

Collaborating to Provide a Gateway to Services and Supports for Noncustodial Fathers

2022–2024 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 13

Tova Walsh and Helenia Quince
Institute for Research on Poverty
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Submitted October 2024

The research reported in this paper was supported by the Child Support Research Agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and the Institute for Research on Poverty. The views expressed here are those of the authors alone. The authors thank Judith Bartfeld and Lisa Klein Vogel for helpful comments in preparing this report and James Spartz and Dawn Duren for assistance preparing the report. The authors are especially grateful to the fathers who participated in the project and shared their feedback and personal stories, the staff who participated in interviews and shared their perspectives, and Darryl Davidson and the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition for their support and partnership to complete this project.

INTRODUCTION

Noncustodial fathers represent a sizable group of American fathers, yet relatively little is known about these fathers, the supports they and their families need, and their access to services. Approximately 24 million U.S. children live apart from their father (Yogman & Eppel, 2022). Of the estimated 7.5 to 9.5 million noncustodial fathers in the U.S., half meet criteria for “low-income” status (Higgs et al., 2018). Noncustodial fathers with the lowest income (less than \$10,000 a year) are responsible for 70% of child support debt (Sorensen et al., 2007). Being in arrears with child support is associated with adverse consequences for fathers and their children including poor physical and mental health, financial hardship, reduced father involvement with children, and strained co-parenting relationships (Cancian et al., 2013; Miller & Mincy, 2012; Nepomnyaschy et al., 2021; Pate, 2002; Robbins et al., 2021; Turner & Waller, 2017). The parenting practices of noncustodial fathers are under-studied, but existing research demonstrates that children benefit from their noncustodial fathers’ active participation and involvement in their lives (Caldwell et al., 2010; Cryer-Coupet et al., 2020; Lemmons et al., 2021).

Engaged parenting and financial provision are both essential ways that noncustodial fathers contribute to their children’s health and well-being. Programs for noncustodial fathers most often address economic support, parenting, or co-parenting and aim to increase employment and child support payments, the time and quality of the time that fathers spend with their children, or improve co-parenting communication and relationships (Administration for Children and Families, 2009; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; Holmes et al., 2020; Pearson et al., 2003). Existing evidence suggests that these types of programs are associated with significant gains for noncustodial fathers and their families, however, availability and rigorous evaluation of programs is limited (Holmes et al., 2020). Further, little is known about how noncustodial fathers

find and access services to meet their full array of needs and how programs can partner to comprehensively meet the service needs of noncustodial fathers.

In Milwaukee County, the Department of Child Support Services (CSS) manages over 125,000 child support cases (<https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/Child-Support-Services>). The Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition (MFC; formerly known as the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative) is a multi-partner initiative established in 2005 to connect Milwaukee fathers to resources to help them better meet the needs of their children and families. MFC offers programs that primarily support low-income, noncustodial African American fathers. These programs include Child Support 101, designed to assist fathers without full custody through coaching, personal responsibility education, and employment consultation; and Fatherhood Summits, city-wide gatherings of fathers which offer father-focused legal, health, and education services to promote self-sufficiency. MFC moved into a new building in early 2022 and CSS opened an office in the building to create new opportunities for outreach and collaboration. Together they serve noncustodial fathers, connect fathers with resources, and facilitate employment, child support payments, and father engagement.

In this study, we explored how CSS, MFC, and other organizations that serve noncustodial fathers in Milwaukee County—in the areas of parenting, employment, education, health, and more—partner to meet the full array of fathers’ needs in order to build stronger families and increase child well-being. We conducted focus groups with noncustodial fathers and interviews with staff of CSS, MFC, and partner organizations to explore access to services among noncustodial fathers, areas of unmet need, collaboration across agencies to increase noncustodial fathers’ access to services, and how collaboration can be improved. This report presents key findings from the focus groups and interviews, and implications for policy, practice,

and research, with an emphasis on identifying the actual and potential contributions of inter-agency collaboration to noncustodial fathers' ability to access and benefit from services designed to boost child support payments, employment, and paternal engagement.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we conducted focus groups with Milwaukee fathers who pay child support and individual interviews with staff of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition, MFC partner programs (i.e., programs offering father-focused services related to parenting, child support, employment, education, health, and more in Milwaukee County), and Milwaukee County Child Support Services. Data collection from fathers and service providers yielded complementary data regarding noncustodial fathers' experiences seeking and accessing services and the strength of inter-agency collaboration from the perspectives of fathers and staff across agencies. Focus groups with fathers allowed for exchange of viewpoints and exploration of variation in fathers' experiences seeking and accessing services, while individual interviews with staff allowed for frank discussion of both strengths and challenges associated with collaborating across agencies to meet the service needs of noncustodial fathers.

Recruitment

We leveraged an existing, multi-partner initiative in Milwaukee—the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition—to engage noncustodial fathers and program staff in this research. MFC works closely with Milwaukee County Child Support Services and father- and family-serving agencies throughout the city. MFC offers programs primarily supporting low-income, African American fathers who do not have full custody of their children. We recruited participants

through MFC and its partner organizations, with MFC Executive Director Darryl Davidson and his staff supporting recruitment efforts.

Recruitment for this study occurred between October 2023 and April 2024. Appendix A presents the recruitment flyer used to recruit focus group participants (fathers) and Appendix B presents the recruitment flyer used to recruit interview participants (program staff). Mr. Davidson circulated study information to MFC program participants and staff and to MFC partner organizations multiple times during the recruitment period. Partner organizations were invited to disseminate study information to their participants and staff by circulating flyers and through announcements at program events. Dr. Walsh met with the Director of Milwaukee County Child Support Services to make him aware of the study and ask for his help in identifying appropriate staff to interview and followed up on his referrals. We sought to interview both frontline staff, who are specifically involved in making connections for fathers to services, and leadership about their impressions of the services available to fathers in Milwaukee and the strength of collaboration across agencies. Additionally, we disseminated study information to attendees of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit on October 21, 2023; attendees included both fathers and staff of agencies and programs that provide services to fathers and families.

Participants

In total, 35 fathers and 22 program staff participated in the study. Inclusion criteria for the focus group component of the study required that the participant was 18 years of age or older, a resident of Milwaukee County, a father to one or more children under age 18, and paying child support for one or more children (current child support order or arrears). All focus group participants identified as male and heterosexual. The vast majority (34 out of 35) of focus group

participants identified as Black or African American, 74% reported annual household income below \$50,000, and 40% reported completing high school or a GED as their highest educational attainment. Nearly two-thirds of participants (63%) had three or more children and two thirds of participants had child support debt. Additional information about individual and family characteristics of the focus group sample is provided in Table 1. Inclusion criteria for the interview component of the study required that the participant was 18 years of age or older and works for an agency or program in Milwaukee that serves fathers, inclusive of services related to child support, parenting, education, employment, and more. A large majority of interview participants identified as Black or African American (86%) and male (77%). Most (59%) had completed college and half had been working in Milwaukee providing services to fathers and families for more than 20 years. Additional information about the interview sample is provided in Table 2.

