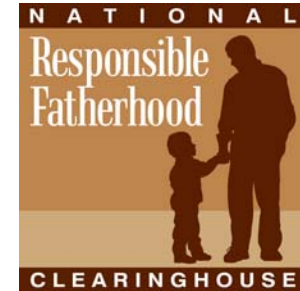




U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

# Responsible Fatherhood State Profile: Massachusetts

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[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

## Massachusetts

### Strategies Intended to Promote Healthy Marriage

#### *State-Funded Marriage Preparation Activities*

With funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Massachusetts Department of Revenue funds a program called Building Healthy Marriages and Family Relationships through the Boston Healthy Marriage Initiative. Through this initiative, Massachusetts couples can take part in marriage education and other counseling services.<sup>i</sup>

#### *Other Marriage Initiatives*

There are no other marriage initiatives currently operating in Massachusetts.

### Strategies Intended to Promote Parenting and Responsible Fatherhood

#### *State-Funded Direct Service Parenting/Responsible Fatherhood Programs*

The Father Friendly Initiative, a project of the Boston Public Health Commission, aims to reintegrate low-income fathers who have child custody or child support issues into their families, and to support these fathers' basic needs. The six month case management program includes medical and substance abuse treatment, parenting skills, and various forms of counseling.<sup>ii</sup> Parenting Wisely is a series of parenting skills classes provided by video and computer programs, sponsored by the Essex District Attorney's Office. The program targets parents of young people who have been involved with the juvenile justice system, and aims to improve parental supervision and positive interactions with children.<sup>iii</sup> The Parent-Child Home Program, which serves parents with low income or education levels, teaches communication and educational play skills, and emphasizes the role of parents in teaching young children.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund provides a number of parenting programs, including a Fatherhood Initiative designed to provide support for fathers, families, and service providers through the coordination of services, professional training, and greater public awareness of the importance of fatherhood.<sup>v</sup>

#### *State-Funded Programs to Prevent Unwanted or Early Fatherhood*

The Massachusetts Family Planning Program, operating within the Massachusetts Office of Health and Human Services, aims to prevent unintended pregnancies through community education and outreach on family planning and sexual health. The program helps low-income adults

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and adolescents make informed decisions about having children.<sup>vi</sup> Massachusetts also uses money from the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) grant to establish a Teen Pregnancy Prevention fund that gives grants to community groups that aim to reduce the occurrence of teen pregnancy. Programs include workshops for parents and teens, employment and life skills training, and health and substance abuse education.<sup>vii</sup>

### *The Family and Medical Leave Act*

In Massachusetts, the Family and Medical Leave Act makes employees eligible for up to 12 months' leave in the event of the birth, adoption, or illness of a child. Anyone taking leave has the opportunity to continue health benefits and, in most cases, is guaranteed the same or a similar position upon their return.<sup>viii</sup> Employers of more than 50 people are also required to allow 24 hours of leave per year for parents to attend school functions, medical appointments and other non-emergencies.<sup>ix</sup>

### *Domestic Violence Services*

According to Massachusetts General Law Chapter 209A, the court may respond to domestic violence by ordering the abuser to stop the abuse, terminate contact, or to move out of the household. The court may also deny an abusive parent custody rights, and demand that they pay child support to the child's custodial parent of guardian. If an abuse complaint is upheld, the abuser may be required to pay for the legal fees, emergency housing or child support of the abused. The Probate and Family Court cannot grant custody of a child to a known abuser.<sup>x</sup>

In June 2007, the governor of Massachusetts re-established a Council to Address Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence. This council will develop a guide for law enforcement officers on how to respond to cases of adult sexual assault, update policies concerning law enforcement's response to domestic violence, consider the necessity of additional domestic violence legislation and support services in the state, and evaluate the response of law enforcement agencies and service providers.<sup>xi</sup>

