expectant parents. Services include parenting skills training, financial management, conflict resolution, and job/career advancement opportunities. The program is using a pilot curriculum called "Keys to a Healthy Marriage," which is delivered in 11 marriage education classes.
- *Healthy Marriage Education/Milwaukee Marriage Partnership:* This program, offered through the Center for Self-Sufficiency, targets adolescents, unmarried expectant mothers and fathers, engaged and dating couples, and married couples. Program services include a community social marketing campaign, marriage education (using the "Keys to a Healthy Marriage" and PREP curricula), one day marriage/relationship enrichment retreats, marriage mentoring, and peer education.^{xiv}

Strategies Intended to Enhance Fathers' Economic Stability

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits

Wisconsin's state welfare program, titled Wisconsin Works (W-2), is designed to help individuals connect to the workforce and to develop economic self-sufficiency through employment. To those ends, the W-2 program offers low-income parents employment, education, and training services, along with financial incentives to work. State residents with incomes below 115 percent of the federal poverty line are eligible to participate in all services if they are the custodial parents of a minor child. Case management services are also offered to noncustodial parents who comply with child support orders, minor parents, and pregnant women who do not have any other children living with them. Recipients are required to engage in work if it is determined that they are able to do so. There is a 60-month lifetime eligibility limit for receiving welfare benefits, which may be extended if it is found that individuals are unable to work because of disability, lack of job availability, or the need to care for a seriously incapacitated family member. Child support payments are not factored into the eligibility requirements for state welfare funds. The state share of child support is passed through and given directly to families.

A noncustodial father who has a child support order is eligible to participate in the state's W-2/TANF Noncustodial Parent program (NCP) if his child or the child's mother receives benefits from the W-2, TANF, SSI Caretaker Supplement, Medicaid, or FoodShare (food stamp) programs. The NCP offers fathers job-search assistance and employment and training opportunities to these fathers.^{xv}

Services Geared Toward Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers

Two programs operating under the TANF-funded Wisconsin Works (W-2) program provide services to low-income, noncustodial parents. The first is the Children First program, which is a court-ordered program for noncustodial parents who fail to meet their child support requirements. The second is the Wisconsin Works Non-Custodial Parent (NCP) program, a voluntary program for unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents. Both programs provide noncustodial parents with case management services, job-search assistance, skills-training, basic education, and opportunities to gain work experience, with the hope that they will be able to provide financial support for children.^{xvi}

Job Training and Employment Services

Both the Children First program and the Non-Custodial Parent program offer job training and employment services to noncustodial parents in Wisconsin, under the state's TANF-funded Wisconsin Works (W-2) program. Further, participants in the state W-2 program and other low-income workers are eligible to participate in a state program that provides transportation services to and from work and to receive job access loans to help pay for work-related expenses, such as work clothes or uniforms or car loans.^{xvii}

Incarceration and Reentry

Services and Programs for Incarcerated Fathers

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) offers a number of programs for incarcerated fathers, including parenting classes, parent support groups, the Inside Out Dads Program, father-child literacy programs, and other fatherhood programs. In addition, fathers can participate in other DOC programs, including anger management programs, substance abuse treatment programs, educational and employment programs, and other treatment programs.^{xviii}

Resources

- **Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.** This Web site provides information on state policies and program aimed at supporting fathers and low-income families; available at <http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/>.
- **Wisconsin Head Start Association.** This Web site provides information about federally-funded fatherhood activities offered through Wisconsin's Head Start programs; available at <http://www.whsaonline.org/>

References

- ⁱ Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (1998). *Governor Launches New Fatherhood Initiative*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/dwd/newsreleases/1998/30fa_536.htm.
- ⁱⁱ Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (2009). *Wisconsin state plan: FFY 2006-FFY 2009*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dws/tanf/tanfstateplans.htm>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). *Region 5 abstracts – Fatherhood*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/hmabstracts/region5fr.htm>
- ^{iv} Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (2009). *Wisconsin state plan: FFY 2006-FFY 2009*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dws/tanf/tanfstateplans.htm>.
- ^v Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (n.d.). *Family and medical leave act*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/er/family_and_medical_leave/default.htm.
- ^{vi} Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (2009). *Wisconsin state plan: FFY 2006-FFY 2009*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dws/tanf/tanfstateplans.htm>.
- ^{vii} Wisconsin Statutes. (2008). *Chapter 767 Actions affecting the family: Subchapter V Child custody, placement, and visitation*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/statutes/Stat0767.pdf>.
- ^{viii} Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2009). *Case Management Services: Legal fatherhood (paternity)*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/bcs/paternity.htm>.
- ^{ix} Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2009). *Child Support – Information for the paying parent*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/bcs/payer.htm>
- ^x Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (2009). *Wisconsin state plan: FFY 2006-FFY 2009*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dws/tanf/tanfstateplans.htm>.
- ^{xi} Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2009). *Support payments: Ways to pay support*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/bcs/pay_ways_ncp.htm
- ^{xii} Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2009). *Case management services: Monitoring and enforcing child support orders*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/bcs/enforcement.htm>.
- ^{xiii} Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (2009). *Wisconsin state plan: FFY 2006-FFY 2009*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dws/tanf/tanfstateplans.htm>.
- ^{xiv} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). *Region 5 abstracts – Healthy Marriage*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/hmabstracts/region5hm.htm>
- ^{xv} Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. (2009). *Wisconsin state plan: FFY 2006-FFY 2009*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from <http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dws/tanf/tanfstateplans.htm>.
- ^{xvi} Ibid.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Wisconsin Department of Corrections. (2009). *The Resource Guide: Opportunities and Options*. Accessed online 08/06/09 from http://www.wi-doc.com/index_adult.htm.