Table 1: Individual and Family Characteristics of Focus Group Respondents (N=35)

Focus Group Respondents	Observations	Percent
Age		
21–30	5	14%
31–40	10	29%
41–50	9	26%
51–60	5	14%
61+	6	17%
Gender Identity		
Male	35	100%
Sexual Orientation		
Straight (heterosexual)	35	100%
Relationship Status		
Single (Never Married, Divorced, Separated, Widowed)	21	60%
In a Relationship (Married, Partnered/Cohabiting)	14	40%
Race and Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	3%
Black or African American	34	97%
Hispanic or Latino	1	3%
Other	1	3%
Education		
Some high school	5	14%
Completed high school or GED	9	26%
Some college or completed technical or trade school	15	43%
4-year degree or more	6	17%
Employment Status		
Employed full-time	20	57%
Employed part-time	5	14%
Self-employed	4	11%
Unemployed	5	14%
Not working due to disability	1	3%
Income		
< 25,000	12	34%
25,000–49,999	14	40%
50,000–74,999	5	14%
75,000–99,999	1	3%
No response	3	9%
Number of Children		
1	5	14%
2	6	17%
3	8	23%
4	4	11%
5+	12	34%
Share Children with More than One Mother		
Yes	20	57%
No	12	34%
No response	3	9%

Focus Group Respondents	Observations	Percent
Age of Youngest Child		
2 years or younger	7	20%
3–5 years	7	20%
6–8 years	4	11%
9–12 years	9	26%
13–17 years	4	11%
No response	4	11%
Children’s Living Arrangements		
One or more of father’s children live with him all of the time	23	66%
One or more of father’s children live with him part of the time	26	74%
One or more of father’s children do not live with him at all	12	34%
Legal Arrangements		
Legal arrangement affects time with one or more children	20	57%
No legal arrangement affects time with any children	15	43%
Total Monthly Child Support Payments		
\$249 or less	12	34%
\$250–\$499	5	14%
\$500–\$749	4	11%
\$750–\$999	2	6%
\$1000+	3	9%
No response	9	26%
Currently Making Child Support Payments on Schedule		
Yes	20	57%
No	12	34%
No response	3	9%
Child Support Debt		
Yes	23	66%
No	9	26%
No response	3	9%
Overall Health Rating		
Below average	1	3%
Average	8	23%
Above average	20	57%
No response	6	17%
General Life Satisfaction		
Dissatisfied or very dissatisfied	3	9%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	8	23%
Satisfied or very satisfied	18	51%
No response	6	17%
Received Needed Services in the Past 5 Years		
Received all needed services	6	17%
Received some needed services	4	11%
Did not receive any needed services	9	26%
Did not need services	4	11%
No response	12	34%

Table 2: Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Interview Respondents (N=22)

Interview Respondents	Observations	Percent
Age		
20–29	1	5%
30–39	5	23%
40+	12	55%
No response	4	18%
Gender Identity		
Male	17	77%
Female	5	23%
Race		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	5%
Black or African American	19	86%
White	4	18%
Other	1	5%
Education		
Some college or less	9	41%
Completed a bachelor’s degree	8	36%
Some graduate school	2	9%
Completed a master’s degree	3	14%
Length of Time at Current Agency		
Less than one year	2	9%
1–9 years	9	41%
10–19 years	4	18%
20+ years	5	23%
No response	2	9%
Type of Agency		
Government agency	5	23%
Non-profit organization	14	64%
Other	2	9%
No response	1	5%
Length of Time in Father / Family Services in Milwaukee		
Less than one year	1	5%
1–9 years	5	23%
10–19 years	2	9%
20+ years	11	50%
No response	3	14%

Data Collection Procedures

We held four in-person focus groups with fathers between October 2023 and February 2024, one coinciding with the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit held at Destiny Youth Plaza, two hosted by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition, and one hosted by Fathers Making Progress (a father-focused non-profit organization on the north side of Milwaukee). At the start of each focus

group, fathers were provided with informed consent information and completed a brief survey addressing demographics, parenting experience, child support, overall health and well-being, and service use (see Appendix C). Next, fathers participated in a 90-minute facilitated discussion that addressed experiences finding and accessing services to meet their own and their family's needs; collaboration among agencies in Milwaukee to serve fathers; the ways in which existing services and service collaborations facilitate child support payments, employment, and paternal engagement; barriers to access and gaps in services; and recommendations for strengthening services and service collaborations (Focus Group Guide presented in Appendix D).

We conducted individual interviews in person at the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition and online, per participant preference. The same format was followed for in-person and online interviews. At the start of each interview, program staff were provided with informed consent information and completed a brief survey addressing demographics and professional experience (see Appendix E). Next, program staff participated in a 60-minute semi-structured interview that addressed experiences helping fathers to identify and access needed services; collaboration among agencies in Milwaukee (including Milwaukee County Child Support Services, MFC, and other father and family serving programs); the ways in which existing services and service collaborations facilitate child support payments, employment, and paternal engagement; barriers to access and gaps in services for fathers; and recommendations for strengthening services and service collaborations (Interview Guide for interviews with staff of MFC and partner programs presented in Appendix F, Interview Guide for interviews with staff of Milwaukee County Child Support Services presented in Appendix G).

Focus groups and interviews were facilitated by Dr. Tova Walsh and PhD student Helenium Quince. Dr. Walsh has extensive experience conducting focus groups and interviews and

Ms. Quince was trained and skillfully co-facilitated. Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Participants received \$50 (in cash in the case of in-person interviews and focus groups, via electronic gift card in the case of online interviews). All study procedures were reviewed by the UW–Madison Institutional Review Board and the project was designated as Quality Improvement / Program Evaluation.

Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes related to strengths and limitations of existing services and service collaborations to facilitate child support payments, employment, and paternal engagement; and recommendations for enhancing inter-agency collaboration to increase support for fathers and their families in Milwaukee. Focus group and interview recordings were professionally transcribed and transcripts were content coded by two researchers independently. In a first round of open coding, data was organized into smaller segments and descriptors attached to the segments. In an iterative process, the team reviewed each transcript multiple times to distinguish and refine definition of recurrent themes and to establish reliable codes. When the team reached consensus on code definitions, all transcripts were coded accordingly. Below, we present significant findings from focus groups with fathers, followed by significant findings from interviews with program staff.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Focus Groups

Findings from the four focus groups shed light on the experiences of noncustodial fathers with seeking and accessing needed services in Milwaukee. As reported by focus group participants in the brief survey completed prior to discussion, only 17% of participants perceived

that they had received all the services they needed over the past 5 years. During the focus group discussions, fathers elaborated on this, speaking largely favorably about the services they had received but identifying numerous barriers to access and gaps in available services. Our analysis centered on fathers' perceptions of the strengths and limitations of existing services and service collaborations, in particular seeking to understand how all of the programs that fathers utilized cumulatively served to address their needs and facilitate understanding of child support policies, relationship to the local child support agency, and payments.

Below we present four themes that were prominent across all focus groups: sense of futility; needs for information and guidance; trusted sources; and holistic support. Themes are described with representative quotations presented to illustrate the themes. Identifying details have been removed to protect participant confidentiality.

Sense of Futility

Noncustodial fathers identified many barriers to receiving services including lack of knowledge regarding services to meet their needs, confusing or cumbersome program enrollment requirements, lack of income, and lack of transportation to be able to access services. Fathers perceived that few services exist for them, noting that "being a man is a barrier" and identifying local resources for mothers that do not have corollaries for fathers, such as housing and shelters specifically for women and children but none for men and children. Unmanageable child support payments and resultant debt is the barrier that was named most frequently, recurred throughout focus group discussions, and was received with empathy and echoed most strongly by other fathers each time a participant referred to it.

Fathers described feelings of hopelessness and limited motivation to seek out and engage in services in the context of debt that they do not believe they will ever be able to clear. As one

father asked: “How much of a father can I be to these kids now when I got this over my head?

