



# Supporting Healthy Marriages among Fathers with Histories of Incarceration

## Activities and Lessons from Six Responsible Fatherhood Programs

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## Importance of Strengthening Family Relationships for Fathers with Incarceration Experiences

Both the removal and release of a loved one because of incarceration are important stressors to a family unit. Aside from the emotional stress felt by the person actually experiencing incarceration, incarceration affects the family members left behind, including spouses, intimate partners, coparents/caregivers, and children. Family members of the person incarcerated may have to deal with the loss of various forms of emotional and/or material support that the family member who is incarcerated provided, which is associated with several adverse consequences. Relative to their peers, children whose parents are incarcerated are more likely to experience economic hardship (Phillips et al. 2006), residential instability (Geller et al. 2009), academic difficulties (Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003), and mental health and behavioral problems (Dannerbeck 2005; Murray and Farrington 2008; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Wildeman 2010). As a result of the loss of support and other factors, episodes of major depression are more common among partners of incarcerated men (Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012), and feelings of grief surrounding the incarceration of a loved one can be particularly painful because of the stigma, shame, and disappointment of having a family member incarcerated (Arditti 2005; Fontaine et al. 2012). Once a person is released from incarceration, family members typically provide a range of resources to assist in their community reintegration, placing further stress on the family, who may already face resource limitations and have their own service needs (Fontaine et al. 2015; Shollenberger 2009).

## BACKGROUND

With funding from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation contracted with the Urban Institute to conduct an implementation evaluation of OFA's Community-Centered Responsible Fatherhood Ex-Prisoner Reentry Pilot Projects ("Fatherhood Reentry").<sup>1</sup> Six organizations were funded to implement a range of activities intended to help stabilize fathers and their families, help move fathers toward economic self-sufficiency, and reduce recidivism. The following organizations received funding and were included in Urban's evaluation:

- **Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action, Inc. (KISRA)**, headquartered in Dunbar, West Virginia, which called its program the West Virginia Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Initiative<sup>2</sup>
- **Lutheran Social Services (LSS)**, headquartered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which called its program Fatherhood and Families
- **New Jersey Department of Corrections' (NJDOC) Office of Substance Abuse Programming and Addiction Services**, headquartered in Trenton, New Jersey, which called its program Engaging the Family
- **PB&J Family Services, Inc. (PB&J)**, headquartered in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which called its program the Fatherhood Reentry Program
- **The RIDGE Project, Inc. (RIDGE)**, headquartered in McClure, Ohio, which called its program TYRO
- **Rubicon Programs, Inc. (Rubicon)**, headquartered in Richmond, California, which called its program Promoting Advances in Paternal Accountability and Success in Work

As required by the authorizing legislation, each organization provided activities in three areas: responsible parenting, healthy marriage, and economic stability.<sup>3</sup> The activities in the three areas were implemented in collaboration with various nonprofit and government agencies. As a complement to the OFA-funded activities authorized by legislation, the organizations helped participants address their reentry and fatherhood needs by using external referrals to nonprofit and government agency partners and internal referrals to services supported by non-OFA funding streams. This brief describes the range of services available to Fatherhood Reentry project participants during the evaluation period.

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*A note on language: the authorizing legislation uses the term "healthy marriage" as one of the three core activities. Throughout this brief, we use the term "healthy relationship," which represents one aspect of the authorized healthy marriage service provision. As made permissible by the authorizing legislation and discussed throughout this brief, the programs primarily provided healthy relationship classes and services within the healthy marriage activity area and characterized their programs as such.*

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The Fatherhood Reentry projects provided activities to fathers (and their families) in institutional settings as they were nearing release ("prerelease") and in their offices located in the community ("postrelease"). All six projects provided services in multiple institutional settings: federal prisons (KISRA), state prisons (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon), county/regional jails (KISRA, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon), and residential substance abuse treatment facilities (Rubicon). All projects provided services in their community-based offices for participants served by the program prerelease. With the exception of the NJDOC project, fathers who were formerly incarcerated could be enrolled and served in the community-based offices without having been served by the programs in the institutions.<sup>4</sup> Four projects (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, and RIDGE) provided services in multiple communities across their respective states, and two (PB&J and Rubicon) provided services in one county.<sup>5</sup> Five projects (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, PB&J, and RIDGE) were operational from September 2011 through September 2015, and the sixth (Rubicon) was operational from September 2012 through September 2015.

