June 17, 2010

Dear Member of Congress:

We would like to take this opportunity to introduce our organization, the American Humane Association. Founded in 1877, the American Humane Association is the only national organization dedicated to protecting both children and animals. A nonprofit membership organization, American Humane is headquartered in Denver and just established a new office in Washington, DC.

The Child Welfare team of American Humane are national leaders in developing programs, training, curricula, research and evaluation, and cutting-edge initiatives to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect. At the same time, we work to strengthen families and communities and enhance child protection systems at the state and county levels.

We provide training for the workforce that addresses issues of child abuse and neglect every day. And we work with child protection professionals and agencies to improve their systems, so that greater emphasis is placed on results that focus on the best interests of children and their families.

In recognition of Father’s Day on June 20th, attached is a briefing paper on Fatherhood and American Humane’s effort to “Bring Back the Dads”. Too many of America’s children, both inside and outside of the child welfare system, are growing up today without a father in their lives. American Humane is committed to expanding knowledge and developing supportive resources so children regain important and lasting connections with their fathers and paternal relatives, so fathers have new ways to redefine and embrace their role, and so the systems that support children and families are invigorated with new knowledge and practices that help achieve positive outcomes.

Thank you for your time and we look forward working with you in the future. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

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Father Engagement & the Child Welfare System

When the child protection system becomes responsible for the safety, permanency, and well-being of a child, involving the father in services can tip the balance in the system’s ability to successfully execute the treatment plan and attain desired goals. However, very little meaningful engagement occurs between child welfare agencies and fathers.

THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

After the first round of the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs) of our nation’s child welfare system in early to mid 2000, we learned that there was a lack of parental involvement in the case planning and involvement with children taken into care. During the second round of CFSRs over 5 years later, parental involvement has not significantly improved and actually has decreased in some jurisdictions. Data collected during the second round of reviews focused more specifically on father involvement vs. mother involvement rather than the previous collective parental involvement. While involvement with mothers continues to be lacking, involvement with fathers is also falling short. This is especially apparent in the areas of case planning and quality of visits, which showed significantly lower levels of involvement. Such findings raise a number of important questions for policy makers at every level: What does this lack of involvement mean about the quality of life of children in foster care? How is permanence altered? How are positive outcomes for kids and families being impacted?

In the last few years American Humane set out to research and addresses some of these challenges and is developing supportive resources so children regain important and lasting connections with their fathers and paternal relatives. In our work we are attempting to understand fathers engagement in child welfare, the reasons for increased absence and deterioration of relationships, the impact of non-resident fathers on the success and quality of life of their children and other family members, and the effect of their absence on child protective services and child welfare. Our efforts are also focused on assisting fathers to redefine and embrace their role and to assist systems that support children and families in a way that invigorates with new knowledge and practices that help achieve positive outcomes.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE ROLE OF FATHERS

Study Results

In 2006, the Urban Institute along with the National Opinion Research Center, funded by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a report that examined the role of fathers in the child welfare system. By surveying and talking to caseworkers, policymakers and nonresident fathers, the study attempted to answer questions on how fathers are involved, the methods that agencies and workers used to reach out to fathers, the challenges both for fathers and caseworkers, including worker opinions and how practices and initiatives may be able to address some of the barriers to greater involvement, and connection between nonresident fathers and their children.

Nearly 2000 cases in the states of Arizona, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Tennessee were examined through surveys of caseworkers and fathers. Caseworkers indicated that 68 percent of fathers were identified at the opening of the case. In those instances where a father was not identified at the opening of the case, workers reached out to several sources including relatives, the mother and the mother’s family. In the matter of locating the father, caseworkers also reached out to the father’s family and a number of official sources such as law enforcement and the motor vehicle administration.
A third of the caseworkers indicated they used the parent locator service through the state’s child support system.

There were, of course, still barriers to contacting fathers. These included not being reachable by telephone (60 percent), lack of transportation, unstable housing arrangements and being absent from the country in some instances. While 31 percent had been incarcerated at some point, this was only considered a barrier in approximately half of these cases.

In regard to the nonresident fathers, half of the fathers contacted (28 percent of the survey sample) expressed interest in having their children live with them. Forty-five percent of fathers contacted were considered for placement. That represented approximately a quarter of all the cases examined. Fifty-six percent of the fathers (approximately 30 percent of the cases) had visited with their child while the child was in care.

**Barriers and Challenges**
Caseworkers report a wide range of challenges in regard to involving fathers. In this study the caseworkers indicated more than half of the fathers had substance abuse problems and half had been involved with the criminal justice system in some way. While services were offered to nearly 60 percent of fathers, only 23 percent had accepted such help. It is important to note that many of the barriers faced by the fathers were similar to the experiences and profiles of the mothers involved.

