



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



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National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

NRFC State Profiles: Wyoming 2009

Strategies Intended to Promote Parenting and Responsible Fatherhood

State-Funded Direct Service Parenting/Responsible Fatherhood Programs

The Faith Initiatives of Wyoming (FIWY) office offers services aimed at strengthening families, including regional parenting workshops offered in partnership with the Catholic Diocese of Cheyenne, the Wyoming Department of Family Services, and five regional Marriage Coalitions.ⁱ In addition, FIWY's Healthy Marriage Initiative offers toolkits, workshops, and other informational resources aimed at increasing fathers' knowledge and skills about parenting and the importance of father involvement.ⁱⁱ

State-Funded Programs to Prevent Unwanted or Early Fatherhood

The FIWY office, in partnership with the Catholic Diocese of Cheyenne, offers information and resources related to abstinence education.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, state Title X family planning grants are used to provide reproductive health services to men, women, and adolescents in Wyoming. Available services include screenings and exams, contraceptive services, counseling services, and testing for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.^{iv} Finally, the Maternal and Family Health Section of the Wyoming Department of Health runs an Unintended Pregnancy Prevention Task Force.^v

The Family and Medical Leave Act

Wyoming abides by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows eligible employees to take time off from work following the birth or adoption of a child, or during a serious illness, without fear of losing their jobs or benefits. Parents are entitled to up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave over a one-year period to care for a new child, an ill family member, or to recover from their own illness. The FMLA protects fathers and mothers who have worked with the same organization for at least one year and have worked at least 1,250 hours within the past year, provided that the company they work for employs at least 50 workers. The federal FMLA also allows eligible family members to take up to 26 weeks of leave annually to care for a military service member who has been injured in the line of duty. Wyoming has no additional state provisions to extend the FMLA or provide paid leave.^{vi}

Domestic Violence Services

Faith Initiatives of Wyoming has partnered with the Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault to provide resources and technical and training assistance to faith- and community-based programs that work to prevent domestic violence. A faith- and community-based pilot program funded by the U.S. Department of Justice provides advocacy, counseling and treatment, and emergency financial assistance to victims of domestic violence. The program is also developing new domestic violence prevention and education programs in the state.^{vii} In addition, Wyoming is using Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to establish standards and procedures for screening and identifying victims of domestic violence within the state welfare system. Victims are entitled to TANF-funded counseling, support, and referral services, and are also granted exemptions from certain TANF requirements (e.g., work requirements and time limits) that may make it difficult to escape domestic violence.^{viii}

Child Custody Policy

Following parental divorce or the establishment of paternity, Wyoming's courts grant child custody according to the best interests of the child. Child custody preference is not based on parents' gender. In granting custody, the courts consider the following: 1) the quality of the child-parent

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relationships; 2) the ability of each parent to adequately care for the child; 3) the relative competency of each parent; 4) the willingness of each parent to accept parenting responsibilities and to grant the other parent his or her established responsibilities; 5) how to best maintain and strengthen the child's relationship with each parent; 6) the quality of communication and interaction between each parent and the child; 7) each parent's willingness and ability to allow the other parent to care for the child without intrusion, and to grant the other parent rights and responsibilities regarding the child; 8) the geographic distance between the parents' homes; 9) each parent's current mental and physical health as it relates to his or her ability to care for the child; 10) the presence of family violence; and 11) any other factors the court deems relevant. On the basis of these considerations, courts can award parents any combination of joint, shared, or sole custody and can determine visitation rights. Courts also have the right to require parents to attend parenting classes if they deem it necessary. Either parent has the right to ask the court to modify or enforce custody arrangements.^{ix}

Paternity Establishment

Paternity in Wyoming can either be established through a voluntary acknowledgement form filed with the State Office of Vital Records, or through an adjudication of paternity. Legal paternity is not established by putting a father's name on the birth certificate; both parents must acknowledge paternity. Married or unmarried men who wish to dispute paternity may do so through adjudication. If a genetic test is performed, paternity is presumed if the results are 99 percent conclusive.^x

Child Support Assistance

Wyoming determines the amount of child support that is to be paid based on the combined income of both parents and the total number of children they have together. If one parent is voluntarily underemployed or unemployed, the parent's earning potential, rather than actual income, is used to determine the level of support owed. The court then divides the total amount of support needed for a child's care between the two parents, and the noncustodial parent is required to pay his or her amount to the custodial parent. Additional considerations that the court may take into account in determining levels of support include factors such as the cost of necessary child care, any special health or educational needs of the child, support that either parent must give to other children, visitation-related transportation costs, and the services and time each parent gives to the child. Any party can petition for an adjustment of the child support amount, but the petitioning parent may be required to pay for the other parent's court-related costs if the court decides not to adjust the level of support.^{xi} Custodial parents are required to participate in the state child support program (e.g., by identifying the father through the establishment of paternity) before they are eligible to receive state welfare benefits.^{xii} Fathers who are unable to pay the child support they owe may be eligible to participate in work-related services—such as job training and educational opportunities—that are offered through the state welfare program.^{xiii}

Child Support Enforcement

If child support payments are not met, courts may find the noncompliant parent guilty of contempt, unless the parent is able to demonstrate just cause for nonpayment. Parents who are unable to make support payments may be required to participate in the state welfare system's work-related activities without receiving any other benefits. Courts may require the noncompliant parent to pay attorney fees and other costs related to the case, withhold income or wages, suspend or revoke a parent's driver's license, report the unpaid amount to a credit agency, or seize and sell nonexempt property to secure unpaid child support. An interest rate of 10 percent is applied to unpaid child support amounts. The amount of future monthly payments may be increased to cover the costs of previous unmet payments. There is no limit on when back child support payments can be collected. In the event that the parents later marry one another, child support arrears owed to the state are not forgiven.^{xiv}

Strategies Intended to Promote Healthy Marriage

State-Funded Marriage Preparation Activities

Federal funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families is used to support the Wyoming Healthy Marriages Initiative (WHMI), which provides marriage preparation and enrichment resources and activities to couples, married partners, stepfamilies, and fathers in the state. The Initiative is offered through the FIWY office. The WHMI operates through the Faith Initiatives of Wyoming (FIWY), the Wyoming Department of Family Services, the Catholic Diocese of Cheyenne, and five regional marriage coalitions. Community-level, faith-based programs funded through this office offer marriage preparation and enrichment activities, along with parenting and fatherhood activities, though the availability of many services varies across regions. Through this funding, local marriage initiatives have been launched or are planned in several Wyoming counties. In addition, FIWY sponsors statewide Family Night events that are aimed at strengthening families; provides free resource kits focused on marriage preparation and maintenance; and helps communities to develop local marriage policies.^{xv} Community marriage policies have been fully implemented in two counties and are being planned in several others. These policies are developed locally and therefore vary by region. For example, in Cheyenne/Laramie County, the community marriage policy is aimed at increasing the local marriage success rate to 75 percent. Through this policy, the county offers premarital testing and counseling services that are delivered through four months of required marriage preparation activities. Postmarital counseling sessions and support are also offered to couples who were recently married or who are experiencing marital distress.^{xvi}

Other Marriage Initiatives

Federal Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grants awarded through the Office of Family Assistance are also being used to fund marriage-related activities in Wyoming. The Northern Hills Pregnancy Care Centers received a five-year grant to fund their REAL program, a community-level healthy marriage initiative targeting adolescents and engaged and married couples. Services include high school-level marriage education programs; premarital education and relationship skills training for unmarried expectant mothers and fathers and for engaged couples; marriage enhancement programs for married couples; skills-based divorce reduction programs; and marriage mentoring programs. A second five-year grant is being used to implement and evaluate Wyoming's Smart Stepfamilies program, which provide marriage preparation, enrichment and divorce reduction services to stepfamilies and couples in second marriages through both community-based and faith-based organizations.^{xvii}

Strategies Intended to Enhance Fathers' Economic Stability

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits

Wyoming's state welfare plan is called Personal Opportunities with Work Responsibilities (POWER). The goal of the POWER program is to promote financial self-sufficiency in families with children through a combination of employment, child care, and other services. Two-parent families are eligible for services according to the same criteria as single-parent families. To be eligible, adults must live in a home with a related child or be a court-appointed guardian of a resident child. In addition, nonresident parents of children whose families receive welfare benefits, food stamps, or Medicaid benefits, or who are at risk of needing these benefits, may be eligible for work-related services offered through the state welfare plan, provided that they comply with established child support orders. To remain eligible for welfare payments, parents must participate in required work and/or training activities, which may include employment, subsidized on-the-job training, job-search or job-preparation activities, vocational training, and/or job training.^{xviii}

Services Geared Toward Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers

Low-income noncustodial fathers may be eligible to receive state-funded work-related services if they are unable to make ordered child support payments.^{xix} No other state services are currently directed toward these fathers.

Job Training and Employment Services

Wyoming recently established a new state agency, the Department of Workforce Services, which offers several state programs that provide training, education, and job-search services to Wyoming residents. The goal of the agency is to deliver comprehensive services that help build a strong workforce for Wyoming's future.^{xx} The state POWER program also provides a number of training, education, employment, and job-search services to TANF recipients and nonresident fathers who are unable to pay child support.^{xxi}

Incarceration and Reentry

Services and Programs for Incarcerated Fathers

The Wyoming Department of Corrections offers a number of programs to inmates, including educational and vocational training, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, life skills training, and transition/re-entry programs. None of these programs is specifically targeted toward fathers, however.^{xxii}

Resources

- **Wyoming Healthy Marriage Initiative.** This Web site provides information about services and other resources available to fathers and families in the state of Wyoming, including information about marriage preparation and enrichment, fatherhood, parenting, and domestic violence; available at <http://www.wyofams.org/>.
- **Faith Initiatives of Wyoming.** This Web site information about faith-based marriage and family-strengthening program and domestic violence resources; available at <http://www.fiwyo.org/index.htm>.
- **State of Wyoming Department of Family Services.** This Web site offers information about various services and resources in the state directed at helping families, including information about the state welfare plan and child support rules; available at <http://dfsweb.state.wy.us/index.html>.

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