We stuck, you know what I mean?.” Another father elaborated:

It’s a mental strain... that’s really almost unconceivable to people who don’t have it... [Arrears and liens and financial hardship] really hinders you and actually your motivation, I should say, to be able to succeed and progress.

Fathers agreed that a sense of futility, resulting from cumulative barriers and specifically from child support payments and debt that are incompatible with their earning potential, impede seeking out services.

One father recommended, and others agreed, that it would be ideal to provide education to men before they become fathers about how to navigate the child support system and avoid arrears.

I think they should have more programs in place that will show fathers or men and fathers, you know what I mean? So to prepare themselves for fatherhood, you know what I mean, and hopefully prepare their relationships. So if it does come to being something of child support involved in it, that they’ll be able to, you know, have a stability some way.

Fathers also discussed the need for counseling to assist men who pay child support with managing that responsibility, maintaining their mental health, and remaining positive about the future.

I think that the system could do better with providing mental health and counseling systems that would support a man to deal with that specific responsibility of child support... like helping them understand... it shouldn’t affect the way that you care and love for your children... and you can still succeed.

Fathers envisioned that this type of support could reduce a widespread sense of futility among low-income noncustodial fathers, increase uptake of services, and yield better outcomes for fathers and their children.

Needs for Information and Guidance

Fathers identified needs for both information and tangible guidance, and perceived that the former is currently more available than the latter to noncustodial fathers. Many focus group participants had participated in, and valued, Child Support 101, a workshop that provides a primer on how child support works. A frequently referenced example of successful service collaboration, fathers had participated in the workshop at the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit where multiple agencies come together to provide direct services and connection to resources for noncustodial fathers, at the MFC, or when a representative of CSS visited a fatherhood program that they participated in. Fathers recollected learning about “everything from default judgment to percentages and how many children, you know, you have.” While this information was useful and sometimes reassuring (e.g., fathers learned that it is not common for fathers to be jailed for inability to make payments), fathers were clear that information alone does not fully meet their need for support. Some fathers had received extensive support from a staff member of a fatherhood program as they navigated the establishment or modification of a child support order, including assistance completing forms and accompaniment to hearings. Fathers that had received such support found it invaluable, while those that had not talked about their unmet need for personalized guidance on the specifics of their case, beyond the general education that they received from websites or handouts or attending a Child Support 101 workshop.

Fathers specifically named free or affordable legal assistance as a primary unmet need. In contrast to the availability of general information about child support, fathers found it more difficult to access either general information about family court processes or specific guidance related to negotiating child custody, visitation, and parenting time. Fathers specifically identified legal representation to help when visitation rights are not respected as an urgent need. Broadly, across domains such as child support, legal rights, parenting, employment, health, and more,

fathers identified a need for information *and* assistance to understand complex information and apply it to their individual circumstances. As one father said, “We need a liaison... Someone that can actually help with the information that we don’t understand and help us figure out what to do.”

Trusted Sources

When seeking information and guidance, fathers turn to trusted sources. Focus group participants had received a diverse array of support from MFC and other organizations in Milwaukee, including food assistance, job skills such as forklift training, mentoring, parenting support including support reconnecting with children after a period of incarceration, driver’s license recovery, and assistance navigating child support. While fathers stated that they did not receive all the services they needed, they spoke highly of the services they did receive, characterizing these services as extremely helpful. Fathers most often found their way to resources when the resources were recommended by trusted sources, and valued the services they received when service providers became trusted sources.

Asked how they learned about and chose to participate in services, fathers frequently mentioned the recommendation of a friend or family member. Asked whether and how their involvement in one program to address a specific need for support facilitated connection to other programs to meet other needs, fathers spoke about connecting with peers and mentors who became trusted sources and they then relied on for recommendations of other useful services. Shared experience is particularly meaningful to establishing trust, with fathers explaining that they are more likely to trust a referral from someone who “gets it” and has “walked a mile in my shoes.”

Fathers emphasized the value of group-based fatherhood programs and classes which reduce feelings of isolation and help fathers learn about resources to meet an array of needs. Group-based programming fosters community and increases a father's connections to others who can be trusted sources for referrals.

... knowing you're not alone and knowing you're not the only one matters, having a regular place to talk with people who get it, and who maybe can point you, maybe they've been in your shoes and something you're facing now is something they dealt with five years or ten years [ago] or last week, you know? You know, having those people to connect with.

Fathers also appreciated that leaders and instructors intentionally introduced an array of resources to fathers as part of group-based fatherhood programming.

Lot of times, you don't know these other organizations, unless they come to us... [the person who leads the program I'm in] invites them into this organization, to speak, talk about your organization, and being able to know that there's other organizations in the city of Milwaukee. But otherwise, if you just, a body being a body, I don't know anything about these other organizations.

Fathers described learning about other services in the context of a fatherhood program or class in which they had developed trust as an important gateway to other supports and services in the community. Trusted programs provided a bridge to accessing child support services in two ways: by hosting a visit from a child support professional and facilitating the opportunity to connect and ask questions in a comfortable and familiar environment, and by offering recommendations and in some cases accompanying fathers to seek out specific child support professionals for information and assistance.

Holistic Support

Fathers identified varied needs but consistently identified multiple needs and the desire to have all their needs recognized and addressed coherently.

It's more than just a job, it's more than just parenting, you know it's mental health, it's, you know, the day-to-day issues... It has to be a system that looks at all of that... [all of a father's needs]... looks at the whole picture. You know, how does one survive?

Fathers perceived the multiple demands they face as linked, underscoring the need for holistic assessment and support. For example, one father talked about a tradeoff between using his limited income to meet his child support obligation or to attend to his own health, stating, "If I get health insurance, I can't get child support... I mean I can't pay my child's, it's gonna be a chunk of my child support."

In discussing services they had received, services they would like to receive, and services they did not know where to find, fathers expressed the desire to have a go-to person who would help them navigate complex and intersecting systems and identify needed resources—in essence, a case manager. They envisioned the person in this role as someone who would see them fully, respect them as a parent and support their involvement with their children, build a sustained relationship, and help them learn about and connect with all needed services.

I just want men to be...I want us to be viewed as parents... Help us to be active, to be active in their lives... [Help us] with systems and support systems... I think more collaboration is better... and [working with someone consistently] there is relationships that develop...

Interviews

The 22 interviews with staff of CSS, MFC, and partner organizations that serve noncustodial fathers in Milwaukee provided exceptional breadth and depth. Nearly all participants were in direct service roles, and those in leadership positions that do not include a direct service component all had prior experience providing direct services that informs their current leadership. Participants facilitate or provide services encompassing parenting and co-parenting support, child support interest debt relief, credit repair, reentry support, criminal record

expungement, driver's license recovery, job skills training, employment assistance, educational assistance, anger management classes, and more. Half of participants had more than twenty years of experience providing services to fathers and families in Milwaukee, often at multiple agencies, and interviews reflected insights acquired through substantial community engagement and professional experience.

Findings from the interview data both reinforce and expand upon findings from the focus group data. Below, we will first briefly present support for focus group findings, and then present four unique themes from the interview data. These four themes reflect "behind the scenes" insight into inter-agency collaboration to serve noncustodial fathers that would not be readily visible to fathers as clients. The themes are: collaboration and competition; primacy of relationships; work with fathers is work with families; and continuing progress. Themes are described with representative quotations presented to illustrate the themes. Identifying details have been removed to protect participant confidentiality.