A second set of challenges and barriers involve worker training and approach. In this study, 70 percent of the caseworkers indicated that they did receive some form of training. While challenges such as views on including fathers and the way fathers were engaged did not differ between male and female caseworkers, there were significant differences between those caseworkers who were trained and those that had not been trained. Overall, trained caseworkers were more successful in locating fathers, more likely to reach out to the father’s side of the family, and more likely to utilize a variety of resources, including the use of governmental public records. Trained caseworkers were also more likely to involve the father in case planning and consider placement with the father, and the father was more likely to express an interest in having the child live with him.

An additional challenge included concerns expressed by caseworkers and supervisory staff over safety issues both for the child and the worker. While this study was not able to determine whether these challenges were real, it was clear that any effective program must address these concerns and barriers.

**THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER ON NON-RESIDENT FATHERS**

**QIC-NRF**
As a result of the findings in the study by the Urban Institute and the evidence from the CFSRs, the Children’s Bureau is providing funding to American Humane and its partners, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the National Fatherhood Imitative, to create a Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers (QIC-NRF).

The QIC-NRF has been designed to promote additional knowledge development regarding the engagement of non-resident fathers and their children who are involved in the child welfare system. Through a research design, the impact of non-resident father involvement on child welfare outcomes will be examined. Child welfare outcomes include child safety, permanence and well-being. Included in this design is the examination of the relationship between child and non-resident fathers or paternal relatives. Throughout the five years of this project (scheduled to end in September 2011), information
gained from the QIC-NRF will be disseminated to the Children’s Bureau, sub-grantees, child welfare agencies, private service providers, the courts and legal systems, and other stakeholders.

**Goals and Process of the QIC-NRF**

The Center is operating with three broad goals:

- To promote and support a research-based and outcome-focused approach to inform best practices related to the engagement of non-resident fathers and paternal family in the public child welfare system.
- To promote and support a research-based and outcome-focused approach to determine the impact of father involvement on child safety, permanence and well-being outcomes.
- To facilitate a collaborative information-sharing and problem-solving national network among sub-grantees, the Children’s Bureau, public child welfare agencies, private service providers, the courts and legal systems, and other stakeholders.

In furtherance of these goals, the QIC has selected four projects to fund for model intervention and evaluation around father engagement and systemic collaboration to strengthen, through father engagement, families with children in the foster care system. Each of the four QIC projects is being implemented by a collaboration led by the county office of a public Child Protection agency. All projects have father-oriented procedures in place for locating and contacting non-resident fathers of children in the foster care system, and all have established relationships with community organizations offering support to fathers and to promoting paternal responsibility. The four projects propose to have a male initiate contact. All four sub-grantees have assembled an array of community supports to offer fathers assistance as needed.

**Research-Based Approach**

All four projects have established a comprehensive data collection and evaluation process. Each sub-grantee has retained an outside evaluator to gather and analyze qualitative data from families, workers and collateral professionals, as well as quantitative data from administrative sources at several points in time. Data will be collected to determine the impact of a model intervention curriculum for 20 weekly peer-led support groups. The focus of the program analysis will consist of, but not be limited to, fidelity to model, process, and the degree to which the proposed interventions successfully promoted father engagement, father’s enhanced understanding of the child welfare system and ability to navigate the system, enhanced relationship between the father and caseworker, increased frequency and quality of visits, increased permanency, and increased contact between child and paternal kin.

**Four Project Sites**

The four sites the QIC-NRF has selected to fund are:

- Washington State (King County), the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), which is a division of the Department of Social and Health Services for the State: Region IV Fathers Engagement Project
  - Partnering with the Community Engagement Initiative at the University of Washington School of Social Work, Divine Alternatives for Dads (DAD) & Fathers In Need Fatherhood Advisory Group, to be convened by the Catalyst for Kids Program.
- Fathers and Families Center & Indiana Department of Child Services Engaging Non-Resident Fathers
  - Partnering with the Indiana Fathers and Families Center, the Indiana School of Social work and the Indiana Department of Child Services Support Bureau.
• El Paso County (Colorado Springs) Department of Human Services
  - Partnering with the Center for Fathering, Policy Studies Inc, Community Partnership for Child Development, Goodwill Industries and the Center for Policy Research.
• Texas Department of Family And Protective Services (Tarrant County), Texas
  - Partnering with members of the Tarrant County Fatherhood Coalition. The Tarrant County Fatherhood Coalition consists of about 40 organizations working to promote responsible fatherhood in Tarrant County and include New Day Services for Children and Families, Tarrant County Workforce Development Board, Foundation Communications, Tarrant County Safety Net, and Child Trends.

MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE WITH ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is another important tool for child welfare agencies and states to use in involving fathers and building family responsibility and community accountability for protecting children.

