

Community Service as an Employment Activity Option for Low-income Non-custodial Fathers

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Currently in Alabama, thousands of low income non-custodial fathers are unable to pay child support. The 1999 Amendment to the Welfare to Work Act (Department of Labor Policy, 2001, p. 16) stipulates that community service is a valid and viable employment activity. In Alabama, however, fathers who are delinquent in their child support payments have not been given the opportunity to engage in community service as a means of fulfilling their obligations. This study focuses on community service as an often-overlooked but practical way to assist non-custodial fathers in fulfilling their child support obligation and acquiring skills necessary to obtain and maintain employment. A survey conducted for this study indicates that non-profit organizations in Alabama have need for adult male volunteers. Based on these findings, community service should be an option in assisting low income, unemployed, or underemployed fathers to become employable.

Nationally, almost one third of fathers who do not meet their child support obligations are poor themselves, with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty threshold. Many of these fathers do not have a high school diploma, and almost one half have not worked in the past year (Sorenson & Wheaton, 2000). Several authors (Sorenson & Wheaton, 2000; Anderson, Kohler, & Letique, 2002, 2005; Huang, Mincy, & Garfinkel, 2005) have written extensively about the challenges and stressors that low income fathers experience and which are exacerbated by young age, chronic under- and unemployment, lack of suitable housing and reliable transportation, poor access to proper health care, criminal record, and punitive practices for non-payment of child support (incarceration, revocation of driver's

license, etc.). These life circumstances are even more problematic for low income African American fathers who are often limited to low wage jobs that offer little flexibility, opportunity for advancement, or security.

In Alabama, 30% of men live below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2006), many of whom are fathers, and financial prospects for these men are limited. A report by the Center for Business and Economic Research (2008) predicts that Alabama's economy will continue to face significant challenges throughout 2008 because of layoffs, plant closings, low consumer spending, and insufficient income. The economic difficulties are made worse because there is insufficient funding to attract new industry and an insufficient workforce with the education and skills necessary to sustain new industry. Given Alabama's current unemployment rate of 4.7%, and major job losses in construction and manufacturing, many unemployed fathers have few prospects for gaining employment (Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, 2008).

Given the future job prospects for low-income fathers, this paper explores the feasibility of implementing a community service program to resolve the employment requirements for low-income non-custodial fathers in Alabama. An overview is presented of the child support policies and the resulting Fatherhood Initiative Programs that have tried to address employment barriers. Secondly, an overview of the community service needs of non-profit organizations and an analysis of current welfare to work programs that incorporate community service are presented. Lastly, results of a survey of non-profit organizations in Alabama are incorporated into a model proposed for use by Fatherhood Initiative Programs.

Overview of Child Support Policy

Child poverty is heralded as the primary reason for current legislation on child support policy. The child poverty rate for single-parent families is approximately 46%, compared to only 10% in two-parent families (Freely, 2000). Over the last several decades, the number of children living in single-mother families has dramatically increased, from 7.5 million in 1970 to 16.5 million in 2002 (Huang, Mincy, & Garfinkel, 2005). Policy efforts have focused on improving the economic situation of welfare mothers and children who live in poverty. The Family Support Act of 1988 mandated that all states--as a condition of receiving federal funds--have guidelines and utilize them when calculating support for children (Administration for Children and Families, 2007). The goal of creating guidelines for child support was to establish clear criteria for child support awards, thus creating a more uniform and consistent amount of support for fathers

to pay (Child Support Guidelines, 2002). Despite reform efforts to make payments fair and affordable, in 1990 at least one third of non-custodial fathers who owed child support did not pay. Therefore, many poor mothers could not adequately care for their children and sought financial relief through public assistance (Del Boca, 2002).

In 1996, policy makers implemented an aggressive plan to increase parental responsibility and decrease welfare expense paid by taxpayers. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was signed into law with the goals of reducing the welfare debt and making absent fathers more financially responsible for their children (Administration for Children and Families, 2007). PRWORA altered the welfare system by cutting out the cash assistance program under AID to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replacing it with a new block grant, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). TANF created time limits on aid to mothers and children, renewed focus on work, and included child support reform (Administration for Children and Families, 2007).