This brief, one of three in a series,<sup>6</sup> focuses on the projects' efforts to support the marital, romantic, and/or coparenting relationships of program participants.<sup>7</sup> In addition to serving fathers, the Fatherhood Reentry projects included several activities to strengthen the relationships between fathers and their partners/coparents and to encourage coparenting and family reunification. This brief first provides a review of the literature on the importance of strengthening such relationships for fathers who are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated. This brief then describes the healthy relationship activities provided by the Fatherhood Reentry programs in detail. A conclusion section includes recommendations intended for practitioners implementing family-focused programming for fathers impacted by incarceration and their partners/coparents based on the experiences of the Fatherhood Reentry projects.

Indeed, the economic and emotional hardships experienced by all parties affected by an incarceration can strain the entire family unit and their relationships with one another (Fontaine et al. 2012; Shollenberger 2009). In addition, people recently released from incarceration are often not in the best position to build or repair their family relationships because of issues that might contribute to relationship conflict, such as histories of domestic violence, substance abuse and dependence, and mental health issues (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Furthermore, not all fathers had strong relationships with their partners/coparents before incarceration (Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt 2012), and economic instability, which is extremely common among the reentry population, contributes to relationship instability (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004).

Though it may be difficult, and families vary in their willingness to focus on these issues, there is a significant need for activities that encourage family members to build or repair relationships that may have been fractured by incarceration. In general, a supportive family environment is critical to the development of children and the well-being of parents. Children who grow up in families with conflict or families characterized by unsupportive relationships are more likely to have a host of mental and physical health problems (Repetti, Taylor, and Seeman 2002). Relationship conflict can have an impact on couples' mental health, which can in turn affect their parenting styles and the well-being of their children (Krishnakumar and Buehler 2000).

In particular, activities that help fathers who are incarcerated or have been recently released maintain, build, and repair relationships with their families have the potential to improve outcomes for fathers, their children, and entire families. Indeed, increased communication and contact with children during incarceration has been shown to lead to improved father-child relationships (Arditti 2005; Landreth and Lobaugh 1998). Maintaining contact with family members during incarceration also helps fathers reunify with their families and reintegrate successfully into the community upon release (Dowden and Andrews 2003; La Vigne, Davies, and Brazzell 2008; Shollenberger 2009). And formerly incarcerated parents with supportive family relationships have better reentry outcomes than parents without these relationships (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; Visher, Debus, and Yahner 2008). Furthermore, services targeted directly to children of parents who are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated and partners/caregivers have significant potential to help repair family relationships and reduce trauma (Peterson et al. 2015).

## Fatherhood Reentry Programs' Approaches to Providing Healthy Relationship Activities

Healthy marriage activities, which included healthy relationship education and activities, were one of three core components of Fatherhood Reentry projects.<sup>8</sup> Though this brief focuses on the healthy relationship activities within the healthy marriage component, the three activity areas were intended to be complementary. The healthy relationship activities focused on strengthening and building the relationship between the father and the father's spouse/romantic partner and/or parent(s) of his children, with whom he may or may not have been in a romantic relationship. For the purposes of this

brief, we describe these people as the participating fathers' partners/coparents. The activities were generally relevant to both fathers who were in intimate relationships and those who were not.

## Case Management

Case management was a central part of all six programs' healthy relationship services. To facilitate family reunification, effective coparenting, and healthy relationships, case managers worked with fathers and their partners to provide coaching and counseling services and referrals to additional resources provided by the program and other community-based organizations. All the programs structured case management so that the same case manager working with the father was also assigned to work with his partner/coparent. For the most part, case management services for partners/coparents consisted of meeting with partners/coparents as needed. Two programs (NJDOC and PB&J) provided service referrals for fathers' partners/coparents: NJDOC provided services to fathers' partners/coparents, including job training, job search assistance, vocational training opportunities, case management, life skills coaching, and GED classes. PB&J similarly provided participating fathers' partners/coparents with direct services, such as referrals to health and mental health treatment, domestic violence services, job readiness and placement services, housing, and tattoo removal.

In conjunction with—and often through—the case management services offered in institutions and the programs' community-based offices, healthy relationship activities were intended to help stabilize fathers and their families and facilitate family reunification by

- **strengthening relationships and encouraging effective coparenting** between fathers and their partners/coparents by providing curriculum-based classes on healthy relationships and parenting, encouraging couple/family interaction through activities, and assisting fathers with child support obligations; and
- **preventing domestic violence** by providing domestic violence assessments and screenings, domestic violence programming, and referrals to domestic violence treatment agencies.

## Relationship Strengthening and Effective Coparenting

To strengthen relationships between fathers and their partners/families, the programs provided curriculum-based classes to fathers and partners/coparents and encouraged couple/family interaction through various activities. Curriculum-based classes were intended to provide fathers and their partners with the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively, manage stress, resolve conflicts, and build a supportive relationship. By encouraging couple/family interaction, the programs provided families with a way to work on their relationships and stay in contact during the father's incarceration and once he returned to the community. Helping fathers manage their child support obligations was also a focus, intended to encourage active coparenting.

## CURRICULUM-BASED CLASSES

Five of the six programs (KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, RIDGE, and Rubicon) provided healthy relationship classes to participants in correctional institutions and treatment facilities. These healthy relationship classes were distinct from the parenting classes that all the programs provided; healthy relationship classes focused specifically on the relationship between fathers and their coparents or romantic partners. The curricula used for healthy relationship classes covered topics such as effective communication skills, empathy, and stress management. The frequency and duration of classes varied across programs from one to eight hours a day, one to four times a week, for one to six weeks. KISRA's program included the most healthy relationship class hours: fathers could receive 26 hours of Within My Reach/Within Our Reach classes. Rubicon provided the fewest hours: fathers could receive 8 hours of the Couples Enhancement curriculum. Three programs (NJDOC, RIDGE, and Rubicon) invited fathers' partners/coparents to attend healthy relationship classes in the correctional institutions and in the community.

KISRA, LSS, NJDOC, and RIDGE used curricula developed by an external organization; Rubicon used a curriculum developed by program staff. KISRA used the Within My Reach (for single people) and Within Our Reach (for couples) curricula delivered in 13 two-hour classes over six and a half weeks. LSS used the Walking the Line curriculum delivered in 15 one-hour classes over three and a half weeks. NJDOC used the Married and Loving It! curriculum delivered in 6 two-hour classes over five to six weeks. RIDGE used the Couple Communication I and II curricula delivered in 2 four-hour classes over two weeks or 4 two-hour classes over four weeks. Rubicon's staff-developed Couples Enhancement curriculum was a single eight-hour class. Though the specific topics varied, all the curricula covered topics such as respectful and effective partner communication, anger/stress management, and conflict resolution.

Three programs (KISRA, RIDGE, and Rubicon) offered healthy relationship classes in the community after fathers were released from jail or prison. The frequency and duration of classes offered in the community also ranged from one to two times a week and over one to six weeks. KISRA's program included the most healthy relationship class hours (26 hours of Within My Reach/Within Our Reach classes). Rubicon provided the fewest healthy relationship class hours (8 hours of the Couples Enhancement curriculum). All three programs used the same curricula postrelease as they did prerelease. KISRA offered the Within My Reach/Within Our Reach relationship classes two times a week for two hours each to program participants only. RIDGE and Rubicon offered their curricula postrelease but modified the class requirements and structure when delivering their classes in the community. For RIDGE participants, the class schedule was truncated and offered in eight hours, usually over a single weekend. RIDGE participants' partners/coparents were invited to attend the Couple Communication class in the community. For Rubicon participants, partners/coparents were required to attend the postrelease classes, which was different from the pre-release class expectation.

Three programs (NJDOC, RIDGE, and Rubicon) used specific strategies to encourage partner participation in the classes. NJDOC, for example, held its parenting, relationship, and financial literacy classes at night, after normal business hours, to make it easier for partners to participate. NJDOC case managers also worked closely with fathers' partners/coparents and state prison staff to ensure partners

were approved visitors and to minimize challenges they might face when entering institutions to attend classes. Both RIDGE and Rubicon provided incentives to partners. RIDGE provided child care, bus tokens, gas cards, and child care reimbursement to both participants and their partners as incentives for participation in its Couple Communication I and II classes. To offset the cost of securing child care and attendance, RIDGE provided fathers and partners \$2–6 an hour per child as well as gas reimbursement. Rubicon offered participants a gift card to encourage attendance for the Couples Enhancement workshop.

In addition to the specific, curriculum-based healthy relationship classes, all the programs had curriculum-based parenting classes that included sections on effective coparenting intended to strengthen relationships. As discussed in more detail in the companion brief on parenting activities, all curriculum-based parenting classes included sessions on effective coparenting techniques, communication, problem-solving, and parenting styles. Although the parenting classes were focused primarily on parenting topics, they also taught skills and techniques for building healthy relationships between fathers and their partners/coparents. For example, the InsideOut Dad curriculum used by LSS and PB&J included a chapter on coparenting and communication that discussed parenting differences and effective communication with partners. The curriculum developed by RIDGE, called TYRO Dads, included topics on coparenting and developing healthy communication with partners and children. The programs also fostered effective coparenting among participating fathers by providing assistance with navigating child support issues.

#### COUPLE/FAMILY INTERACTIONS

To support fathers' relationships during their time in institutions and following their release, all the programs offered formal and informal opportunities for program participants and partners/coparents to interact. These activities were offered in addition to the interactions provided through the healthy relationship class activities. These opportunities often included children, allowing couples to practice their relationship and coparenting skills. LSS, NJDOC, and RIDGE offered these opportunities in the correctional institutions where their program was offered. RIDGE also offered these opportunities in the community, as did KISRA, PB&J, and Rubicon. Two programs (LSS and RIDGE) facilitated family activity days, and five programs (KISRA, NJDOC, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon) offered other opportunities, such as coached telephone calls or special events, to foster couple interaction.

LSS and RIDGE hosted family activity days in the institutions and NJDOC facilitated telephone calls between participants and their family members during incarceration. LSS held quarterly family activity days at each of the five correctional facilities where the program was implemented. The LSS family activity days were an opportunity for children, relatives, and partners/coparents to visit fathers and engage in activities such as making crafts. RIDGE hosted two different types of family activity days: one called Family Days, held annually, and another called Time with Dad. RIDGE staff set up stations where fathers could make T-shirts, build a model dream home, play games, read books, play with puppets, or get their face painted with their kids, families, and partners/coparents. Time with Dad visits were monthly two-and-a-half-hour visits between participating fathers and their families. Time with Dad visits were group based and included a variety of structured and unstructured activities. NJDOC facilitated couple/family interaction by providing coached telephone calls. Although these calls often

occurred between fathers and their children, fathers could also call other significant adults in the child's life, such as the father's coparent or romantic partner. The calls helped participants practice their communication skills and stay engaged with their families and partners/coparents. Participants could request to make calls as they deemed necessary, and program staff provided guidance to participants before and during the call and debriefed with them after to discuss how the participant felt about the call.

Four programs (KISRA, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon) provided opportunities in the community for participants to interact with their partners. These programs held special events, such as family barbecues, sporting outings, Father's Day events, a holiday cookie-baking night, and a Halloween movie showing and costume event. These events allowed fathers to practice and apply the communication, coparenting, and conflict resolution skills they learned in the healthy relationship classes with their partners. As a program support, PB&J provided weekly support groups and family dinners at its offices, where fathers, partners/coparents, and children could share a meal together. After dinner, the group divided into separate activities: children engaged in activities that helped them process their parent's incarceration and return from incarceration while case managers facilitated a parental discussion about topics such as communication, anger management, coparenting, problem-solving and goal-setting, healthy living and nutrition, addiction, child well-being, and financial stability.

#### ASSISTANCE WITH CHILD SUPPORT OBLIGATIONS

All six programs worked with fathers to navigate their child support issues as a way to help them reengage and improve their relationships with their partners/coparents and children. The programs partnered with local child support agencies to provide educational sessions to fathers and be a resource for their questions about navigating child support.<sup>9</sup> Further, three programs (LSS, PB&J, and Rubicon) connected fathers to local child support agencies to help them modify and manage outstanding child support orders. LSS partnered with the Division of Child Support within the South Dakota Department of Social Services to provide child support counseling and education, help reinstate suspended licenses, and modify outstanding child support orders. PB&J partnered with the New Mexico Child Support Enforcement Division to help fathers modify support orders, develop payment plans, and reinstate driver's licenses that had been revoked because of child support noncompliance. Rubicon partnered with the Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services to inform program participants about child support procedures, help modify support orders, and discuss cases in one-on-one sessions. Additionally, NJDOC partnered with the New Jersey Office of Child Support Services and referred fathers to the office when necessary. The state of New Jersey also partnered with a separate Responsible Parenting Program run by NJDOC that provided assistance modifying child support orders in addition to an eight-week parenting class. Engaging the Family and the Responsible Parenting Program jointly provided funding for a child support case manager that regularly attended Engaging the Family classes and helped participants pay and modify their child support orders.

In addition to these activities focused on strengthening relationships between fathers and their partners/coparents, the programs engaged in a host of parenting activities that helped fathers build and repair their relationships with their children. These activities are discussed in detail in the companion brief on parenting activities. Beyond the curriculum-based parenting classes facilitated by all six

programs, parenting activities included parenting support groups and child care services. Collectively, parenting activities were intended to build fathers' knowledge of parenting and child development, increase and improve parent-child contact and communication, and remove and reduce barriers to family stability and reunification. Although the primary focus of these activities was to strengthen and support the parent-child relationship, the activities were also intended to strengthen and repair the entire family unit, including the relationship between fathers and their partners/coparents.

## **Domestic Violence Prevention**

To help prevent and address domestic violence issues, all six programs screened and assessed participants during intake to identify signs of domestic violence, provided domestic violence programming, and referred participants to domestic violence treatment agencies for additional services as necessary. As a stipulation of the authorizing legislation, all programs were required to describe how their proposed programs or activities would address issues of domestic violence and to consult with domestic violence experts or relevant community-based domestic violence coalitions to develop those programs and activities. Further, the funding opportunity announcement encouraged programs to provide domestic violence screening and services. Domestic violence services were designed to ensure participants and their partners were engaging in safe relationships and, if not, to provide treatment and support services. By identifying and addressing evidence of domestic violence, the programs provided couples with opportunities to work together to safely overcome challenges in their relationships. Alternatively, couples may have learned their relationships were not safe and received services to help them improve their coparenting relationships without being engaged in romantic relationships.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT**

All six programs conducted an assessment for evidence of domestic violence issues with each participant during intake. Five programs (KISRA, NJDOC, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon) incorporated questions related to domestic violence on their intake forms or during their intake interviews. These programs enlisted the help of domestic violence organizations to develop, customize, or review the questions. LSS used a specific tool called the Propensity for Abuse Scale to screen participants for domestic violence during intake.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES**

Three programs (KISRA, LSS, and NJDOC) offered domestic violence services to participants, based on the level of need determined during their intake assessment, as a part of their internal program activity offerings. Although none of the programs formally reassessed participants' needs for domestic violence services, program staff monitored participants' needs during their enrollment and offered domestic violence services as necessary. KISRA developed its own domestic violence class, called Domestic Violence 101, in partnership with the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Kanawha County Family Court. Domestic Violence 101 was not intended as a batterer intervention program and instead focused on domestic violence awareness and prevention. The eight-hour class was facilitated by KISRA staff and included four modules. The class covered a number of topics, such as defining domestic violence, distinguishing physical abuse from emotional abuse, and discussing the

effects of domestic violence on children. KISRA referred participants to the class if risk factors were identified during the intake assessment, but participation was not limited to those in the fatherhood program. Men and women from the community could attend the class along with first-time and low-level domestic violence defendants referred by the Kanawha County Family Court.

LSS and NJDOC provided domestic violence classes using curricula developed by an external organization. LSS used the Moral Reconciliation Therapy-Domestic Violence curriculum as its domestic violence service. LSS case managers facilitated the weekly one-hour classes for 24 weeks, and participants could take the class concurrently with their parenting and relationship classes. NJDOC incorporated domestic violence education into its healthy relationships class, Married and Loving It! Using the Understanding Domestic Violence curriculum, case managers taught a two-hour lesson on the definition of domestic violence and the use of nonviolent methods to address challenges that may emerge in relationships.

#### REFERRALS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TREATMENT PROVIDERS

Four programs (LSS, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon) used the information gained through their domestic violence screening assessments to refer participants to their own domestic violence programming or to community-based organizations for domestic violence support services and case management. In addition to offering the Moral Reconciliation Therapy-Domestic Violence class, LSS partnered with the South Dakota Network Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault to educate case managers on the available domestic violence programs and services in the state. The Network also received referrals from LSS and connected participants to domestic violence service providers in the community. PB&J partnered with A New Awakening Counseling Services to provide fathers with a 52-week domestic violence program. A New Awakening waived its fees for fathers enrolled in PB&J's fatherhood program. RIDGE provided domestic violence services through its partnerships with several providers in Ohio. In the state's northwest region, RIDGE referred participants to the YWCA in Lucas County and Coleman Behavioral Health; in the northern region, they partnered with Every Woman House, the Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center, and the Stark County Prosecutor's Office; in the southern region, participants were referred to the Family Violence Collaborative and the Artemis Center. Rubicon partnered with STAND! For Families Free of Violence to provide domestic violence treatment classes to participants it assessed as needing additional treatment services.

## Recommendations and Conclusions

The Fatherhood Reentry programs implemented several activities in the institutions and communities in which they were based intended to build stronger relationships between fathers and their partners/coparents. Relative to the other two components of the programs—economic stability and responsible parenting activities—the healthy relationship activities implemented by the programs were not as extensive. Nevertheless, the Fatherhood Reentry programs successfully implemented some healthy relationship activities in the correctional institutions and treatment centers and in communities.

The following recommendations are drawn from the experiences and lessons learned of the Fatherhood Reentry programs and are intended for practitioners seeking ways to help fathers returning from incarceration build healthy relationships with their partners/coparents and reunify with their families:<sup>10</sup>

- ***Make partner/coparent interaction activities a targeted and meaningful program component.*** Although healthy relationship activities were intended to be a core component of the six programs, in practice, they were a supplement to or an extension of the parenting activities. Efforts to facilitate strong, healthy relationships between fathers and their partners/coparents and efforts to develop fathers' parenting skills may be mutually reinforcing, but each deserves its own focus. A tense relationship between a father and his partner/coparent can be a major stressor within a family and can hamper positive father-child relationships. Parenting activities alone may not be sufficient to overcome tense or conflict-ridden relationships because their primary focus is often on the parent-child relationship. Indeed, parenting activities may not provide the father an opportunity to address a tense or conflict-ridden relationship directly. By providing healthy relationship activities and emphasizing their importance, fatherhood programs can strengthen the entire family unit. The Fatherhood Reentry programs demonstrated how these components could be complementary in practice, but more activities could have been implemented if there was equal emphasis on parenting and relationships (e.g., counseling sessions, couples retreats, etc.).
- ***Consider funding that provides services to address the needs of fathers' partners/coparents.*** The partners/coparents of currently or formerly incarcerated fathers have their own unique needs and priorities. For example, partners/coparents might struggle finding employment and maintaining stable housing or suffer from mental and physical health issues. Although the Fatherhood Reentry programs could not use OFA grant funds to provide services to fathers' partners/coparents, it is important to engage partners in healthy relationship activities alongside fathers. Programs should think creatively about funding sources or partnerships that allow them to address the needs of partners directly as part of a comprehensive approach to strengthening the family. Giving partners access to staff who can connect them to appropriate services is an important way of ensuring their needs are met. Satisfying partners/coparents' needs will free up time and resources they can devote to improving their relationships, thus removing stressors that can lead to relationship conflict or dissolution.
- ***Be willing to work with partners on family reunification as they are ready.*** Couples have different levels of readiness for reunification or engagement. Some partners/coparents have forged strong connections during incarceration and only need a small amount of support to continue a healthy relationship as spouses, intimate partners, or coparents. Other partners/coparents may have a more tenuous connection, perhaps because of a history of bad communication, mistrust, or even domestic abuse. Many fathers also have multiple partners/coparents (i.e., they have minor children with multiple women), and each partnership may be at a different level of readiness for coparenting. Healthy relationship programs can affect the relationship quality of

participants, but they are not the universal solution: programs should work with participants and partners where they are and only encourage reunification or engagement if both partners are interested and ready. Even if reunification is not possible, there are many intermediate and important goals, such as improving the coparenting relationship and decreasing anger or resentment, that can help strengthen a family.

The experiences of the Fatherhood Reentry programs offer various lessons for practitioners who wish to help partners/coparents of fathers with incarceration histories achieve family stability and family reunification. Building healthy relationships can provide a solid support system and foundation for children and has the potential to improve the reentry success of fathers.

## Notes

1. The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation and the Office of Family Assistance are both part of the Administration for Children and Families in the US Department of Health and Human Services.
2. KISRA was funded under a different funding opportunity announcement than the other five projects and served fathers who may not have had recent incarceration histories.
3. The Fatherhood Reentry projects were part of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood initiative, a discretionary grant program originally authorized under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 and reauthorized under the Claims Resolution Act of 2010.
4. Postrelease enrollment varied widely: LSS, PB&J, RIDGE, and Rubicon enrolled fathers who had been released from incarceration in the past six months; KISRA enrolled formerly incarcerated fathers with no time limit on the recency of their last incarceration; NJDOC did not enroll any fathers in the community.
5. Additional information about implementation of the programs, including target populations, geographic locations, and partnerships can be found in a companion report (Fontaine et al. 2017).
6. Two other briefs in this series focus on economic stability (Fontaine and Kurs 2017) and responsible parenting (Fontaine, Cramer, and Paddock 2017).
7. A note on language: throughout this brief, the words partner/coparent will be used to refer inclusively to both the romantic partners of program participants (who may or may not be the parent of their child), and/or their coparent (who may or may not be in a romantic relationship with the participating father). In practice, the programs had fathers choose which partner/coparent they wanted to participate in healthy relationship activities. Many fathers had multiple partners and/or coparents. Occasionally, we refer specifically to the “romantic partner” or “coparent” when a relationship was specified by the program.
8. The other two components were responsible parenting and economic stability activities. Additional information about the responsible parenting and economic stability activities the Fatherhood Reentry programs implemented can be found in two companion briefs (Fontaine, Cramer, and Paddock 2017; Fontaine and Kurs 2017).
9. The OFA-funded Fatherhood Reentry projects were not permitted to use grant funds for child support payments.
10. These recommendations include suggestions for service provision that are not allowable by the authorizing legislation that funded the Fatherhood Reentry projects.

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