Support for Focus Group Findings

Themes from the focus groups are echoed in the interview data collected from program staff. Interviewees described a prevailing sense of futility among noncustodial fathers that needs to be addressed in order for fathers to see the value of program engagement. As one practitioner described, "It gets so heavy, I think, on a lot of men.... [They feel] frustrated..., on an emotional roller coaster... [like they're] on a continuous wheel generating money for the system...." Program staff identified the need to augment information with guidance, recognizing that information is necessary but insufficient support for fathers to navigate complex situations.

We hold Legal Rights Night for fathers... we've had judges on the panel, commissioners, family court commissioners... [They talk about rights] but [what] fathers really want to know [is], how do we get those rights recognized, not just

on paper, but in reality? Fathers need help. ... [Not] just some vague information, you know what I mean, that public information they give to everybody.

Program staff recognized that the recommendation of trusted sources is regularly the gateway to fathers reaching out or responding to outreach and initiating services.

The majority ... [come through] word of mouth. So, um, if there's a father being served, they tell a friend about it and so that works best because they had a great experience in the program so therefore, they want that for their friends and families as well.

They also described how they themselves, and peers that fathers meet in group-based programming, can become trusted sources and point fathers toward other needed services.

[When you work with a group] they start to see changes in each other, and they start seeing what the other person did and they say; I want to measure up to that. And there is relationships that develop and they guide each other.

Like fathers, program staff called for more holistic support, recognizing noncustodial fathers' need for support and assistance in multiple life domains.

People are just going through a lot of challenges... From education to child support, um, housing, family supports, legal advice... I think people have more barriers and challenges now. And you know, poverty, mental health; I think those are the source of a lot of the challenges.

Program staff recognized a father's array of service needs as inter-related and addressing the full set of needs as integral to facilitating both child support payments and father-child relationships, and consequently multiple interviewees spoke about inter-agency collaboration as imperative.

A lot of their issues go unaddressed, and in the meantime they're stacking on top of each other... [and] they just go unaddressed until they get in a situation where their back is against the wall... I just think collaboration is the biggest solution, because so many fathers have such a wide um, array of issues that one organization can't solve them all.

Collaboration and Competition

Program staff unanimously recognized the limitations of a siloed approach to service delivery and endorsed the necessity of collaboration across agencies to comprehensively meet the needs of noncustodial fathers. Staff affiliated with CSS, MFC, and partner programs recognized the tremendous advantages of co-location to facilitate collaboration and described ways that they made use of shared space to reach and serve fathers. As described by one CSS staff member,

Well, I think it's good that we [CSS and MFC) are under this [the same] roof, because a dad may come in [to see MFC] about housing and in that conversation something comes up about child support. They're able to, you know, flow them over... like they [fathers] come in for something else, and they mention something about child support, and they [MFC staff] say; oh well you know, we have someone here you can see.

Similarly, a MFC staff member describes, "We're fortunate, with the Child Support Office. If we have really complicated cases, they are in our building and so we just walk them [fathers] over to them [CSS]." Staff of other programs also reported that this arrangement benefited fathers, who they could direct to one building to access multiple services. Additionally they named that they appreciated opportunities to table in the building, share information about their programs, and participate in father-focused events.

Staff of CSS, MFC, and other programs described their processes for needs assessment and the ways they refers fathers to a variety of partner organizations to address diverse needs. They emphasized the value of having reliable partners to whom to send fathers needing services outside of their own agency's scope.

We stay informed [about the services that other agencies offer] and we develop relationships... We are so intentional about building relations and building a rapport [with fathers]... and we don't want to break that trust... [so we want to refer fathers to agencies where] we can honestly tell our fathers this is a good resource.

Staff of MFC and partner organizations also described welcoming representatives of CSS and other services into their space to introduce their programs and answer questions for participant fathers.

In every [fatherhood] group, we have uh, somebody from the, a representative from Milwaukee Child Support. They come in... and then they have a discussion with them. And I tell, from day one, I tell them, save your questions, save your questions, if it's questions I can't answer we're gonna have somebody come in here, so you can ask them the question. And that person becomes like their liaison too.

In discussing where they make referrals, program staff frequently named Milwaukee Fatherhood Fire, a grant-funded program of CSS that combines services related to healthy relationships, responsible parenting, and economic stability and offers child support interest debt relief to fathers who complete the program. As one interviewee stated,

I think that the Fatherhood Fire Program is... probably the best thing that happened to Milwaukee County... but when the federal funding gets reduced then they can't work with as many other agencies, can't work with as many fathers.

While recognizing inter-agency collaboration as essential to serving fathers well, program staff also acknowledged tensions that arise, particularly when funding to support services is scarce. As one service provider and program leader described,

I would love to see fatherhood organizations get together more often... but for one reason or another it's not happening. And I think a lot of that is just because of um, just funding you know... Because we're all fighting for the same dollars at the same time, a lot of times.

Another service provider and program leader reframed the competition for resources as a challenge to work together to maximize resources and maximize impact for fathers.

In this work, you know, sadly, things could become competitive. Like no, this is our area, this is your area, this is this. But um, I'm not apprehensive with regards to working with another community-based organization and supplementing the great work that they've already done... And then it becomes the question of how can we pool our resources to get our participants' needs met and also further align with each other.

Ultimately, program staff overwhelmingly spoke to a desire for “more opportunities for connection with other organizations” and called for greater public investment to reduce competition and enhance opportunities for collaboration and service innovation.

On the government side on, you know, on the local side, uh on the state level; [they talk about] how important fatherhood is and [they need to] put their money where their mouth is.

Primacy of Relationships

In discussing organizational collaboration, many interviewees emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships.

I say people as opposed to organizations... it's like, you know, you got folks that this is their mission, this is what we do... my connections to organizations sometimes are through connections to people, you know, and that's kind of how it has to run.

One practitioner with nearly twenty years of experience with service provision in Milwaukee explained,

You just have to build that relationship... You have to find the right person in that organization and just collaborate with them... I've been working in social services for maybe about 17 or 18 years. Throughout that [time] I've just built relationships that's just been ongoing... with like-minded organizations and people.

Program staff with a depth of experience similarly described the networks they had built and the ways they rely on their networks to stay current on available resources for fathers in Milwaukee, including learning about new resources and learning when a program or service closes. They also described reaching out to contacts at other agencies to make direct, personal introductions for their clients, and try to facilitate a warm handoff.

I'm the type of person like if I refer you to like Driver's License Recovery, for example, like now I'm, you know, of course I'll do the referral, but I'm also gonna probably walk you down the street and introduce you to who you're going to be working with; and be like, okay, you know, here you go... here's one of my brothers, you know what I'm saying? He can help you out.

Noting the great value of networks and the time it takes to develop relationships and build a robust network, several interviewees recommended more intentionality among experienced professionals about bringing new service providers into their networks and facilitating connections.

Work with Fathers is Work with Families

Prompted for recommendations to strengthen services and service collaborations for noncustodial fathers, numerous program staff identified a need for greater recognition of fathers as family members and expanded engagement of other family members alongside fathers. One practitioner stated, “The thing I’ve come to see is that you can’t, I don’t want that to be a silo, I don’t want that to be a...well that’s the fatherhood thing....” Interviewees whose roles center on providing parenting education for fathers or facilitating fatherhood groups defined their work as being as much or perhaps even more so about children than it is about fathers themselves.

[When a dad asks me what he’ll get out of it] I tell him that I’m going to focus on your child, and your child’s going to get a better father out of this.

They described a focus on other family members as an essential part of supporting fathers to reflect on their roles and understand the meaning of their involvement.