FGDM recognizes the importance of involving family groups in decision making about children who need protection or care, and it can be initiated by child welfare agencies whenever a critical decision about a child is required. In FGDM processes, a trained coordinator who is independent of the case brings together the family group and the agency personnel to create and carry out a plan to safeguard children and other family members. FGDM processes position the family group to lead decision making, and the statutory authorities agree to support family group plans that adequately address agency concerns. The statutory authorities also organize service providers from governmental and non-governmental agencies to access resources for implementing the plans. FGDM processes are not conflict-resolution approaches, therapeutic interventions or forums for ratifying professionally crafted decisions. Rather, FGDM processes actively seek the collaboration and leadership of family groups in crafting and implementing plans that support the safety, permanency and well-being of their children.

Through FGDM, families tap their own existing resources to rebuild and strengthen social support networks and forge workable, strategic partnerships with formal systems. Fathers and their families are actively targeted to participate in FGDM processes. Although research and evaluation on FGDM is in its infancy, a few evaluations have specifically looked at father and paternal relation involvement in creating plans for children. In one study, for 57 family group conferences for which relationship data were available, an average of five maternal and three paternal relatives partook in the decision-making forum. According to their analysis, “This level of paternal participation contrasted sharply with previous studies showing very few fathers involved in case planning, even for family-centered, family preservation services.”

Another study showed FGDM produced an improved connection with fathers and their families over most existing child welfare practice. The study found, that in 62% of cases, fathers and, in 56% of cases, paternal relatives were contacted to participate in FGDM. Mothers and maternal relatives, however, were still approached at a greater rate to participate. This shows that even when holistic approaches like FGDM are implemented, difficulties can abound in securing paternal involvement. A number of factors may influence this level of participation, including difficulties in identifying or locating fathers and their families, mothers’ unwillingness to involve them, and potential child welfare system bias against fathers.
FGDM provides the child welfare and court systems, broader community, and families an opportunity to create practices that embody these principles. Through FGDM, fathers and their families are actively sought out, systemic barriers are identified, and plans are created that promote child safety and address the informal supports and formal services needed by young fathers and mothers.

FOCUSBING ON BARRIERS TO POSITIVE FATHERHOOD
Despite the positive potential of involving fathers and paternal relations, there remain some roadblocks, which could be overcome with an organized framework. The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) offers such a framework that was devised by distilling practitioners’ experiences serving fathers, mothers, children, and families. This framework highlights the importance and difficulty of involving fathers and their families while supporting the notion that the circle requires widening to ensure their participation. The Seven Core Learnings of NCOFF are:

1. Fathers care – even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
2. Father presence matters – in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
3. Joblessness and unemployment are major impediments to family formation and family involvement.
4. Systemic barriers – in existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment – operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement.
5. Co-parenting – A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills needed to share parenting responsibilities.
6. Role-Transition – the transition from the role of biological father to committed parent has significant development implications for young fathers.
7. Intergenerational Learning – the behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within their families of origin.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increased funding must include a strong research component
When Congress considers reauthorizing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or other programs that seek to focus our attention on bringing fathers into families, we recommend you include requirements that include a strong research and evaluation component. American Humane believes that research in this area is lacking as it is often maternal focused.

- Require collaboration between community partners
The most effective strategies will involve a cross-section of partners as well as family members. As you can see from our current fatherhood projects, as well as with our efforts on Family Group Decision Making, greater success is likely when a range of supports and resources – including those within families – are marshaled to help these families and children.

- Address barriers such as unemployment and the root causes such as lack of training, education and supports
We must not forget one of the central tenants of the TANF program – to assist needy families. TANF should not become a flexible block grant that loses its purpose with a goal of merely removing families from public assistance. Rather, this program must be re-focused on the need to help those with barriers to work and successful lives. Many fathers currently missing from their children’s lives can be brought back into the family but attention to job training, access to services such as substance abuse treatment and other supports will be an important component to any effort to make these families stronger.
• **Full implementation of the Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act**

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351) is very significant but it came at a time of great economic crisis and transitions within the government. As state budgets improve and the phase-in of this law continues, it is important that the new law is implemented, both in practice as well as on paper. The implementation of genuine relative notification, the requirements around health care planning and access to expanded workforce training are just a few of the provisions that require real work and execution.

We are beginning to transform the child welfare system in a way that recognizes the importance of family connections to children in our nation’s child welfare system. Through the Fostering Connections to Success Act, Congress has officially recognized the importance of kinship relationships. The Administration is proposing an increased emphasis on programs that link fathers and their families and on research and outcomes. However, there is still work to be done and as Congress and the Administration move forward in this process, we offer our assistance and support in these reform efforts.

Sincerely,

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7 The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF). Core Learning Areas. Taken from the website: [http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu](http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu)