



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

Responsible Fatherhood State Profile: New Jersey

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www.fatherhood.gov

New Jersey

Strategies Intended to Promote Healthy Marriage

State-Funded Marriage Preparation Activities

New Jersey does not use state funds to support activities directly aimed at marriage preparation. However, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has provided funding for marriage preparation activities in the state. One community-based organization, the Puerto Rican Family Institute, has received funding to work with Latino fathers to provide information about the benefits of marriage and to offer relationship and marriage education.ⁱ

Other Marriage Initiatives

Recently enacted federal legislation allocates substantial new funding for healthy marriage efforts. This has allowed the federal government to provide funding to community-based organizations for the promotion of healthy marriage. The Healthy Marriage Program of El Centro, offered through the Catholic Charities Diocese of Trenton, will use the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP®) curriculum to offer marriage education and intervention services to Latino couples.ⁱⁱ In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement has provided funding to three community-based organizations in New Jersey that will enable them to provide healthy marriage education, enrichment services, communication skills training, conflict resolution techniques, and parenting skills to immigrants and refugees.ⁱⁱⁱ

Strategies Intended to Promote Parenting and Responsible Fatherhood

State-Funded Direct Service Parenting/Responsible Fatherhood Programs

New Jersey does not currently fund programs aimed at promoting responsible fatherhood. However, recent funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has enabled the Puerto Rico Family Institute to offer the Building Pathways for Latino Fathers program in the state. This program will use the PREP Within Our Reach Curriculum to offer parenting and relationship skills education to fathers. The program also will provide family assessments, marriage and relationship workshops, anger management workshops, and parenting preparation courses for expectant fathers.^{iv}

Take Time to Be a Dad Today



State-Funded Programs to Prevent Unwanted or Early Fatherhood

New Jersey provides funding for a number of abstinence education programs that work with at-risk adolescents. These programs are designed to delay adolescents' sexual activity; reduce the rates of teen pregnancies, births, and sexually transmitted diseases; increase teens' ability to refuse unwanted sexual advances; and increase communication between parents and children.^v The state also has provided funds for pregnancy prevention programs that focus on increasing adolescents' self-esteem and self-sufficiency and for adolescent parenting programs that are designed to reduce repeat births among adolescent parents and to improve adolescent parents' parenting skills.^{vi}

The Family and Medical Leave Act

In addition to abiding by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), New Jersey has a state Family Leave Act. The New Jersey Family Leave Act ensures that workers are entitled to receive up to 12 weeks of family leave in a 24-month period to care for a newborn or adopted child or to care for a parent, minor child, spouse, or domestic partner with a serious medical condition. Eligible employees include those who have worked for their employer for at least one year, have worked for at least 1,000 hours in the past year, and work for employers with 50 or more employees nationwide.^{vii}

Domestic Violence Services

The New Jersey Office of Domestic Violence and Family Support Services, operating within the state Department of Children and Families, coordinates services for domestic violence victims and their children. This office provides grants to nonprofit organizations across the state that offer services such as legal advocacy, emergency and transitional housing assistance, counseling, community education, specialized children's services, crisis hotlines, and emergency response. The state also funds one-stop family support centers that provide wrap-around prevention services and supports for families at risk of domestic violence and child abuse.^{viii} And New Jersey operates an address confidentiality program designed to prevent batterers from learning the location of former victims.^{ix} Last, the state provides funding for the Peace: A Learned Solution (PALS) program, which uses creative arts to promote healing and peaceful conflict resolution with children who have been victims of domestic violence in several counties around the state.^x

Child Custody Policy

Upon the dissolution of a relationship or marriage, either parent may file for custody of the children. Child custody disputes are referred to the Family Practice Division of the court system. New Jersey has no preference or presumption for joint custody; instead, custody decisions are made in the best interests of the child, including factors such as the character and fitness of all involved parties, the parents' economic situations, the ability of each party to pay child support, and the safety of each potential home.^{xi} When divorcing, separated, or never-married parents have a custody dispute, parents are required to participate in a three-hour parent education program.^{xii} Parents involved in custody disputes may also be ordered to participate in mediation sessions. The state has also established a parenting coordination pilot program in four locations around the state. Under this program, a court-appointed intermediary works with both parents to help resolve day-to-day parenting issues and to promote communication and collaboration in parenting.^{xiii}



Paternity Establishment

Establishing legal paternity guarantees a child's rights to services and benefits, including child support, Social Security benefits, health insurance, and inheritance rights. If parents marry prior to a child's birth, the mother's husband is assumed to be the child's legal father. If parents are unmarried, paternity can be established voluntarily if both parents complete a Certificate of Paternity in the hospital after the child's birth or at any time afterwards. The New Jersey Paternity Opportunity Program (POP) facilitates paternity establishment by requiring hospitals to provide unmarried parents with information on the benefits of establishing paternity. If a man doubts that he is a child's biological father, he may voluntarily undergo genetic testing to verify paternity. If he will not do so voluntarily, he may be required by the court system to undergo testing.^{xiv}

Child Support Assistance

Child support in the state is overseen by New Jersey Child Support (NJ Child Support), a division of the Department of Human Services. NJ Child Support helps to establish legal paternity, locate noncustodial parents, establish child and medical support orders, collect and distribute payments from the noncustodial parent, enforce unpaid support orders, review changes to orders, and work with other states and the court system to resolve disputes and ensure payment of child support.^{xv} Parents, grandparents, other relatives, and guardians are eligible to receive NJ Child Support services if they have custody of a minor child.^{xvi}

NJ Child Support operates several programs to encourage child support compliance and to help noncustodial parents pay support orders. The department operates a public awareness and outreach campaign designed to raise awareness of available services, prevent teen pregnancies, encourage noncustodial parents' involvement with their children, and educate community leaders about the resources available for parents.^{xvii} Moreover, noncustodial parents may be eligible to participate in the Work Requirements Judicial Benchcard Initiative, which provides employment assistance with the goal of increasing child support payment.^{xviii}

Child Support Enforcement

If a noncustodial parent fails to pay child support, NJ Child Support may utilize a number of enforcement methods to ensure payment, including income withholding, intercepting lottery winnings or tax refunds, seizing bank accounts and stocks, and intercepting money received from settlements or lawsuits. As arrears rise, a parent's debt may be reported to credit bureaus; alternatively, a parent may be ineligible to receive a passport or may have his or her driver's, professional, occupational, recreational, or sporting licenses revoked. Should all previous methods fail to induce payment, the noncustodial parent may be ordered by a New Jersey Family Court to enter into a job placement program and/or to pay all past-due support, or a warrant may be issued for the parent's arrest.^{xix}

Strategies Intended to Enhance Fathers' Economic Stability

Welfare Benefits

New Jersey's welfare program, Work First New Jersey (WFNJ), provides cash assistance to low-income individuals in the state. Families with children are eligible to receive benefits from the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, and individuals and married couples without children may be eligible to receive benefits through the state's General Assistance funds. For families with children, the income of

a stepparent is not considered when determining eligibility for receipt of TANF benefits as long as the household income does not exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty line. Recipients of WFNJ assistance must participate in work activities when they have received benefits for at least 24 months; however, training or education may fulfill part of this requirement.

Individuals are only eligible for WFNJ benefits for up to 60 months. However, in 2004 New Jersey established the Supportive Assistance to Individuals and Families (SAIF) program to provide up to 24 months of ongoing and transitional services and benefits for people who have reached their WFNJ time limit, have cooperated with WFNJ requirements, have in good faith attempted to secure and retain employment, and/or have been deferred from WFNJ work activities.^{xx}

Services Geared Toward Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers

In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child Support Enforcement, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the National Center of State Courts, New Jersey has established a pilot program known as the Work Requirements Judicial Benchmark Initiative. The program serves noncustodial parents who elect to participate in the program or who are ordered by the court system to participate in work activities, and is designed to increase payment and collection of child support orders, to increase referrals of noncustodial parents to employment service centers, to help noncustodial parents become employed, and to educate parents on the benefits of participation in work programs.^{xxi}

Job Training and Employment Services

Fathers who participate in WFNJ have access to a number of job training and employment services, including the Early Employment Initiative (EEI). The EEI offers individuals who apply for WFNJ benefits but are not in immediate need up to 30 days of intense job-search assistance and financial assistance for one-time expenses, such as owed rent, to help individuals avoid having to receive welfare benefits.^{xxii} In addition, fathers may be eligible to receive services from one-stop career centers, which provide job-search assistance, job training activities, educational opportunities, and skills training.^{xxiii}

Incarceration and Reentry

Services and Programs for Incarcerated Fathers

The New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) has recently received funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to provide a fatherhood program for inmates. In the NJDOC Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Project, incarcerated fathers and their families will work with family case managers to establish post-release treatment plans. Services will include referrals to drug treatment, family counseling, relationship-strengthening, parenting, and domestic violence education programs.^{xxiv} State correctional facilities also offer a number of anger management, conflict resolution, transitional support, and substance abuse programs.^{xxv}



Resources

- **The Work Requirements Judicial Benchcard Initiative.** This Web site provides information about the pilot program that has been established in New Jersey to help noncustodial parents increase employment opportunities and payment of child support orders; available at <http://www.njchildsupport.org/Article.asp?AID=78&PID=0#>.
- **The Paternity Opportunity Program.** This Web site provides information about the state's Paternity Opportunity Program, which promotes voluntary paternity establishment; available at <http://pop.njchildsupport.org>.

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