

Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) Project Overview

Since 2006, Responsible Fatherhood programs across the country have received federal funding administered by the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These programs aim to promote positive father-child interactions, improve parents' relationship and capacity to parent as a team, and build fathers' economic stability. Since their inception, Responsible Fatherhood programs have conducted capacity-building activities, such as performance management, and have undergone local and federal evaluations aimed at building evidence. These activities and evaluations have uncovered a number of implementation challenges, including recruiting fathers, enrolling them in services, and keeping them actively engaged in services so they can realize their goals.

MDRC's Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) is studying ways to help programs overcome these hurdles. SIRF seeks to improve Responsible Fatherhood programming using a continuous cycle of evidence building, implementation, and adaptation that is attuned to the real-world needs of the people who provide the services and the fathers who use them. For example, if a program identifies engaging fathers in services as a challenge, the SIRF project, in partnership with the program, would identify possible solutions, implement the solution, examine the effect of the solution on fathers' engagement, and adjust. This process could repeat multiple times over the course of the project, depending on the intensity and scope of the solution. This type of effort is sometimes known as rapid cycle evaluations or rapid learning methods.

If you are interested in learning more about SIRF or would like to nominate a fatherhood program to participate, please email SIRF@mdrc.org.

Agenda, Scope and Goals

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), MDRC has assembled a team of leading experts in the field with experience using rigorous learning cycles – which use an iterative approach to identify implementation roadblocks, design and test solutions, interpret findings, and adapt practices and measurement – and providing programmatic technical assistance to Responsible Fatherhood programs. Over the first year of SIRF, the research team will identify common implementation challenges and potential solutions for Responsible Fatherhood programs. Activities will include a thorough review of the literature and input from ACF, content experts, and stakeholders (including Responsible Fatherhood program participants and program operators). Based on this information gathering phase and early conversations with Responsible Fatherhood programs, the research team will select up to 10 Responsible Fatherhood programs to participate in learning cycle activities.

The learning cycles will begin in early 2021. The SIRF study team envisions this work to be a collaboration between researchers and practitioners so that each program's learning approach can be tailored to its unique context and service structure. This process is represented by three words: learn-do-reflect. It may involve examining program data to identify a problem and consider potential solutions (learn), supporting the implementation of chosen solutions (do), and examining the results to decide on next steps (reflect).

The study findings will be disseminated on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the project, which is slated to end in 2024.

Design, Sites, and Data Sources

The learning cycles will vary in their design, timeframe, and structure – that is, how they fall along a spectrum from more practitioner driven to more researcher-led, which will depend upon unique contextual factors associated with each site and the associated learning objectives. Through these activities, SIRF seeks to build evidence to help Responsible Fatherhood programs deliver more effective services and set the stage for potential future studies that could measure the effects of the strengthened programs.

Data will be collected from nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management), the management information system developed for Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood federal grantees, as well as from interviews with program staff and Responsible Fatherhood program participants.

Funders and Partners

Funders: The project is sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance and administered by the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

Partners: MEF Associates, Insight Policy Research.

NOTE: The Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This collection of information is voluntary and will be used to gather preliminary information about the fatherhood field and explore with fatherhood programs the research questions that are of interest and the design options that are feasible. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Katie Pahigiannis; Katie.Pahigiannis@acf.hhs.gov, and Kriti Jain; Kriti.Jain@acf.hhs.gov; Attn: OMB-PRA (0970-0356).