



DC Family Policy Seminar

“Family Friendly” Welfare Reform: Using Welfare Policies to Strengthen the Family

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HIGHLIGHTS

The DC Family Policy Seminar aims to provide accurate, relevant, non-partisan, timely information and policy options concerning issues affecting children and families to District policymakers.

The DC Family Policy Seminar is part of the National Network of State Family Policy Seminars, a project of the Family Impact Seminar, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy Research and Education Foundation.

A collaborative project of the Georgetown University Graduate Public Policy Program (GPPP) and its affiliate, the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health (NCEMCH).



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**“Family Friendly”
Welfare Reform:
Using Welfare Policies to
Strengthen the Family**

HIGHLIGHTS

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These highlights from the November 9, 1994, D.C. Family Policy Seminar serve as an extension to the “Background Briefing Report” written for this event by Dr. Mark Rom.

“Family Friendly” Welfare Reform: Using Welfare Policies to Strengthen the Family

The D.C. Family Policy Seminar series present family issue topics of local and national significance to District policymakers, practitioners, legislators, social service professionals, community leaders, and residents. “Family Friendly Welfare Reform,” fourth in the series, investigated the father’s role in welfare families, addressing issues such as paternity establishment, child support, and training and employment programs.

Opening Remarks

Dr. Mark Rom, director of the D.C. Family Policy Seminar and faculty member of the Graduate Public Policy Program at Georgetown University, welcomed all participants. He recognized Ms. Evita Leonard from Councilmember Cropp’s office, Mr. Thomas Blackburn from Councilmember Lightfoot’s office, and several members of Mayor Kelly’s Task Force on Welfare Reform. Then Dr. Rom introduced the speakers.

Speakers

Pamela Johnson

Ms. Johnson, special assistant for the D.C. Commission on Social Services, Family Preservation and Support Services Program (FPSSP) at the Department of Human Services, explained how the current welfare system could be reformed to ensure continued economic support of families. Highlighting FPSSP as an example, Ms. Johnson discussed how government could play an important role in strengthening families.

FPSSP offers an array of support services, both social and economic, to help families become self-sufficient. To undergird the family, FPSSP provides

peer support, educational guidance, and foster care services through a network of community centers. This support base enables family members to pursue and obtain jobs while preserving a cohesive family unit. The legislation that promotes the establishment of the FPSSP also includes a community needs assessment: the geographical information system. This system analyzes community needs and service availability to match existing resources to emerging needs.

The underlying premise of FPSSP is that all families need some form of support; welfare is but one kind. FPSSP draws on various support elements to help take families off the welfare rolls and keep the family structure intact. This process requires recognition of the father as a key figure in stabilizing the family structure. Ms. Johnson described an Iowa program that illustrates this kind of a system. The Iowa program, which is governed by principles similar to FPSSP’s, funds community centers that make support services available to all families who need them.

In conclusion, Ms. Johnson stressed that the political and bureaucratic environment must become more father friendly. This can be accomplished through such simple means as promoting the father as a role model, status building, and welcoming stepfathers into the family process.

Maurice Roberts

Maurice Roberts, chairman of the Subcommittee on Strengthening the Family of Mayor Kelly’s Welfare Reform Task Force and director of M. R. & Associates, a local advocacy organization, told the audience that he once was a welfare recipient, a convict, and a drug dealer. For

the past 25 years, Mr. Roberts has worked as a community organizer, teacher, and welfare reform advocate. For the past two years, he has worked with community organizations, specifically the Langston Dwellings Residence Council and the Ward 5 Community Coalition, to create integrated comprehensive social service programs that focus on creating jobs.

Mr. Roberts examined some of the obstacles to local government initiatives in welfare reform, including resistance by government agencies and their lack of respect for welfare recipients (especially males), and a proliferation of meetings leading to little or no action.

The Subcommittee on Strengthening the Family developed a set of recommendations that address fathers who face barriers when offering support to their families. The recommendations include:

- **Welfare application process**
Include the father in the intake process and view him as a source of child care and a positive role model for his family.
- **Waiver**
Eliminate the *100-Hour Rule*, an eligibility requirement of Aid to Families with Dependent Children-Unemployed Parent (AFDC-UP). Established during the 1960s, this program provides economic support to needy, eligible two-parent families. The AFDC-UP program has strict eligibility criteria. First, the primary wage earner of the family must be unemployed and have worked six of the last 13 quarters (where earning quarters are defined according to Social Security standards). Unemployment is defined as working less than 100 hours in a month. It is this criterion that has become known as the *100-Hour Rule*. The Clinton welfare reform proposal would provide states the option to modify, reduce, or eliminate any of the special eligibility requirements.