If I’m only talking to fathers and I’m not talking about the children and the mothers and the grandparents and the support systems, we’re doing an injustice...It’s about family, not fathers. Fathers fall into a bigger scheme of family.

Many interview participants are involved in delivering services related to healthy communication, conflict resolution, anger management, and cooperative co-parenting, and they highlighted “the missing piece” of working exclusively with fathers. As one service provider described,

We're working with one side [noncustodial fathers] and making them more amenable to this, you know, custody and visitation and child support and their responsibilities... And we're not working with the other side, who's maybe still upset, you know maybe mom is not amenable.

Interviewees highlighted a need to collaborate with other providers to provide parallel services to custodial parents, to strengthen both parents' capacity for supportive co-parenting and provide children with a more stable, less conflictual environment.

Continuing Progress

Program staff who participated in interviews simultaneously recognized progress made in Milwaukee and the need for continued efforts to increase collaboration to more fully and equitably serve noncustodial fathers. Progress referenced by interviewees included the name change and corresponding directional shift from Child Support Enforcement to Child Support Services, and the accomplishments of the MFC over nearly two decades of developing multi-sector partnerships to increase services and support for fathers and ensure that fathers' needs are considered in local policy and program development. Across all 22 interviews, the most frequently mentioned and acclaimed collaboration on behalf of fathers was the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, which participants recognized as an important annual event for both fathers and the organizations dedicated to supporting them. For fathers, the event is "a showcase of what services are available locally in Milwaukee County for fathers... a one-stop shop for that day." For father-serving professionals, "we get to see each other and learn what everyone is doing now."

Program staff offered several suggestions for next steps to build on the progress of recent decades including the flagship event, the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit. First, they recommended additional outreach to make fathers aware of existing resources.

I think Milwaukee is kind of unique because we have so many father-serving groups here. I think the resources are there, it's just a matter of making people aware that the resources are there, or to match them to those resources.

They recommended new approaches (e.g., TikTok) to reach fathers as well as sustained efforts to meet fathers wherever they are in the community.

Second, they recommended more frequent gatherings for fathers and father-serving professionals, to extend the benefits of coming together once a year at the Summit. Practitioners who had been working in the field for 20+ years recalled when there used to be monthly meetings for fatherhood practitioners to get to know one another and learn about each other's work, and they consider the current absence of such meetings a loss for the field and an impediment to greater collaboration. They also noted that more regular gatherings for fathers would allow more opportunities for noncustodial fathers to get connected with resources and demonstrate that their service needs are recognized as an ongoing priority, so they don't "leave there, they think that's it, I'm alone in this struggle. Okay, this was a one-day thing."

Third, veteran and newer program staff both identified a surge of momentum and a new cohort of emerging leaders doing fatherhood work. They highlighted the need for greater intergenerational collaboration, for those who launched the fatherhood movement in Milwaukee and have championed fathers in Milwaukee for decades to share their knowledge and experience with those who are entering the field; and new practitioners to share their experiences of fatherhood and family relationships, the motivations that lead them to this work, and their ideas for new approaches to engaging and supporting today's fathers, particularly young fathers.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

Findings from this study provide insight into noncustodial fathers' experiences seeking and accessing services in Milwaukee and the ways in which staff of CSS, MFC, and other organizations serving Milwaukee fathers partner to support noncustodial fathers' ability to access and benefit from services designed to boost child support payments, employment, and paternal engagement. In combination, focus group and interview results yield client and service provider perspectives on the strengths and limitations of existing services and collaborations and opportunities to further strengthen collaboration in Milwaukee to holistically serve noncustodial fathers and improve child and family well-being. The multisectoral partnership developed in Milwaukee over the last 20 years offers a model for other counties to better assess and address the multifaceted needs of noncustodial fathers and coordinate resources through increased inter-agency partnerships.

This study relied on cross-sectional focus group and interview data collected from a sample of noncustodial fathers and program staff recruited in collaboration with MFC and other father-serving organizations. It's possible that our recruitment strategy did not reach fathers who are least connected to services and supports or program staff who are least connected with other organizations doing related work, and thus findings may not capture the experiences and perspectives of those who are most isolated. It is not possible, based on this study's sample, to generalize to the larger population of Wisconsin fathers with child support orders or the larger population of program staff at child support agencies and father- and family-serving organizations throughout the state. However, the current study notably focuses on a population of fathers whose needs for support warrant particular attention.

Research demonstrates that low-income men of color with child support arrears “fare far worse physically, physically, psychologically, and economically than those with no arrears” (Robbins et al., 2022, p.1366). The current study offers an in-depth look at the service-seeking experiences of a sample of predominantly low-income, African American fathers with arrears and the efforts of program staff at agencies throughout Milwaukee to collaborate to meet these fathers’ service needs. As the largest metropolitan area in the state, Milwaukee County has more concentrated resources for fathers than other counties. This study provides a foundation for continued investigation of actual and potential collaborations to meet the comprehensive needs of noncustodial fathers in other counties; the current focus on Milwaukee County offers an example that other counties can draw on to forge or extend multisector partnerships to meet the needs of noncustodial fathers, tailored to the local context.

Policy and Practice Implications

Following are a set of ideas for how Wisconsin child support agencies can build and strengthen partnerships with local organizations (e.g., community organizations, faith-based organizations, philanthropic organizations, businesses) to better meet the multiple service needs of noncustodial fathers. These recommendations are informed by the reported experiences and perspectives of fathers and service providers who participated in this research.

1. Develop preventive intervention strategies to disseminate knowledge of services and resources to men and fathers before the accumulation of unmet service needs and child support debt prompts a sense of futility that limits receptiveness to service engagement. Possible partners for this endeavor include home visiting programs that engage expectant and new parents and provide parenting education, social support, and information about and connections to social and health services.

2. Explore partnerships and models for educating fathers about legal rights and available assistance related to custody and visitation. For instance, one potential model could involve partnering with the Wisconsin Court System to launch Family Court 101 as a parallel program to Child Support 101. Noncustodial fathers and staff of CSS, MFC, and partner organizations identified knowledge of legal rights and assistance related to custody and visitation as a prevalent and high priority unmet need, calling for collaboration to generate resources in response to this need.

3. Identify and expand programs with demonstrated records of success assessing and addressing noncustodial fathers' needs holistically. One such program identified through the current project is the Milwaukee Fatherhood FIRE program. The FIRE program's integration of services in the areas of healthy relationships, responsible parenting, and economic stability was upheld by fathers and practitioners as a powerful instance of inter-agency partnership—among CSS, Center for Self-Sufficiency, Community Advocates, and United Community Center—and an impactful experience of holistic support for participating fathers.

4. Facilitate opportunities for staff of CSS and staff of organizations that provide a wide array of services (e.g., related to parenting, employment, finances, housing, health, and more) to meet on an ongoing basis, build and sustain relationships, stay informed of one another's activities and currently available programming and resources for noncustodial fathers, and have generative discussions to advance collaboration in service of collective commitment to strengthen outcomes for noncustodial fathers, their children, and families.

Research Implications

This study adds to a body of research already conducted through the CSRA and other in-process initiatives that emphasize the value of connecting with fathers to learn more about their

needs. The present study highlights existing multisectoral partnership, and the strengths and limitations of existing partnerships, to meet the multiple service needs of primarily Black, low-income, and noncustodial fathers in Milwaukee. Future research is needed to explore the nature and extent of partnerships in other Wisconsin counties, including counties with more dispersed populations and fewer resources for fathers, and explore avenues to forge and strengthen partnerships in diverse local contexts. Potential partners and opportunities for collaboration will necessarily vary by community contexts, and these variations should be examined. The current project, by recruiting participants in partnership with MFC and on site at the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, included noncustodial fathers with some amount of connection to community organizations, services, and resources. While most of these fathers had outstanding, unmet service needs, it is important that future research specifically seek to connect with and learn from noncustodial fathers who are less connected to resources; these fathers might have different needs and offer different perspectives than the fathers who participated in the current project.

Findings of the current study suggest specific areas for service innovation and inter-agency collaboration to address largely unmet needs. For example, future research could pilot and assess efforts to increase fathers' understanding of family court processes, knowledge, and tools to respond when parenting plans are not adhered to. Future research could assess partnerships to provide fathers with both broad education and guidance specific to individual circumstances related to child support, custody and visitation, and more. The current study demonstrates the importance of referrals from trusted sources to promote service engagement, and relationships among service providers to facilitate connections for fathers to additional

needed services. Network analysis could deepen understanding of key sources of influence in charting pathways for noncustodial fathers to, and among, needed services and support.

REFERENCES

- Administration for Children and Families. (2009). *How to implement promising practices*. (Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Projects). Retrieved from https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/files-for-pages/How%20to%20Implement%20Promising%20Practices_09_29_09.pdf
- Caldwell, C. H., Rafferty, J., Reischl, T. M., De Loney, E. H., & Brooks, C. L. (2010). Enhancing parenting skills among nonresident African American fathers as a strategy for preventing youth risky behaviors. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*(1–2), 17–35.
- Cancian, M., Heinrich, C. J., & Chung, Y. (2013). Discouraging disadvantaged fathers' employment: An unintended consequence of policies designed to support families. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 32*(4), 758–784.
- Cryer-Coupet, Q. R., Dorsey, M. S., Lemmons, B. P., & Hope, E. C. (2020). Examining multiple dimensions of father involvement as predictors of risk-taking intentions among Black adolescent females. *Children and Youth Services Review, 108*, Article 104604.
- Fagan, J., & Kaufman, R. (2015). Reflections on theory and outcome measures for fatherhood programs. *Families in Society, 96*(2), 133–140.
- Higgs E., Gomez-Vidal C., Austin M. J. (2018). Low-income nonresident fatherhood: A literature review with implications for practice and research. *Families in Society, 99*(2), 110–120.
- Holmes, E. K., Egginton, B. R., Hawkins, A. J., Robbins, N. L., & Shafer, K. (2020). Do Responsible Fatherhood Programs Work? A Comprehensive Meta-Analytic Study. *Family Relations, 69*(5), 967–982.
- Lemmons, B. P., Bamishigbin, O. N., Cryer-Coupet, Q. R., Lewis, E. M., Dorsey, M. S., & Johnson, S. (2021). Exploring the determinants of discipline and monitoring among non-resident African American fathers. *Children and Youth Services Review, 125*, Article 106004.
- Miller, D. P., & Mincy, R. B. (2012). Falling further behind? Child support arrears and fathers' labor force participation. *Social Service Review, 86*(4), 604–635.
- Nepomnyaschy, L., Emory, A. D., Eickmeyer, K. J., Waller, M. R., & Miller, D. P. (2021). Parental debt and child well-being: What type of debt matters for child outcomes? *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 7*(3), 122–151.
- Pate, D. J. (2002). An ethnographic inquiry into the life experiences of African American fathers with children on W-2. In D. R. Meyer & M. Cancian (Eds.), *Fathers of children in W-2 families, vol. 2 of W-2 child support demonstration evaluation, report on nonexperimental analyses* (pp. 29–118). Insitute for Research on Poverty.

- Pearson, J., Thoennes, N., Davis, L., Venohr, J., Price, D., & Griffith, T. (2003). OCSE Responsible Fatherhood programs: Client characteristics and program outcomes. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.frpn.org/asset/ocse-responsible-fatherhoodprograms-client-characteristics-and-program-outcomes>
- Robbins, N. L., Waller, M. R., Nepomnyaschy, L., & Miller, D. P. (2022). Child support debt and the well-being of disadvantaged fathers of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(5), 1366–1386.
- Sorensen, E., Sousa, L., & Schaner, S. G. (2007). *Assessing child support arrears in nine large states and the nation* (p. 97). Urban Institute.
- Turner, K. J., & Waller, M. R. (2017). Indebted relationships: Child support arrears and nonresident fathers' involvement with children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(1), 24–43.
- Yogman M. W., Eppel A. M. (2022). The role of fathers in child and family health. In *Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality* (pp. 15–30). Springer.

APPENDIX A: FATHERS RECRUITMENT FLYER



**Expanding access to services and support
for fathers in Milwaukee**



Attention Milwaukee Dad's We Need You!

University of Wisconsin researchers are conducting a quality improvement project to learn about fathers' experiences finding and accessing needed services (such as services addressing parenting, child support, driver's license recovery, employment, education, health, and more). We are looking for fathers willing to share your experiences and insight to inform efforts to strengthen access to services for fathers in Milwaukee.

You may be eligible if:

- If you are a father to one or more children under age 18
- pay child support for one or more children (current order of support and/or arrears)
- live in Milwaukee County
- you are 18 years of age or older

What to Expect?

Participation will include joining other dads in a 90 minute focus group discussion. *Each participant will receive \$50 as a thank you for your time.*

**To learn more about this study, please contact the team
by phone at (608) 616-5682 or by email at MF1study@mailplus.wisc.edu**

**Please share this announcement with others you know who may
be eligible and interested in participating!**

APPENDIX B: PROGRAM STAFF RECRUITMENT FLYER



Expanding access to services and support for fathers in Milwaukee



University of Wisconsin researchers are conducting a quality improvement project to learn about how fathers in Milwaukee find and access needed services, including understanding how programs collaborate and make referrals. We are looking for professionals willing to share your experiences and insight to inform efforts to strengthen access to services for fathers in Milwaukee.

What to Expect?

Participation will include an hour-long, one-on-one interview that can be completed in person or by zoom outside of working hours. Each participant will receive \$50 as a thank you for your time.

You May Be Eligible If:

- If you are a staff member of an agency or program that serves Milwaukee fathers (inclusive of services related to parenting, child support, driver's license recovery, employment, education, health, and more)
- you are 18 years of age or older

To learn more about this study, please contact the team by phone at (608) 616-5682 or by email at MFIstudy@mailplus.wisc.edu

Please share this announcement with others you know who may be eligible and interested in participating!

