

Fathers and Families: Changing the Rules

Whenever we tear at the fabric of our lives, which another man has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children, whenever we do this, then the whole nation is degraded.

— Robert Kennedy

I am one of those very lucky people who grew up with a wonderful father.¹ He was completely dedicated to our family. He was strong and protective and, by example, he was a moral compass for my brothers and sister and me. He taught us a sense of responsibility to our family, our community, and our country.

I can still picture him—wiry and strong—dragging great, heavy rocks he brought in from the countryside so that he could build a fence to secure the yard of our home. I can still hear him patiently helping the older women who gathered once a week for citizenship classes in our living room, quizzing them about the number of stars on the flag and cheering them on when the going was tough. I can still remember the pride and unconditional love he showered on me and all of my siblings as we made our way through childhood.

Despite the wonderful skills of my mother, it is not hard to imagine the difficulties my siblings and I might have had growing up if we had not had both the example of my father and the stability he brought to our family. And yet many American children are being reared without such stability, without fathers. Many American women are having to shoulder the emotional and financial responsibilities of parenthood alone; many communities are finding themselves with fewer good male role models to hold up as ideals for their sons; and too many men are living their lives without ever experiencing the joys of fatherhood.

In 1960, 8 percent of American families were living without fathers. By 1993 that number had climbed to 23.3 percent (U.S. Congress). In 1993 more than 1 million American babies were born to unmarried mothers—that is 31 percent of all births and triple the percentage of births outside of marriage in 1970. More American children are growing up in single-parent households as well. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the number of children living in single-parent families increased from 3.1 million to 6 million, nearly doubling between 1984 and 1994 (Zill, 1996).

Yet study after study demonstrates that American families do better and have fewer problems, both economically and emotionally, if the family unit is intact. The absence or presence of a father is the single most reliable statistical predictor of poverty in this country. Children, especially boys, who grow up without fathers, are more likely to have trouble with the law. They are more likely to drop out of school. They are more likely to join gangs.

And this is why a Secretary of Housing and Urban Development is writing about fatherhood: Because good fathers are not only important to each of us personally, they are important to the community and to society as well. Healthy, loving family units are crucial to the success of our urban areas and our Nation. Government has a responsibility to ensure that at the very least it is not contributing to the problem by imposing financial restrictions and other impediments that may be keeping some families from remaining intact.

This essay will lay out some of the evidence that has been collected to give us a snapshot of the current state of fatherhood in the United States. We will look at some of the best programs that have been established in select sites and examine whether these programs are replicable. And we will explore some of the ways government itself has been a hindrance to fatherhood. But first, a look at the importance of fathers in families—evidence that points to the great societal harm that comes from a Nation of increasingly fatherless children.

The Importance of Families in Rearing a Nation of Good Citizens

When children are reared by single mothers, their fathers are all too often not just absent from the children's home but are frequently completely absent from their children's lives as well. Only one in six children growing up without live-in fathers see their fathers at least once a week. That number drops to only 1 in 10 after 10 years (Ooms et al., 1995).

Why is this important? Because the absence—or presence—of a father in the household has a profound impact on the current and future experiences of his children. Fathers bring an important dimension to child rearing that, in its best form, complements and supports the role of the mother.

Children who live without fathers are more likely to grow up in poverty, are less likely to finish high school, are more likely to experience sustained periods of idleness, and are more likely to become teenage parents themselves.

- Seventy percent of all the juveniles in State reform institutions grew up in single- or no-parent situations (Beck et al., 1988).
- The poverty rate for single-parent, female-headed families with children is nearly six times higher than the poverty rate for married-couple families with children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994).
- Fatherless children are at a greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, suicide, poor educational performance, teen pregnancy, and criminality (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993).

- Almost 75 percent of American children living in single-parent families will experience poverty before they reach 11 years. Only 20 percent of children in two-parent families will do the same (National Commission on Children, 1993).
- Children with divorced parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in premarital sex, and become pregnant themselves outside of marriage (Furstenburg and Teitler, 1994).
- Fully 29.7 percent of children living with a never-married mother and 21.5 percent living with a divorced mother have repeated a grade in school. Only 11.6 percent of children living with both biological parents repeated a grade (Dawson, 1991).
- The United States is the world leader when it comes to fatherless families. In the early 1970s Sweden had the highest percentage of single-parent families—a distinction which America took over in 1986 (Burns, 1992).

Why are these statistics so stark? Why is the impact of the absence or the presence of the father so dramatic? There are many reasons. Some have been well-documented; others we have yet to uncover. But there are a few things we do know.

We do know it is difficult to rear children in the best of circumstances, and with one parent—often a very young one—shouldering all the responsibility, the chances for success decrease markedly. Often the single mother is unemployed and very poor. Or she is employed but earning low wages, which makes the family a little better off financially, but worse off in terms of time spent caring for the children and providing for other aspects of their well-being.

We do know that many fathers do not pay child support, even when ordered to do so by the courts. Teen fathers are even less likely than other absent fathers to provide child support. Even by the age of 27, only 30 percent of absent teen fathers paid child support, compared with 51 percent of those who fathered a child at age 20 or later.

We do know that 30 years ago there were many more examples of intact families and working fathers in the inner city than there are today. These role models are important for both boys and girls, as they determine the future course of their own lives. We know that economic prospects are lacking, particularly for young inner-city males, and that many of these young men may see paternity as another way of earning respect and a sense of belonging.

Yet few of the young men who father children outside of marriage tend to marry or live with the mothers of those children. About three-fourths of young fathers who live away from their children at birth never subsequently live with them (Lerman, 1993). This failure to connect with their children and to become responsible fathers reinforces the men's negative self-image and alienation—traits all too often passed on to their young.

Government's Responsibility

Historically, and to its credit, the U.S. Government has officially resisted interfering in family life, yet many laws inadvertently have done just that. There are two strong areas where government has unwittingly driven a wedge into families, especially those struggling against poverty: in public housing and in welfare. Within both of these poverty-related programs, unintentional impediments have been set up that have prevented families from remaining whole. The result has been a dramatic and often devastating destruction of entire families, particularly in low-income areas.

From the very beginning of this administration, President Clinton and Vice President Gore have made the health of the American family one of their greatest concerns. They have worked to undo the negative effects of government policies for families and to offer positive approaches. In June 1995 the President sent a memorandum on the subject of supporting the role of fathers in families to every cabinet officer. In it, he said:

I am firm in my belief that the future of our Republic depends on strong families and that committed fathers are essential to those families. I am also aware that strengthening fathers' involvement with their children cannot be accomplished by the Federal Government alone; the solutions lie in the hearts and consciences of individual fathers and the support of the families and communities in which they live. However, there are ways for a flexible, responsive Government to help support men in their roles as fathers.

The memorandum directed all executive departments and agencies to review every program, policy, and initiative that pertains to families to ensure that, where appropriate, they engage and include fathers.

HUD's Goal: Healthy Living Environments for American Families

The Clinton administration is working to change the rules that govern the poor, to encourage more self-sufficiency and more responsibility. This often means learning to provide for each other within the family unit. At the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), we are working to discourage the destruction of the American family by creating policies and programs that are family-friendly and encouraging to fathers within families. We are working on both the Federal and local levels to change the rules and social climate around public housing so that they no longer penalize renters who work or fathers who try to return to their families.

Making Public Housing More Family-Friendly

Not long after I became Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, I made a trip to Atlanta to visit the public housing authority (PHA) there and to meet with community leaders and others. On a walk through one of the city's streets, I came upon what looked like a happy family taking a stroll. There was a mother and father, two small daughters, and a baby being held in its father's arms. I was so

taken with the beauty of the scene that I stopped and chatted with the couple, remarking about their children and actually holding the baby.

“I love my family very much,” the man told me in response to my compliments, “and I try to visit them as much as I can.” “What do you mean?” I asked him. “Well,” he said, “we were all living together in public housing here, but then recently I got a job—a good job—doing construction work. If I remain with my family, our rent will increase to a level we still can’t afford. And I’m not confident enough about the job yet to move my family out. So I’ve had to move. The best I can do is visit them a couple times a week and hope even that doesn’t get us into trouble.”

For fathers, who realize that *their physical absence is actually a financial benefit* to their children, the choice is horrible. But public housing rent rules of the past often discouraged work, lease policies destroyed family stability and created a climate of subterfuge and deception, and isolation from support systems resulted in multigenerational dependence. Fathers were left feeling inadequate and powerless. Mothers were overwhelmed with work and responsibility. The result was that families were torn apart.

At a recent roundtable discussion on fatherhood that I convened with experts from around the Nation—public housing administrators, academics, activists, program directors, and others—the feelings expressed about public housing were unanimous: Something must be done to change the current structure. Public housing administrators told stories of families being forced apart because of the dramatic escalation in rent when the father returned to live with his family. They told of the many fathers who violate the rules in order to live with their families and then face the consequences of living secretly and breaking the law.

One participant told a story of a mother in public housing whose son had just turned 18 and had found a low-paying job. Because of the way the rent is structured, the rent increase for the family would be more than the son’s take-home pay. The mother was faced with three options: She could ask her son to quit the job, lie to the public housing authority about her son and advise her son to do the same, or ask her son to leave home.

All too often, because of policies like these and a destructive social climate, single mothers have been required not only to shoulder all responsibility for their families, but to do so in an environment that is often nothing more than a giant vortex of human misery. Such an environment perpetually threatens to pull the family, and certainly the children, down in a hail of gunfire, or in a shot of crack cocaine, or in the insidious negative influences of a sidewalk corner lifestyle.

The women who survive in these environments are the heroines of some of the most inspiring and heart-wrenching real-life dramas I have ever encountered. They often work several jobs, they guide their children, they protect them from harm, and they provide leadership for resident activities.

But often they find that when they do work, their rent goes up so rapidly that they have less disposable income than if they did not work. They find that if they want

to go to school or to training programs, they need childcare, which too often is not available.

To shop for food and necessities, they must carry little children long distances on public transportation, because the only shops in their neighborhoods are liquor stores and check-cashing outlets. And they are in a constant desperate struggle to keep their sons and daughters away from the groups who control the very buildings in which they live.

Fathers struggle with the same set of circumstances, and too often they find little success in the job market. They are left to fend for themselves on the streets, where too many of them die, and to face the humiliation of not being able to support their families. Few Americans—even the most principled, self-assured, and self-reliant—could prosper if placed in the same financial, racial, and life circumstances as those families.

I came back from my trip to Atlanta with a strong desire to reform the atmosphere in public housing to make it more friendly to families. I worked to make three major changes that would ease the plight of some of these families and make it easier for fathers to stay within them:

- Removing the disincentive from work. I wanted to remove the penalty people in public housing pay for going to work. As laws were at that time, and in some places still are, residents of public housing had to pay a certain fixed percentage of their income in rent: usually 30 percent. That meant rent increased significantly when work began and increased continuously if the resident got a raise or promotion.
- Putting a ceiling on rents. With no ceiling on rents, a family could end up paying much more for public housing than they would have to pay in rent on the open market. It made no sense for working families to remain in public housing, and therefore those who were left were the poorest and most desperate of our population. Long ago we learned that public housing, or any environment, works best when there is a mix of incomes and socio-economic groups. In order to encourage working families to stay in public housing, ceilings had to be put on rents—ceilings no higher than the market would bear, but ceilings nonetheless.
- Encouraging a mix of incomes by repealing the Federal preference rules that mandate PHAs to house only the poorest Americans. Without changing the way PHAs selected their renters, there was no effective way to change the mix of people who lived in public housing. Until this year the poorest and most needy renters were always given preference over the working poor and the less desperate. While we would like to be able to serve everyone, it does the housing residents little good to live in an unsafe and undesirable environment—yet with only very poor residents, that is what the environment had become.

In response to the urging of HUD, Congress finally changed the mandates for public housing to address the issues I have just listed, and since then the climate

of public opinion within public housing circles has changed. For 2 years in a row, Congress has allowed PHAs both to put ceilings on rents and to rewrite rent rules so that working renters are not penalized. While some PHAs are still reluctant to rewrite their rules, afraid that congressional will on these matters might change again, it is clear that there can be no turning back. Especially in the post-welfare reform environment, we are obligated to ensure that work is encouraged rather than discouraged by arbitrary rent rules.

In addition to pressing Congress to act, HUD took some actions of its own. HUD published an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on the subject of strengthening the role of fathers in public housing families. We received comments from public housing entities across the Nation and determined from those comments that two subsequent steps would be effective: Making minimal additional regulatory changes in the proposed rule, and producing a “best practices” guidebook for PHAs.

HUD has agreed to develop such a book of materials for PHA managers who are planning fatherhood initiatives. The guide will be based on information gathered during site visits to PHA fatherhood programs, on information developed from the two roundtable discussions on fatherhood I have now convened, and on other useful information that becomes available. We hope the guide will be useful to PHAs that are thinking of implementing local programs to encourage more positive roles for fathers, both within their families and within the public housing community.

HUD is working in other ways to change policies and physical environments in cities and in PHAs to encourage intact families. Our work frequently starts with helping families help themselves, by providing them with opportunity.

Making Public Housing Safer and Providing Education and Job Training

We are creating better public housing—and better public housing *neighborhoods*—for all residents, but particularly for families, by tearing down the worst buildings. Prior to this administration, about 1,000 units of public housing were torn down each year. By the end of this year, we will have torn down an unprecedented 23,000 public housing units that just do not work. We are tearing down the tens of thousands of dilapidated, unsafe developments that have for far too long been the settings for our children’s urban nightmares.

In their place new signs of hope have been planted and are beginning to grow. Instead of the superblocks of developments such as Cabrini-Green, grids of traditional streets are being designed. Instead of mammoth apartment buildings, small-scale, townhouse-style housing is being constructed. Instead of acres devoted exclusively to housing, commercial activities are being encouraged. Instead of large, open pedestrian areas, small parks and squares, as well as civic buildings such as police and fire stations and daycare centers, are being sited. Instead of housing built, owned, and managed by public entities, partnerships with for-profit and nonprofit developers are being forged. Instead of housing built only for the poorest of our society, economically integrated communities are being created.

We are working to change the social dynamic. This goes to the heart of what ails so many of the people who live within these structures. Until now, the rules of public housing discouraged work, discouraged responsibility, and discouraged marriage.

We have changed admission policies so that PHAs can create preferences for working families. We have changed rent rules to reward people who work. We have begun connecting tenants to education and employment opportunities through innovative partnerships with universities, community colleges, and community-based organizations. This helps both mothers and fathers better prepare themselves for the future.

We have made it safer for families to live in public housing. We have begun to change the atmosphere around the housing units by creating stricter rules and conditions for residency. No longer are unsavory persons allowed to spoil the efforts of the hardworking majority of families struggling to lift their families out of poverty. The president has called for, and HUD has issued, a “one strike and you’re out” policy in public housing. Public housing agencies will have more power and resources to screen out those residents who have engaged in drug or criminal activity or who are making the environment otherwise unlivable for the rest of the tenants. These people will be evicted.

We are helping families become self-sufficient through education. HUD has worked to transform selected public housing developments into avenues for educational achievement and job advancement—what we call Campuses of Learners. This initiative is designed to provide residents with an opportunity to live in an environment centered around education and economic self-sufficiency. The residents of Campuses of Learners enter into an education program involving computer technology, job training, and comprehensive education and support services. Residents of public housing communities succeed in becoming self-reliant when they receive assistance in obtaining comprehensive training, education, and support services, and help finding gainful employment.

We are helping parents train for and find jobs. HUD implemented a demonstration program last fall called Jobs Plus, which is designed to encourage work and family unity through job training and employment programs. Changes in housing and welfare policies present urban PHAs and their residents with enormous challenges, both to increase the share of public housing residents who are employed and to retain those families that are already working.

HUD is working with Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) to design a demonstration to establish innovative and replicable strategies for accomplishing these goals. The Rockefeller Foundation has provided substantial funding during the design phase and has matched HUD’s \$5 million investment with its own \$5 million for implementation.

MDRC intends to work closely with four to six urban PHAs to develop tailored, locally based approaches to providing saturation-level employment opportunities and job access to a substantial proportion of working-age residents of at least one family development in each selected PHA.

Two of the Best Practices: Innovative Programs That Are Working

HUD has helped fund two major pilot programs that are being credited with starting a very positive trend across the country. Both the Hartford and Baltimore experiments use a combination of job opportunities and housing benefits to encourage the unification of families and the more active participation of fathers in their families. The programs reward these fathers for work and responsibility, qualities that were rarely nurtured or encouraged in the environments in which they were reared. Although these programs do not provide the ultimate answer for the problems faced by the urban poor, they are one answer that has been proven to work. The fathers are discovering that taking responsibility for their families is not only the right thing to do, it is often the most meaningful experience of their lives.

The Hartford Experience

My father taught us responsibility and providing for your family. If that meant working two jobs, then you did that.

— Victor Rush,
Director of Hartford Housing Authority's
Family Reunification Program

Ben Compton is the father of two children growing up in a public housing unit in Hartford, Connecticut. He was reared there himself. It is where he joined a gang, where he began to use and sell drugs, and where he lived before he was arrested and sent to prison.

Now Ben is reunited with his family and has a steady job removing hazardous material from abandoned housing units in Hartford. It is well-paying work, but there is a catch: Ben can keep the job only if he accepts responsibility for his family, supports and remains involved with his children, and stays off drugs.

Ben Compton is one of the growing number of men involved in a unique program that has become a model and an inspiration to many PHAs across the country. Just 6 months old, the program was developed by the executive director of the Hartford Housing Authority (HHA), John Wardlaw, who wanted to create a plan that would bring the men in public housing back to take care of their families. In Wardlaw's housing authority, 85 percent of the families are headed by women alone.

The Family Reunification Program used part of a \$20.8 million project redevelopment grant from HUD to demolish and rebuild some of HHA's public housing sites as it helped rebuild some of the families who lived in the housing project. Wardlaw worked with HUD to construct a program that would put that money to multiple uses. His idea was to ask fathers to claim paternity and take financial responsibility for their children and, in return, to guarantee the fathers employment by putting them to work on the construction project.

The program started with only five fathers recruited from the community. The five fathers were selected because they fulfilled important criteria: All had

children living in Hartford public housing but were themselves not on the lease of the apartment where their children lived, and all were willing to come home and to work immediately.

As the program required, the mothers of the children informed their welfare officers that the father had returned to live with them. The families were immediately removed from welfare. The fathers, as agreed, claimed paternity, but found that suddenly they were liable for back payment of child-support costs. Everyone was frustrated, and the situation, as Victor Rush tells it, was tense.

“Some of these guys were former gang members. They were tough, and they were angry. They told me they’d kill me if I didn’t get them out of this, and I believed them,” says Rush, director of the HHA Reunification Program, laughing in hindsight.

To solve their problem, the group met first with local HUD officials and then with the White House staffs of both President Clinton and Vice President Gore. Eventually an agreement was worked out under which the participating fathers paid child support arrearage at a small enough level (about \$5/month) that the fathers would not feel punished for claiming paternity. And the mothers were not penalized for welcoming the fathers back—they were allowed to keep their welfare medical benefits. Now that the plan is in place, the program is working well.

“These guys are different now from the gangs they used to hang out with,” says Rush. “Many of them have started coming to church, and two of the couples have married.”

Participating fathers are eligible for onsite construction jobs that pay up to \$22 an hour, with employment linked to positive family and personal behavior. To get involved with the project, however, they must sign a contract (see figure 1) that makes a number of demands upon its signers. Victor Rush is optimistic about the program’s chances for success:

We believe that a big part of the reason urban America is in the shape it’s in is because too many kids are being brought up in broken homes. We believe the only way we’re going to win this war on drugs as it relates to our children is to bring families back to a time when children were raised in two-parent households. We hope that by having fathers in their lives and seeing them get up in the morning to go to work, and seeing them come home in the evening, dirty from work, we will, by example, begin to break this vicious cycle.

Baltimore City Healthy Start

We just give them hope. We’re able to show these young men that they have something to look forward to other than hanging out on the street.

— Joe Jones,
Director, Baltimore City Healthy Start

Myron Turner is one of the many success stories of Baltimore City Healthy Start and its lead abatement action project. He was 19 and an active member of a gang, dealing in both drugs and weapons, when he first came looking for help at the

Figure 1

The Hartford Housing Authority Employment Program Contract requires the following behaviors by fathers:

1. Must act as role models in their communities.
 2. Cannot sell or consume drugs or associate with individuals or groups who sell or consume drugs.
 3. Must report additional income resulting from employment through this program to the city or State department of social services (if applicable) within 30 days of obtaining employment.
 4. Must be bona fide residents of the Hartford Housing Authority (HHA).
 5. Must pay rent on time.
 6. Must demonstrate positive behaviors and abstain from physical or mental abuse.
 7. Must achieve self-reliance with regard to home maintenance and repair.
 8. Must enroll in, and remain in, HHA's Family Investment Center Program and must seek out and participate in programs that will assist in achieving self-sufficiency and independence.
 9. Must test drug free at the time of employment. Participants are tested periodically for illegal drugs.
 10. Must uphold minimum attendance standards.
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urging of the mother of one of his babies. At the time he was described as a “menace to society.” After several years of counseling and job training and several highs and lows, he appears to have turned a corner. Once the leader of his gang, he is now a leader of his peer group. Once a top student of the streets, now he is in a general equivalency diploma (GED) program and is making good grades. He is doing excellent work and is living with his family. For the first time in his life, he has a vision for the future and reason to believe it will be positive. Recently he told a reporter, “I want to continue working. I want to get my GED, I want to get caught up with my child support. I want to pay off my probation costs. And I want to get legal custody of my oldest daughter.”

Here is how Healthy Start works: Counselors from the program go out into the community and aggressively recruit high-risk pregnant women. These women are given prenatal care and counseling, with the goal of giving birth to healthy babies. Those involved in the program know, however, that having a healthy birth is only the beginning of the struggle. They know that if they want to encourage a truly healthy family atmosphere, fathers will have to participate.

That is why they developed a Men's Services program. Its goal is to help fathers and/or other significant male supporters of Healthy Start's female clients maintain involvement with their children and families through the promotion of parenting skills and through peer and program support. Men are encouraged to provide financial support for their families and to attend prenatal appointments, pediatric appointments, family development sessions, therapeutic support groups, and education and employment readiness sessions.

Healthy Start's accompanying employment program, the Lead Abatement Action Project, began with a grant from HUD. The grant, to establish a lead abatement project in Baltimore's public housing, created an opportunity for Baltimore's housing authority to change more than the paint in its units: It allowed the families that live there to help themselves.

Nearly all of the fathers recruited by the program are unemployed or underemployed, and many are drug users. The program asks them to take responsibility for changing their lives, first by stopping their drug use and then by entering the program's counseling and job placement program. The plan has already enrolled 170 fathers, just short of the goal of 200.

The \$12 million HUD grant is paying for 1,000 houses to be lead abated and for hundreds of men in public housing to be gainfully employed. After a screening and physical exam, participating men are linked with contractors in the lead abatement project. The contractors are required to hire the participants as part of their contract and are required to provide continuous work even after the lead abatement project is completed. Although some of the contractors were wary about hiring and training some of these men, the men now have begun to work and everyone seems pleased with the result.

"Guys on the street are looking for a positive alternative and we give it to them," says Joe Jones of the \$8/hour jobs and health insurance that all workers receive.

Will Myron Turner stay on the straight path he appears to be on right now? Will Ben Compton be able to use his job and renewed ties with his family to keep himself away from the problems of his youth? Although we have no solid answers for these questions, we do know this: At least now they have a chance.

"These are men who have grown up without positive male role models," says Jones. "We tell them that the bottom line is they must not let people in their community act in such a way that harms their children. Peers must give positive peer pressure."

Can These Programs Be Replicated?

These programs are two of the most exciting and probably most successful in the country. But each depends on the charismatic leadership of an individual who inspires, cajoles, and models positive behavior among men on whom society has given up. Can these programs be replicated, even minimally, so that their successes can be taken to scale?

Joe Jones and Victor Rush, as well as many other experts, believe replication can be accomplished through hard work, the dedication of a committed staff, the priority placed on raising healthy children, and the acceptance of a range of rules. Such rules include:

- Changing welfare rules to encourage fathers to return.
- Working out a reasonable schedule for child-support arrearage payments.
- Ensuring that the at-risk males in the program are given case managers so that they work with people, not just with a program.
- Creating support groups that help the men with both the physical and the emotional challenges they face in their new roles.
- Providing training that works in the areas of good child rearing, relationship building, domestic violence amelioration, and other interpersonal skills.
- Creating a model of family unification without forcing incompatible parents to cohabit.

HUD is in the process of talking with Jones and Rush about developing a training institute so that they can teach other leaders how to accomplish these goals. Whether it will be in the form of a training institute or some other guidance, there is little doubt that the Hartford and Baltimore programs will influence PHAs nationwide.

Other programs already in place across the country have been working to reach out to fathers and urge them to take responsibility for their families. Some of these programs are:

- **Father to Father.** A national program organized by the Children, Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota. This collaborative effort on the part of more than 50 supporting organizations has helped organize mentoring programs, support and education groups for young fathers, a spiritual counseling center, and other activities and plans. Vice President Gore is the honorary chair of this consortium, which also is responsible for FatherNet, an electronic bulletin board dealing with the role of fathers in families.
- **The Fatherhood Project.** A national research and education program created by the Families and Work Institute that is examining the future of fatherhood and developing ways to support men's involvement in child rearing.
- **The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization.** A nationally recognized, Cleveland-based organization that seeks to change fathering behavior through nontraditional counseling and group work.

These organizations are just a few of those that have developed across the Nation in response to the visible and desperate need in our Nation's urban areas.

Services for Mothers

There has been some concern, understandably, that although these programs help young men find jobs and become independent, the programs themselves are closed to women. Both Jones and Rush have had the experience of women asking to be taken in and given jobs and training much the same as the men receive. After all, they reason, they are the ones who have stayed with their families and who have accepted the responsibilities of parenthood, so why should they receive fewer benefits than the men who left them? At the fatherhood roundtable convened in late summer 1996, practitioners in the field discussed this problem and came to a few conclusions.

Everyone agreed that a tremendous need exists for exclusively male programs to help these fathers. As Victor Rush said, it is exactly because the men are the ones who have left and who have abandoned their responsibilities that they are the ones these programs should reach out to, for the sake of the children. That said, the group also pointed out the tremendous need for more services directed at women—the single mothers I wrote about above—who are struggling in dire circumstances.

Ultimately, the successful return of the father to the home and/or his acceptance of his child-rearing responsibilities helps everyone in the family unit. In such a problem-filled atmosphere—one drenched with poverty, violence, a lack of positive role models, and inadequate employment opportunities—much needs to be done for both men and women. Children thrive when both parents are healthy and productive members of society.

Fostering Families That Are Both Intact and Positive Role Models

Not long ago, news accounts explored the devastating situation of street children in Buenos Aires. A reporter covering one of the stories interviewed a small group of homeless girls. The girls all agreed on one thing: They said the world would be a better place if there were no men in it. These girls had all grown up in families in which their own fathers abused them and beat their mothers. Now they were living on streets where they were in constant danger of being raped or beaten by runaway boys or grown men. To them, an absent father would have been a good thing.

I bring up this story to make a point. We are not trying to force families together at all costs. Some fathers do not belong with their families. Most children are better off in a broken home than in one torn by violence. Some fatherless families are successful, and often the family has little choice. In the majority of situations, however, under the right circumstances, fathers are an extremely important and valuable part of a family. The goal is for fathers to become involved with their families and to be *good fathers*. To participate in the care of their children. To be a source of financial and emotional support to their wives. To be leaders in their communities.

What is a good father? I do not pretend to know all the answers, but there are a few commonly agreed-upon components to good fathering. A good father is a

good provider. He is also a nurturer. He is a partner with his spouse. He is a teacher. He is a protector from harm. He is an authority figure. He is a moral guide. He is a good listener.

These are not new-age male qualities; they are age-old, respectable male qualities. They are qualities that challenge men, in the same way women are challenged, to truly *give* to their children, to guide them, and to prepare them for their lives to come. The rewards from this kind of behavior are enormous.

They are the arms of your child wrapped around your neck. The smile of pride, reserved only for you, when an accomplishment is reached. The personal knowledge that you have succeeded in one of the greatest challenges life has to offer.

To write this essay, I have given a lot of thought to my own experience as a father and to all the joys and heartaches that job includes. I believe that a man has the responsibility of fatherhood from the moment he participates in the conception of another human being. He will have an effect on that child's life, whether he is present and participating in the child's upbringing or he is absent and leaving a big void in that child's life.

The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) at the University of Pennsylvania has identified seven “core learnings” gleaned from the experiences of programs and agencies serving fathers. They are:

- Fathers care, even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways.
- The presence of a father matters in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
- Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.
- Existing approaches to public benefits, child-support enforcement, and paternity establishment create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement.
- A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the skills vital to sharing the responsibility for parenting.
- The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.
- The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

Many people think that we at HUD are concerned only with the brick and mortar aspects of building American communities. But we know, and I know, that there are no community foundations more necessary than a solid, secure family. We know that homes—even the most palatial—are good places in which to grow up only if there are loving families within them. We know that public housing cannot be turned around if the people who live there have no role models who give them hope for their future. We know that the delicate fabric of the family, so easily torn, is ultimately the strongest net on which our country can depend.

It is just that fabric that has made us a great Nation. It is that fabric that we should be able to wrap ourselves in as we battle the challenges and surprises that may threaten our strength in the future. There is no better investment, no better public policy, than that which supports our families. Let us hope we have realized this before it is too late.

Note

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