- **Program Initiatives**

Institute support programs to prepare young fathers who are in school for employment and instill in them a sense of self-esteem and responsibility. Institute alternative programs that support "cooperative economics," whereby a family can pool resources [e.g., food stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits] and become aware of what they can accomplish together.

Mr. Roberts closed by stating that the recent election results portend a Congress that will not support family-friendly reform. He placed responsibility on the community to craft strategies to promote and hasten welfare reform.

Pamela Holcomb

Pamela Holcomb is a research associate at the Urban Institute and is working at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on welfare reform. She addressed the difficulties of implementing programs for noncustodial fathers within a system that traditionally has focused on women. She discussed how men have received attention solely as providers of child support. Ms. Holcomb focused on how paternity establishment (the legal process by which the father of a child born to unmarried parents is identified as the child's biological father, and thereby assumes parental rights and responsibilities for the child's first 18 years of life) and financial support have been the two avenues open for men who want to contribute to their families. She commented that the father's role in the welfare family dynamic has only recently emerged as an issue.

Ms. Holcomb made several suggestions for incorporating noncustodial fathers into welfare reform: target young fathers, emphasize parenting and paternity establishment, and establish support programs that increase employment opportunities for men. Early intervention includes efforts to get more noncustodial fathers to establish paternity

through in-hospital programs at the time of birth. Ms. Holcomb contended that health care facilities, WIC clinics, prenatal clinics, and family planning clinics do little to notify young fathers about paternity establishment. She did note that parenting programs for fathers do exist in some cities, sometimes within adolescent mother programs and, occasionally, in programs specifically geared to fathers. Some examples are programs in Philadelphia and Minneapolis and the Responsible Fathers Program in Cleveland. These programs address parenting skills and peer support while stressing father involvement.

According to Ms. Holcomb, voluntary paternity establishment is supported in some hospitals. However, she felt that child support agencies must be careful to ensure that the process is performed with sensitivity and appropriate client education. Ms. Holcomb emphasized that while many institutions and their staff are in a unique position to interact with the father, often health professionals and providers have not been open to broadening their roles to include this kind of client education.

Ms. Holcomb then elaborated on the issue of employment and training for fathers. She indicated that the welfare system is beginning to support employment and training programs because they are viewed as a means to increase child support payments. An example of a training program is Parents' Fair Share, an innovative method for integrating employment and training efforts with peer support, family mediation and parenting skills, paternity establishment, and child support education. This program reaches young men soon after they learn they're going to be fathers, helping them understand their responsibilities as parents while helping them find employment. Ms. Holcomb highlighted the peer groups as one of the most beneficial components of this model. These groups are as an important support source for young men coping with their new responsibilities.

Ms. Holcomb also discussed the Clinton administration's welfare reform proposal that

allows states to use up to 10 percent of their JOBS/WORK funds to support employment and training initiatives for noncustodial fathers. These funds may be used to support programs based on the Parents' Fair Share model. In addition, the grant proposal includes small demonstration grants for noncustodial father parenting programs. States may also modify or eliminate the 100-Hour Rule and all other special eligibility requirements for two-parent families under the AFDC-UP program.

Ms. Holcomb concluded by stressing that a great opportunity exists at the local level to explore various initiatives to integrate both mothers and fathers into welfare reform.

Paula Roberts

Paula Roberts, senior staff attorney at the Center for Law and Social Policy, presented innovations from around the country that incorporate the father into the welfare process. She discussed both practical and inexpensive strategies for action.

Ms. Roberts identified two types of fathers, based on the categories established by Ron Minsey at the Ford Foundation: "deadbeats," who can afford to pay but try to escape the system; and "turnips," who may be involved in their children's lives but are unable to provide financial support. Ms. Roberts felt that deadbeat dads must be forced to meet their obligations. The policy choices for turnip dads are not so clear. She elaborated by identifying two types of turnips: those that have tried to help their children, and those who have not made a significant effort. She contended that policymakers must address how to bring men into the welfare system in those cases where abuse is not an issue impeding family unification.

Ms. Roberts also discussed paternity establishment, advocating in-hospital programs that encourage fathers to become involved, responsible parents early in the child's life. Even when a child is no longer a newborn, systems can be established at birth record agencies to establish paternity, and

the original birth certificate can be updated. Identification of the biological father can now be determined through genetic testing with a 99.9 percent probability. Genetic testing, which costs couples between \$200 and \$400, can be offset by federal government subsidies that cover 90 percent of these costs. Ms. Roberts also suggested additional reforms for the child support office where fathers often cannot access services. Federal law mandates that these offices aid in the formal and legal identification of the father's relationship to the child. Ms. Roberts stressed that these offices need to emphasize that fathers are important.

Once paternity is established and the father comes forward to take on his parenting responsibility, the instinctual agency response has often been to demand and, in some cases, take legal actions to obtain back support. This consequence is often problematic for a father under the age of 25 who might not have a full-time job that would allow him to provide regular child support. Ms. Roberts offered solution strategies, such as Erma Neill's program in Indianapolis. This program stresses the importance of attaining a high school diploma. Through a formal written contract, a father who is still in school or returns to school is exempt from child support or back-support compliance laws. In addition, the father cares for his child for an agreed-upon number of hours and attends parenting classes. Thus, the father is able to maintain a continuous relationship with his child while increasing his economic opportunities.

Historically, child support guidelines have been applied with little regard and respect for low-income fathers. These guidelines often require support levels above the father's ability to pay, deterring some fathers from offering any support. In fact, Ms. Roberts contends that mothers often do not pursue higher levels of child support for fear that the father will be driven into the underground economy or away from the child completely. Policymakers must therefore reexamine the feasibility of prohibitive cash obligations.

Ms. Roberts spent some time discussing support guidelines for District residents. She reported that when a family applies for AFDC, the local government views any child support paid as a debt to the District. Current and back support may be demanded from fathers. Ms. Roberts stated that there is no legal reason why the District cannot hold arrears aside. In addition, in the case of reunification of an AFDC family, the District does not need to garner income for back child support payments when this income is needed to meet the child's current needs. Ms. Roberts feels that the purpose of welfare should be to strengthen families, not to seek compensation for previous debt. She added that the Clinton welfare plan will allow states several options in seeking child support payment and establishing paternity.

Ms. Roberts then discussed another innovative approach to welfare reform: Child Support Assurance (CSA). In some single-parent families, the father does not earn enough to contribute adequately to the financial base. To help raise the family out of poverty, CSA programs supplement the father's child support. Paternity establishment, income identification, and supplementation are all elements of this program. CSA programs have been implemented in New York, Virginia, Connecticut, and California in an attempt to build on families' existing contributions to balance what the government provides.

Finally, Ms. Roberts enumerated that many community resources are not being used. For example, Prince George's County, as a result of its collaboration with University of Maryland volunteers, has incorporated a family mediation component into its welfare system. Ms. Roberts added that the University of the District of Columbia provides many similar resources for counseling in family reunification. The efforts place minimal financial burden on the local government.

Discussion

- A community activist voiced her concern over the lack of access her sons have had to the system. She thanked Ms. Roberts for her insights, and stressed the need for legislative changes to aid rather than hurt young black men.

- A member of Anacostia Partnership shared a personal story of his experience with the D.C. Child Support Office. He commented that fathers are treated as guilty parties in the welfare system, and many times are left with no choice but to go underground.

Ms. Roberts responded that a national enforcement record is needed so that parents paying child support can do so through a central location. She added that because states and territories have separate systems, a person can pay support to one agency and be pursued for support by another. She discussed the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act, which is pending in the D.C. City Council, that tracks child support payments across state lines. This measure, if passed nationwide, would preclude the need for federal legislation.

- A representative of the D.C. Child Support Office announced that the agency does have early intervention programs such as in-house paternity. An automated system, which will allow greater access to child support information across territories and states, is being developed. In addition, as of March 1, 1993, the D.C. Child Support Office does not collect on unreimbursed public assistance. The representative also informed the audience that the District does not pursue back arrears.

Ms. Roberts suggested that the D.C. Child Support Office take steps to make the public aware of this information.

- A member of Mayor Kelly's Task Force on Welfare Reform stressed the need for young men to develop skills. Policy development should focus on employment and training programs as advocated by Mr. Roberts.
- A representative of the Family Preservation Program asked how to make the welfare system user-friendly to lessen high frustration levels.

Ms. Roberts recounted that the typical caseload for welfare workers is 500-700 cases; in the District, the average number is 817. Therefore, transforming the District's system into an ideal model is difficult. More resources for the child support agency and additional funds for community-based programs are needed.

Ms. Roberts also commented that staff should be sensitive to emotional undercurrents between a couple, especially if they are separated.