### *Child Custody Policy*

In Massachusetts, child custody is often granted based on an agreement between both parents. But in the event that parents cannot agree on a custodial arrangement, the court will decide what is best for the child. While the previous inclination was to place a child with its mother when possible, the court now views each parent equally, and gives equal consideration to the custody requests of fathers as it does to those of mothers.<sup>xii</sup> Furthermore, Bill 111 of the Massachusetts State Senate directs probate and family courts to order divorcing parents with children to attend parenting classes.<sup>xiii</sup>

### *Paternity Establishment*

Married couples do not have to formally establish paternity; it is assumed that both partners are parents of the child. If a child's parents are unmarried, the father must claim his rights and responsibilities by signing a Voluntary Acknowledgment of Parentage form and having his statement approved by a court. In the absence of a voluntary declaration, paternity may be established through a judicial process in accordance with Massachusetts General Law Chapter 209C.<sup>xiv</sup>

### *Child Support Assistance*

The Child Support Enforcement Division (CSE) of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue is charged with ensuring that children receive financial support from their parents. It does so by determining child support, ensuring that it is collected, and assisting families with any necessary changes in child support. This division also provides parent education, counseling, financial plans, and supervised visitation.<sup>xv</sup> Child support services are available for any parent or guardian of a minor child.<sup>xvi</sup> Massachusetts law requires a father to support his child until the age of 18. If the child is dependent on and housed by a parent, the support may extend to the age of 21 while the child is enrolled as a student. The court determines the amount of child support, including medical insurance, based on a father's financial situation.<sup>xvii</sup>

### *Child Support Enforcement*

In cases of child support nonpayment, Massachusetts may take actions such as placing levies on bank accounts of noncustodial parents, placing liens on personal property, increasing the amount of money automatically withheld from a paycheck, seizing property such as cars or vacation homes, intercepting federal and state tax refunds, reporting the parent's debt to credit bureaus, seeking a contempt of court order against the parent, or referring the case for criminal prosecution.<sup>xviii</sup> Massachusetts also may take away a driver's license or other license of a parent who fails to pay child support. This is usually enforced with 30 days' warning after 8 weeks without paying child support or a failure to appear in court.<sup>xix</sup>

## **Strategies Intended to Enhance Fathers' Economic Stability**

### *Welfare Benefits*

Low-income families with children may be eligible to receive benefits through Massachusetts' Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) program. Individuals may not receive more than 24 months of TAFDC assistance in a continuous 60-month period. Two-parent families are not eligible for TAFDC benefits on the same basis as one-parent families; instead, they face stricter income and work requirements.<sup>xx</sup> In Massachusetts, child support payments of up to \$50 are not factored into a family's income when determining cash assistance. Low-income parents or parents who are students may also qualify for child care subsidies.<sup>xxi</sup>

### *Job Training and Employment Services*

In Massachusetts, Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients are eligible for job skills training and employment programs. Offerings include skill and life history assessments; job search, resume writing and interview skills; and job performance and retention support once a person is employed. Recipients are connected with employers through job fairs and a job database.<sup>xxii</sup> The same resources are available to non-custodial parents. After families no longer require TAFDC assistance, they still have access to employment and job retention services.<sup>xxiii</sup>



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### Incarceration and Reentry

#### *Services and Programs for Incarcerated Fathers*

Most Massachusetts courts have a branch of the Fatherhood Program for incarcerated fathers and those on probation. The program features guest speakers on topics such as parenting skills, child safety; offers job training; and provides other services for fathers on probation.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Young Fathers group educates incarcerated fathers on issues such as domestic abuse, fatherhood responsibilities, transition into the community, and children's issues such as peer pressure and academic success. Inmates also attend the Father's Group, a 12-week parenting course that focuses on the responsibilities of fathers.<sup>xxv</sup>

#### Resources:

- **Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services.** This page provides information about the services available to Massachusetts residents, including parenting skills, child support assistance, and job training; available at: <http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eohhs2homepage&L=1&L0=Home&sid=Eeohhs2>.



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