APPENDIX C: SURVEY FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS (FATHERS)

1. How old are you? _____

2. What is your gender identity? *(please select all that apply)*

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say
- Other identity not listed- please specify : _____

3. What is your sexual orientation? *(please select all that apply)*

- Gay
- Straight (heterosexual)
- Bisexual
- Questioning or unsure
- Prefer not to say
- Other identity not listed- please specify: _____

4. What is your current relationship status?

- Single
- Married
- Partnered/Cohabiting
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Other - please specify: _____

5. Are you Hispanic or Latino?

- Yes
- No

6. Which category best describes your race? *Select all that apply.*

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other - please specify: _____

7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school
- Completed high school or GED
- High School with certifications
- Some college, or completed technical or trade school
- Completed a four-year college with a Bachelor's degree
- Some graduate school
- Completed a Master's degree
- Completed a Professional degree
- Completed a Doctorate degree

8. What is your current employment status? (please select all that apply)

- Employed full time
- Employed part time
- Unemployed looking for work
- Unemployed not looking for work
- Full time student
- Part-time student
- Other - please specify: _____

9. What is your current income?

- \$24,999 or less
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

10. How many children do you have? *(Please consider all of the children for whom you are in a fathering role, which may include biological children, adopted children, foster children, stepchildren and/or partner's children)*

11. How old are your children? *(please select all that apply)*

- Newborn – 1 year
- 1–2 years
- 3–5 years
- 6–8 years
- 9–12 years
- 13–17 years
- 18 years+

12. How many of your children live with you?

I have ____ children that live with me all of the time

I have ____ children that live with me most of the time

I have ____ children that live with me less than half of the time

I have ____ children that don't live with me at all

13. *The next four questions are repeated multiple times so that you can provide information about each of your children. Please think of your oldest child when responding to questions about child #1, your second oldest child when responding to questions about child #2, your third oldest child when responding to questions about child #3, etc. This set of questions repeats eight times so that you may respond about up to eight children. You may skip to the end of this section (to question 14 in the middle of page 13) after you finish responding about all of your children.*

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #1's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #1? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely distant						Extremely close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #1?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #1?

No

Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #2's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #2? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #2?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #2?

No

Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #3's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #3? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #3?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #3?

- No
- Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #4's other parent that affects your time with your child?

- Yes
- No
- Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #4? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #4?

- No
- Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #4?

No

Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #5's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #5? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #5?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #5?

No

Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #6's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #6? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #6?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #6?

No

Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #7's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #7? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #7?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #7?

No

Yes

Is there a legal arrangement between you and child #8's other parent that affects your time with your child?

Yes

No

Other - please describe: _____

How would you rate your relationship with child #8? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your child)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Are you obligated to pay child support for child #8?

No

Yes

Do you have a child support order through family court for child #8?

No

Yes

14. What is the total amount of your child support obligations on a monthly basis (across all orders)?

- \$249 or less
- \$250–\$499
- \$500–\$749
- \$750–\$999
- \$1000–\$1249
- \$1250–\$1499
- \$1500 or more

15. Which county (or counties) service your child support order (or orders)? *(please select all that apply)*

- Milwaukee County
- Other county in Wisconsin
- Other county outside of Wisconsin

16. Are you currently making your child support payments on schedule?

- No
- Yes

17. Do you have child support debt?

- No
- Yes

18. Do you feel that you have the technology needed (such as cell phone, reliable internet) to fully engage with and support your children?

No

Yes

19. How many people do you share children with? _____

20. The next question is repeated multiple times so that you can provide information about each of the people you share children with. This question repeats five times so that you may respond about up to five co-parents. You may skip to question 21 at the top of page 16 after you finish responding about all of your co-parents.

How would you rate your relationship with co-parent #1? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your co-parent)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How would you rate your relationship with co-parent #2? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your co-parent)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How would you rate your relationship with co-parent #3? (circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your co-parent)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How would you rate your relationship with co-parent #4? (*circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your co-parent*)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How would you rate your relationship with co-parent #5? (*circle the number that corresponds to the quality of your relationship with your co-parent*)

Extremely Distant	Distant	Somewhat Distant	Neither Distant Nor Close	Somewhat Close	Close	Extremely Close
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

21. How would you rate your own health, overall? (*circle the number that corresponds to how you would rate your overall health*)

Very Poor						Excellent
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

22. Are there current or recent physical, mental, or emotional health issues for which you have had difficulty receiving treatment or care?

No

Yes

23. In general, how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say...

- Very dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Satisfied
- Very satisfied

24. Have you received any services from the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition (MFC) in the past 5 years?

- No
- Yes

25. If yes, which services did you receive? *Please describe:*

26. If you have received services from in MFC in the past 5 years, how helpful did you find MFC services to be? (*circle the number that corresponds with the helpfulness of services*):

Not helpful at all

Extremely helpful

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

27. Have you received any other services (for example, parenting support, employment assistance, counseling) from a government agency, community or religious (organization) in the past 5 years?

Yes

No

28. If yes, which services did you receive? *Please describe:*

29. If you have received services in the past 5 years, how helpful did you find these services to be? (please circle the number the best corresponds to the helpfulness of services):

Not helpful at all

Extremely helpful

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

30. Are you facing any issues or challenges for which you would like to receive services but have not found any that are available?

No

Yes

31. What has acted as a barrier, preventing you from receiving services you have needed? Please describe:

32. What has helped you receive services you have needed? Please describe:

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE FOR FATHER FOCUS GROUPS

INTRO – Moderators introduce ourselves. Brief overview of the project + goals for this focus group. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us to share your insight and inform efforts to strengthen access to services for fathers in Milwaukee.

We'd like to start with brief introductions. Can you please tell us your name, tell us how many children you have and how old they are, and share what motivated you to attend today's conversation?

Today we're going to talk about challenges faced by fathers and families, and where and how fathers find resources to help them better meet the social, emotional and financial needs of their children and families.

- What are some of the challenges that you and your family and other fathers and their families are facing?
- How do those challenges affect you and your family's health (mental, physical, emotional) and wellbeing?

Like many other parents in Wisconsin and across the US, all fathers participating in this project are currently paying child support for one or more children. What has it been like for you when you interact with the child support agency (for example, getting help with a child support order, or getting answers to questions about your case)?

- Probe for barriers & facilitators to getting help from the child support agency
- Probe for importance and effect of the location of MKE child support services – if MKE child support services moves from the courthouse, how would this impact access (to child support services and other services, such as legal services, housed at the court house)?

How would you describe the support available to you and other fathers in Milwaukee? Are there agencies or organizations in the community where you are able to find support to meet your individual and family needs?

- Probe for health, educational, employment, legal services
- Probe for support for parenting and co-parenting
- Probe for support related to child support

Have you have received services from the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition (MFC)?

- How did you learn about these services?
- Probe for barriers & facilitators to getting help from MFC

Which MFC programs have you been part of, and how has your participation impacted you as a father?

- Probe for financial impacts (income, employment, housing stability, ability to pay child support)
- Probe for family impacts (time spent with children, relationships with children, relationships with co-parents)
- Probe for health impacts (physical, mental, and emotional health)
- How did you hope these services would impact you?

Have you received any other services (for example, parenting support, employment assistance, counseling) from other sources, such as a government agency, community or religious organization?

- How did you learn about these services?
- Probe for barriers and facilitators to getting help from these sources

How has your participation in these services impacted you as a father?

- Probe for financial impacts (income, employment, housing stability, ability to pay child support)
- Probe for family impacts (time spent with children, relationships with children, relationships with co-parents)
- Probe for health impacts (physical, mental, and emotional health)
- How did you hope these services would impact you?

Think of all the services you have received. What services have been most impactful to you and your family? Why?

Sometimes service providers offer referrals or connection to other services, to help people get more of their needs met. What has your experience been with receiving referrals?

- Probe for which agencies / programs have made referrals and where they have referred to
- Probe for the nature of the referral – a phone number? an introduction?
- Probe for follow-up on referrals – barriers? facilitators?

Think about any needs you have that are currently going unmet. What kinds of services could help you address those challenges? What barriers would need to be overcome?

If you were giving advice to another father looking for help in Milwaukee, what advice would you give?

Thank you for joining us today and helping us to learn more about your experiences with services for fathers in Milwaukee, and generate ideas for how to improve support for fathers and families.