- A member of the medical community stated that health care professionals should receive education about paternity establishment and parenting issues. In addition, programs should focus on incarcerated youth for conflict mediation, peer counseling, and parenting skills. Recreation centers can be used as a suitable environment for education outreach. Father's Day is a particularly appropriate day to publicize the issues addressed at this conference.

Ms. Holcomb indicated that programs must give males a stake—a reason for participating in them. She agreed that program designers should focus some of their activity on incarcerated males.

Mr. Roberts stated that the results of the recent elections will be manifested in the halting of the implementation of programs that support institutional and personal development. In most cases,

support program funds will be cut. Mr. Roberts stressed that policymakers should have a vested interest in welfare reform, if for no other reason than that someday they may be on the welfare rolls.

- A community representative voiced support for the welfare process to include the father.
- A staff member of the D.C. City Council, as well as a child support provider, questioned whether any member of the audience had had any successful interaction with the D.C. government.
- A public housing resident remarked that the D.C. City Council does not listen to its constituency. She voiced her frustration in being unable to access the knowledge and information she needed to meet her family's needs. She felt that members of the public housing community receive very little respect from their elected officials, and yet the officials are elected to be their voice.
- A representative from the Anacostia Partnership stressed the importance of knowing how to play the political game with the City Council. She indicated that public testimonies are not taken seriously. She stated that as part of the welfare reform process, community groups must dedicate themselves to playing the game in order to be heard on this issue.
- The D.C. City Council staff member responded that the political game in D.C. is not unlike that within the home—it is a based on relationships. He commented that the council has sponsored projects such as the Family Preservation Project, D.C. ACT, and the Absent Fathers program in Ward 5. He stressed the importance of the study of civics—the basics of how government works. He felt that honest dialogue does not take place in public testimony. Yet, the D.C. City Council can help advocates to obtain information to become better informed.

However, he admitted that when people approach the council en masse they will be heard because the same people will be at the polls on election day. He offered the services of his office to the audience and to other coalitions.

- A representative of the police department expressed concern over admitting children in court at the time of paternity establishment and raised the issue of the grandparents' role in providing child support.

Ms. Roberts advocated genetic testing to avoid a child's exposure to court cases in which the father could deny paternity. The issue of the grandparents' role in providing for children is particularly troublesome and often becomes a critical issue when the parent is a drug abuser. In this case, the parent simply cannot care for the child(ren). Family friendly welfare should support grandparents caring for their grandchildren. However, the family's stability is often shaken when the parent returns. Grandparents should be advised to get a custody order to show the fact that they have assumed the role of caregiver for the child.

- Ms. Roberts commented that, unlike AFDC, food stamps do not require that an individual enter the child support system.

Mr. Roberts addressed the issue of moving legislation through the system, and focused specifically on Councilmember Cropp's welfare reform proposal. He stressed that the Council should involve welfare recipients in drafting documents in order to ensure that legislation, and information dissemination about it, meets their needs.

- A representative of the health care community stated that 11- and 12-year-olds are delivering babies in the District, so that some women are grandmothers at the age of

24. At some point discussion must address sexuality within society's two tiers: the very poor and the very rich.

- A public housing representative recounted the story of a grandparent-parent joint custody battle, and the neglect on the part of the father in his child care responsibilities.

Ms. Roberts suggested that the grandparent pursue single custody of the child. Ms. Roberts added that the differences among, and the roles of, "father," "daddy," and "stepfather" raise unique questions in welfare reform. This could be a topic for an upcoming seminar.

- A member of the D.C. Commission for Women offered her office's services to the audience and stated that welfare reform will be a focus for the commission in the upcoming year.

Concluding Remarks

Dr. Mark Rom thanked speakers and participants. He welcomed participants to fill out and return evaluation sheets. The meeting then ended.

The next seminar in the series will be held February 10, 1995. The topic will be community-based drug abuse prevention in the District. All are welcome to attend.

The D.C. Family Policy Seminar is coordinated by Mark Rom, Assistant Professor, Georgetown Graduate Public Policy Program, 3600 N Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20007-2670; (202) 687-7033, fax (202) 687-5544.

For additional information about the D.C. Family Policy Seminar, or to request copies of the following briefing reports or highlights, please contact Kerry Whitacre at the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health (NCEMCH), (703) 524-7802.

*"Family Friendly Welfare Reform," November 1994
"Preventing Family Violence," September 1994
"Preventing Adolescent Violence," May 1994
"Preventing Teen Pregnancies," December 1993*