In 1997, there was a deliberate policy shift to a strategy that included assistance to low income non-custodial fathers to gain meaningful employment, improve their economic situation, and improve the well-being of their children (Martinson, 1998). To this end, Congress passed the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, which allocated \$3 billion in grants to the Department of Labor (DOL). The grant money was provided so states and local communities could support Welfare to Work (WtW) programs for the hardest-to-employ TANF recipients and non-custodial parents of children on TANF (Fraker et al., 2004). As Freely (2000) explains, regularly paid child support orders prevent poverty by increasing income for single mothers and their children.

Expansion of the welfare to work program continued in November 1999. First, Congress passed the Welfare to Work and Child Support Amendments, which made non-custodial parents' eligibility more inclusive and provided a better-defined explanation of what activities qualify as employment activity (Department of Labor Policy, 2001). Under the 1999 amendments, the welfare to work grant program serves non-custodial parents who are unemployed, underemployed, or are having difficulty making child support payments or who have a child who is receiving or eligible for TANF benefits; the non-custodial parent must enter into a personal responsibility contract. A clearer indication of what "employment activities" can be applied in programs are listed: vocational education and job training, community service, work experience, on-the-job training, and job creation through public or private sector employment wage subsidies (Department of Labor Policy, 2001).

Secondly, in 2000, President George W. Bush furthered the funding and scope of the services for low income non-custodial fathers. Grants totaling \$125 million were designated for programs to assist low income non-custodial fathers to work, pay child support, and reconnect with their children. In addition, the Welfare to Work eligibility requirements were expanded to include fathers with children not receiving welfare benefits (Office of the Press Secretary, 2000).

Lastly, President Bush set aside another \$60 million in grants in 2002 for programs supporting responsible fatherhood. Grants were given to faith-based and community organizations that assist low income non-custodial fathers in obtaining work skills and, thus, the National Fatherhood Initiative Program was created (Office of the Press Secretary, 2000). The National Fatherhood Initiative offers an array of services such as counseling, mentoring, marriage education, enhancing relationship skills, and services to foster economic stability (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). The goals of the national fatherhood program were to improve employment opportunities for low income non-custodial fathers by providing activities such as job search, job training, subsidized employment, and job enhancement through career-related education (White House, 2001). Many states developed their own fatherhood programs using the components of the national program as a model.

Fatherhood Programs in Alabama

Alabama, compared to other states, has generally provided a very modest financial safety net for low income families. However, in 2000, Alabama Governor Don Siegelman approved spending the accumulated TANF funds for initiatives that went beyond federal mandates (Holcomb, Schlichter, Schmidt, Adams, & Leos-Urbel, 2001). In 2002, the Alabama Fatherhood Initiative (AFI) was created to ensure short-term skills training, employment assistance, job placement, education, and counseling to non-custodial fathers (Alabama Department of Human Resources, n.d.). Fatherhood programs must utilize a range of services for this diverse population.

The Bessemer Fatherhood Initiative's Building the Bridge program is one of the more comprehensive AFI programs. It was created in response to an overwhelming number of non-custodial fathers in the Bessemer area having significant child support arrearages. The majority of the clients were court-ordered to the program because of non-payment. Many of these fathers were willing to pay child support but lacked the ability. Services for these non-custodial fathers include counseling, job readiness,

case management, and short-term job training (Bessemer Building the Bridge, 2007). While Alabama's programs have implemented these other employment activities, they have not used community service to address the employment and job skill needs faced by low-income fathers.

Community Service Option: Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteers are an integral part of non-profit organizations, and without them many community needs would not be met. In the United States, adult volunteers provide the equivalent of nine million full time working hours in addition to helping fulfill the organization's mission or charge. Without people who are willing to give of their time and resources, many non-profit organizations would not survive (Finkelstein, 2008).

There are many noted benefits to community service for both participants and organizations. Volunteering serves as a vehicle for developing and discovering skills, provides for services to those in need in communities, and produces a sense of achievement and motivation through service and change. Volunteering also provides opportunities to network, receive support, have positive experiences, and send a message to potential employers (World Volunteer Web, 2005).