APPENDIX E: SURVEY FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS (PROGRAM STAFF)

1. How old are you? _____

2. What is your gender identity? *(please select all that apply)*

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say
- Other identity not listed- please specify : _____

3. Are you Hispanic or Latino?

- Yes
- No

4. Which category best describes your race? *Select all that apply.*

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other - please specify: _____

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school
- Completed high school or GED
- High School with certifications
- Some college, or completed technical or trade school
- Completed a four-year college with a Bachelor's degree
- Some graduate school
- Completed a Master's degree
- Completed a Professional degree
- Completed a Doctorate degree

6. How long have you worked at your current agency? _____**7. Please choose the response that best describes the agency where you currently work.**

- Government agency
- Non-profit organization
- Faith-based organization
- Private organization
- Other: _____

8. How long have you worked in Milwaukee at an agency that serves fathers and/or families? _____

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF AT MFC AND PARTNER PROGRAMS

INTRO – Interviewer introduces themselves. Brief overview of the project + goals for this interview. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us to share your insight and inform efforts to strengthen access to services for fathers in Milwaukee. In this project, we're focused specifically on understanding the experiences of fathers with child support orders and the resources available to them, so we'll be asking you to focus specifically on *the experiences of father with child support orders* and the resources available to them in the questions that follow.

Please tell us about the agency you work for and the services your agency provides.

- What roles have you held at your agency?
- In your current capacity, what programming do you deliver, manage, or oversee?
- In what ways does your agency's programming address:
 - Parenting and father-child relationships
 - Understanding of child support policies, relationship to the local child support agency, and payments
- When and what technology do you use in your work to interact with fathers?

Today we'd like to talk with you about challenges faced by fathers and families, and where and how fathers find resources to help them better meet the social, emotional and financial needs of their children and families. Please tell us about the fathers you serve.

- What have you heard from fathers about the challenges that they and their families are facing?
- What have you heard from fathers about how those challenges affect them and their families?

What have you heard from fathers about what it is like for them seeking to access services at your agency?

- What are typical barriers and facilitators?
- How do fathers typically find out about the services that you offer?

How would you describe the support available to fathers in Milwaukee? What other agencies or organizations in the community do you know of where fathers can find support to meet their individual and family needs?

- Probe for health, educational, employment, legal services
- Probe for support for parenting and co-parenting
- Probe for support related to child support

Please tell us about how you collaborate with these other agencies, including but not limited, to, making referrals.

- How do you keep up with services available elsewhere, and how do you share what your agency is doing with other agencies?
- Do you have opportunities to come together with other service providers? Tell us about that.
- When, where, and how do you typically make referrals for your clients to other agencies?
 - What types of needs prompt you to make referrals?
 - Where do you most often refer your clients?
 - What is your process for making referrals? How do you follow up?
- When, from where, and how do you typically receive referrals?
 - What types of needs prompt other agencies to refer clients to you?
 - Where do your referrals typically come from?
 - What is your process for responding to a new referral?

How do you collaborate with Milwaukee County Child Support Services?

- Prompt for experiences with referrals
- Prompt for experiences assisting fathers with questions related to child support
- Prompt for communication with Milwaukee County Child Support Services

What is going well with inter-agency collaboration to support fathers and their families in Milwaukee? How do you think inter-agency collaboration to support fathers and their families could be strengthened in Milwaukee?

- What are some of the points of ease of collaborating across agencies?
- What are some of the challenges of collaborating across agencies?
- What is going well and what could be strengthened to respond to the specific needs of noncustodial fathers?

[If not employed by MFC:] What do you know about services offered by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition (MFC)?

- How did you learn about MFC?
- How does your agency collaborate with MFC?
- When and how have you referred fathers to MFC for services?
- When and how has MFC referred fathers to you?
- What could be changed to strengthen your collaboration with MFC?

Think about the needs of the fathers you serve. Which needs are currently going unmet? What kinds of services could help to address those challenges? What kinds of collaboration among agencies could help to address those challenges? What barriers would need to be overcome?

If you were giving advice to someone about to start working at your agency, what advice would you give to them about collaborating with other agencies to meet the needs of fathers that you serve?

Thank you for joining us today and helping us to learn more about your experiences with services for fathers in Milwaukee, and generate ideas for how to improve support for fathers and families.

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES

INTRO – Interviewer introduces themselves. Brief overview of the project + goals for this interview. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us to share your insight and inform efforts to strengthen access to services for fathers in Milwaukee with child support orders. While mothers and fathers can both owe child support, in this project we’re focused specifically on understanding the experiences of fathers with child support orders and the resources available to them, so we’ll be asking you to focus specifically on *the experiences of father with child support orders* and the resources available to them in the questions that follow.

Please tell us about your work at Milwaukee County Child Support Services.

- What roles have you held at the child support agency?
- In your current capacity, what services do you deliver, manage, or oversee? (E.g., Establishment, Enforcement, Financial, Legal, Interstate)
- When and what technology do you use in your work to interact with clients?

Today we’d like to talk with you about challenges faced by fathers and families, and where and how fathers find resources to help them better meet the social, emotional and financial needs of their children and families. Please tell us about the fathers you encounter in your work at Milwaukee County Child Support Services.

- What have you heard from fathers about the challenges that they and their families are facing?
- What have you heard from fathers about how those challenges affect them and their families?

What have you heard from fathers about what their experience is like when they need help with their order or have a question about their case? (E.g., seeking to have their cases reviewed for enforcement, settlements, alternative payment plans)

- Prompt for barriers and facilitators to fathers getting help from the child support agency

How would you describe the support available to fathers in Milwaukee? What other agencies or organizations in the community do you know of where fathers can find support to meet their individual and family needs?

- Probe for health, educational, employment, legal services
- Probe for support for parenting and co-parenting
- Probe for support related to making child support payments, compromise of arrears, driver’s license recovery

Please tell us about how you collaborate with these other agencies, including but not limited, to, making referrals.

- How do you keep up with services available elsewhere, and how do you share what Milwaukee County Child Support Services is doing with other agencies?
- Do you have opportunities to come together with other service providers? Tell us about that.
- When, where, and how do you typically make referrals for your clients to other agencies?
 - What types of needs prompt you to make referrals?
 - Where do you most often refer your clients?
 - What is your process for making referrals? How do you follow up?
- When, from where, and how do you typically receive referrals?
 - What types of needs prompt other agencies to refer clients to you?
 - Where do your referrals typically come from?
 - What is your process for responding to a new referral?

What is going well with inter-agency collaboration to support fathers and their families in Milwaukee? How do you think inter-agency collaboration to support fathers and their families could be strengthened in Milwaukee?

- What are some of the points of ease of collaborating across agencies?
- What are some of the challenges of collaborating across agencies?

What do you know about services offered by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Coalition (MFC)?

- How did you learn about MFC?
- How does your agency collaborate with MFC?
- When and how have you referred fathers to MFC for services?
- When and how has MFC referred fathers to you?
- What could be changed to strengthen your collaboration with MFC?

Think about the needs of the fathers you work with in your role at Milwaukee County Child Support Services. Which needs are currently going unmet? What kinds of services could help to address those challenges? What kinds of collaboration among agencies could help to address those challenges? What barriers would need to be overcome?

- Probe for how additional services or greater collaboration could help to boost fathers' understanding of child support policies, relationship to the local child support agency, and payments

If you were giving advice to someone about to begin working at Milwaukee County Child Support Services, what advice would you give to them about collaborating with other agencies to meet the needs of fathers that you serve?

Thank you for joining us today and helping us to learn more about your experiences with services for fathers in Milwaukee, and generate ideas for how to improve support for fathers and families.