Inadequate job skills are only one of several barriers to employment that low income non-custodial fathers encounter. Hoard and Anderson (2004) identify a few of these other barriers as poor health, life stress, and lack of social support. Their research explains that when low income fathers have health problems, their problems are worsened by unemployment. Community service will remedy many of these issues. A report by Grim, Spring, and Dietz (2008) for the Corporation for National and Community Service reveals that volunteering can lead to better mental and physical health. Anderson, Koehler, and Letique (2005) explain that many low income non-custodial fathers experience life stressors that are exacerbated due to lack of emotional resources and social support. Specifically, men who did not have a support system were found to be more depressed and to struggle more with everyday problems. Volunteering could provide a network of support for these fathers and render them the validation and reinforcement they need to improve their lives (Taylor & Bloch, 2008).

A study by Summers, Boller, Schiffman, and Raikes (2006) indicates that low income non-custodial fathers who see themselves as less than adequate providers tend to have reduced interactions with their children. Research also indicates that when fathers do not spend time with their children, this leads to negative outcomes for the children emotionally, mentally, physically, and socially (Seltzer, 1991; Administration for Children

and Families, 2007). Therefore, when unemployed non-custodial fathers are given the opportunity to participate in community service, they will be building their self-esteem, be positive role models for their children, and strengthen their communities. Fathers who volunteer will model pro-social behavior and citizenship through serving for their children (Macomber, Moore, & Brown, 1999).

In welfare reform, policies and programs promote work, self-sufficiency, effective parenting, and responsible fatherhood. An assumption of these policies is that by reducing government support, there will be a revival of community and volunteerism to help those still in need (Brown & Trends, 2001). This message of communities taking care of themselves is promoted in the 1999 Amendment to the Welfare to Work grant, which stipulates that community service can be counted as an employment activity. Programs can use community service as a bridge for underemployed or unemployed fathers in their search for gainful employment while simultaneously meeting the needs of the community.

Programs Offering the Community Service Option

West Virginia and Wisconsin have implemented community service or unpaid work experience into their Welfare to Work programs. In West Virginia, a pre-employment model is used which focuses on employment preparation as a means to assist non-custodial fathers. Employment preparation services help individuals overcome barriers to employment or facilitate skills to find and maintain work (Fraker et al., 2004). Some program participants are unable to find a job even with employment preparation services, however; transitional employment or community service provides an option for such clients who do not quickly secure unsubsidized employment. More than two thirds of enrollees have been placed in unpaid work experience positions within non-profit organizations. This provides clients with a current work history and helps them gain work skills and habits necessary for unsubsidized employment (Fraker et al., 2004).

In Wisconsin, the welfare to work program (W-2) was designed using an employment ladder model. Each tier engages the enrollee in different work activities. The community service jobs (CSJ) tier prepares individuals for eventual entry into work by increasing skills, enhancing work behaviors, and providing a structured and supportive environment for hands-on experience (Roobles, Doolittle, & Gooden, 2003). In the W-2, the most commonly assigned program component state-wide is community service jobs. During the first two years of the program's implementation (September 1997– December 1999) sixty to eighty percent of all participants were

assigned to CSJs. Wisconsin's W-2 program has been successful in preparing participants to engage in the work force. In a survey, CSJ participants reported that CSJ helped them improve their work habits and basic work skills, and that CSJ offered them real work opportunities; participants also reported that they expected to be able to attain better paying jobs as a result of CSJ (Roobles et al., 2003).

Both the West Virginia and Wisconsin programs have made significant reductions in their case loads and have been successful by offering a number of employment options to welfare recipients and non-custodial fathers. In addition to the variety of "work activities" provided, their success is also due to their use of ancillary services, such as job search, GED classes, community service, and job training. The information gained from these programs helped in the development of the Community Service Option model presented later in this paper.

Non-profits in Alabama

The Non-profit Resource Center of Alabama (NRCA) is a membership organization of 700 non-profits around the state. The NRCA mission is to "strengthen and support Alabama non-profit organizations in serving their communities" (NRCA, 2002). NRCA provides information and programs specifically designed to fit the needs of Alabama's communities (NRCA, 2002). To fulfill their missions, many non-profits rely heavily on volunteers, that is, individuals or groups who give their time, talent, and abilities to a population, cause, or community in need, and are necessary to carry out services to disadvantaged populations. Unfortunately, a recent national survey showed that non-profits have had a recent 58% drop in volunteers because of rising gas prices (Cauchon, 2008). Data recorded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) show that both the number of volunteers and the volunteer rate were less in 2006 than in 2005 and had also dropped from 2003. To establish whether non-profit organizations in Alabama provide a viable work option for low income underemployed or unemployed fathers, the researchers created a survey that was distributed to members of the NRCA.

Methodology

Survey Population

The researchers in this study created an eight-question survey to assess whether non-profit organizations in Alabama have a need for male volunteers. The Associate Director of the NRCA agreed to email the survey to all 700 member agencies. No identifying information was retained from the survey, and the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board approved the survey and methods for collecting data.

Survey Scope

The survey, entitled "Community Service Opportunities for Low-income Non-custodial Fathers," was designed to assess the need for male volunteers in the state. The first four questions are: "What activities are provided by your agency?", "Is there a need for adult male volunteers at your agency?", "Currently, how many adult male volunteers are needed at your agency?", and "What positions are available at your agency for adult male volunteers?" The fifth question is important because of the implications for a program model: "Approximately how many hours per week could an adult male volunteer at your agency?" Questions six through eight are: "Has an adult male volunteer ever been hired by your agency?", "Is there a community bulletin board with local job listings posted at your agency?", and "Is a personal vehicle required to volunteer?"

Survey Administration

The survey was distributed to all 700 NRCA members by email, which allowed for easy distribution and effective tracking of survey responses. A survey invitation and an informed consent form were included along with the survey questions. In the next couple of days, 19 survey responses were received. After one and a half weeks, NRCA's Associate Director emailed a second distribution of the survey to prompt more responses to the survey. Despite the advantages of an email survey, a total of only 26 (.04% of 700) responses were received.

Because of the low response rate, the survey was subsequently conducted over the phone with another 44 non-profits, for a total of 70 respondents (10% of 700). Every tenth organization in NRCA's Member Directory was contacted. The researcher called the organization's contact number and identified herself and the purpose of the call. The persons who

answered either verified themselves as the person who could answer the questions, asked the researcher to call back at a later time, or transferred the researcher to voicemail; occasionally, no one answered at all. In the case of no answer or voicemail, the researcher went to the next non-profit on the list. The researcher continued with this process until there were a total of 70 sets of answered surveys.

Results

Responses to the first question, “What activities are provided by your organization?”, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of Non-profit Organizations Offering Specified Activities

Environmental Preservation	17.0%	Art	8.6%
Family Services	16.0%	Services for the Elderly	8.6%
Services for Children	14.0%	Special Needs Populations	8.6%
Mentoring	11.0%	Services for the Community	5.7%
Tutoring/Literacy	10.0%	Fundraising	2.9%
Camp/Recreation	8.6%	Civil Rights	2.9%
Meal Delivery	8.6%	Historic Preservation	2.9%
Community Education	8.6%	Animal Services	2.9%
Counseling	8.6%	Community Health Services	2.9%

Responses to the second question, “Is there a need for adult male volunteers at your agency?”, indicated 52 (74%) of the organizations need male volunteers. Four (6%) need male volunteers sometimes, whereas 11 (16%) organizations do not need male volunteers at all. Three (4%) of those surveyed said they “do not know.”

The third question, “Currently how many adult male volunteers are needed at your agency?”, had varying results. Eighteen (26%) respondents reported needing 1 to 5 male volunteers; 7 (10%) need 6 to 10 male volunteers; 16 (23%) need more than 10 volunteers; and 13 (19%) do not need any volunteers. Sixteen (23%) of those surveyed said they did not know how many were needed. Many of the “do not know” responses were explained in terms of seasonal activities, time of programs, and funding for the programs.

Replies to the next question, “What positions are available for male volunteers at your organization?”, are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of Non-profit Organizations Having Specified Positions for Males

Grounds Keeper	5.7%	Security	1.4%
Construction	7.1%	Teacher	5.7%
Coach	5.7%	Tutor	14.3%
Deliveryman	5.7%	Patient Visitor	1.4%
Driver	7.1%	Art Festival	2.9%
Janitor	8.6%	Tour Guide	2.9%
Mentor	17.1%	Clerical	12.9%
Repairman	10.0%	Fundraising	8.6%

The majority of surveyed non-profits need male volunteers between 5 and 10 hours per week. Some of the organizations stipulated that the hours volunteers were needed vary with the particular volunteer position. In regards to the question, “Has an adult male volunteer ever been hired by your agency?”, 20 (29%) said “yes,” 28 (40%) said “no,” and 9 (13%) answered “do not know.” Thirteen (19%) did not answer the question.

In response to question seven, “Is there a community bulletin board with local job listings posted at your agency?”, 6 (9%) organizations indicated they have a bulletin board, 41 (59%) do not have a bulletin board, and 5 (7%) post job listings on their website. Five (7%) indicated they did not know if there were a community bulletin board, and 13 (19%) did not answer the question.

In response to the last question, “Is a personal vehicle required to volunteer?”, of the surveyed organizations, 21 (30%) said “yes” and 31 (44%) said “no.” Seven (10%) of the organizations’ representatives replied “do not know,” and 11 (16%) did not answer the question.

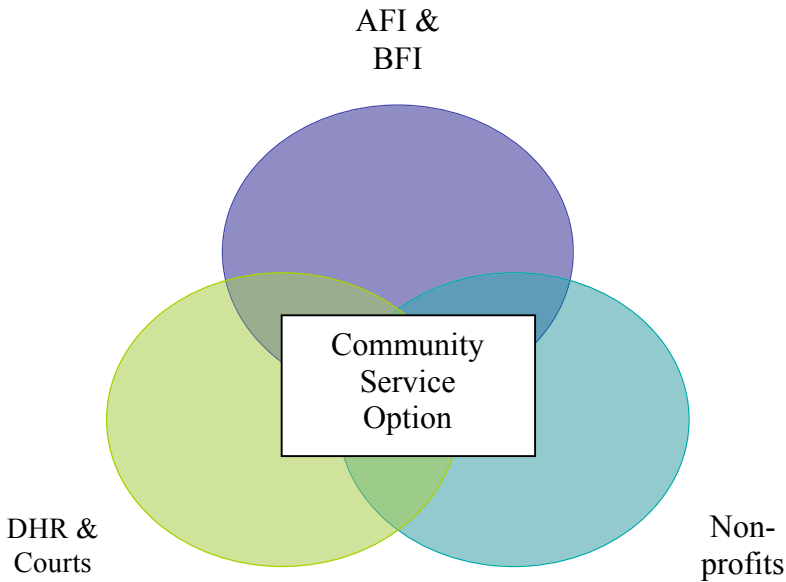
Limitations

The low response rate to the two emails was a major limitation to the researchers’ ability to generalize findings. A related limitation was tight time constraints for the research project. Another limitation that must be considered in development of a Community Service Option for fatherhood programs is that several of the nonprofit organizations that provide services to children, youth, or to special needs populations require a background check. This could be problematic for low income fathers who have a criminal record. Lastly, a final limitation is that there are non-profit organizations listed on the NRCA website in the Member Directory that do not use volunteers at all. The only way for researchers to distinguish between the ones that do utilize volunteers and those that do not is to contact each organization.

Recommendations

This study shows that Fatherhood Initiatives in this state are not offering community service as a method to assist low income non-custodial fathers and that non-profit organizations in Alabama need male volunteers. Based on these findings, the researchers propose a Community Service Option model (CSO) for fatherhood programs. See Figure 1 for a diagram of the CSO.

Figure 1. Community Service Option*



*AFI- Alabama Fatherhood Initiative; BFI- Bessemer Fatherhood Initiative
DHR- Alabama Department of Human Resources

The Community Service Option Model (CSO)

The responses from the NRCA non-profits indicate that 52 of the 70 non-profit organizations surveyed have a need for adult male volunteers. Thus, there appear to be opportunities for AFI and BFI programs' clients to have community service as an option for fulfilling their employment requirement. The researchers in this study suggest a pilot project that would form the basis of a model for these low-income fathers. The first step would

involve discussion of survey results with directors of BFI. Second, a partnership/agreement with local judges and Department of Human Resources along with BFI would be needed, to implement the use of volunteering for a two-year period while giving those involved amnesty in regard to child-support payments for this period of time. Lastly, it is recommended that a tiered program be developed, using best practices from West Virginia and Wisconsin, to offer community service opportunities in combination with job search, skills training, and/or GED classes.

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