

Fatherhood Connection Pilot

About CCA

Connecting Communities in Action, Inc. (CCA), located in Cattaraugus County, New York, has provided services to its community since 1965. *CCA builds resilient communities by helping people achieve economic, physical, and emotional security.* In addition to the fatherhood programming, additional programs provided by CCA include Energy and Housing Services, Nutrition Services, Property Management, Transitional Services, Victim Services, and Youth and Family Services.



The Need

The national poverty rate for families with female-headed households with no husband or similar male figures stands at 29.7%. When these same female-headed households have children under 18, the poverty rate increases to 47.6% (over four times the rate in married-couple families); for those same households with children less than five years of age, the poverty rate increases explodes to 62.1%.

Female-headed households comprise 18% of Cattaraugus County's families, 16% of Allegany County's families, and 23% of Steuben County's families. About a third of all births are widowed, divorced, or never-married women. Forty-two percent (42%) of families living in poverty in Cattaraugus County are female-headed with absentee father figures. Children in father-absent homes are almost four times more likely to be poor and are at significantly higher risks for substance abuse and aggressive behaviors. Children without present fathers are more than twice as likely to die by suicide. Father involvement with their children in school and academics is associated with students mainly achieving A grades, but 71% of high school dropouts are fatherless.

Initiative Overview

In FFY 2021, the NYS Department of State (DOS) used CSBG Discretionary resources to fund a pilot project to create, sustain, and evaluate the **Fatherhood Connection Pilot**. The Fatherhood Connection assists in creating a firm foundation for the men in the community through the facilitation of men's parenting and personal development groups to increase self-sufficiency and self-awareness. Three community action agencies were involved in the pilot – Connecting Communities in Action (Cattaraugus, the lead contract agency), ACCORD Corporation in Allegany County, and ProAction of Steuben and Yates. Funds were subcontracted to Reginald Cox, the Fatherhood Connection curriculum creator, and Dr. Christopher St. Vil, a researcher with the University of Buffalo, to rigorously evaluate the outcomes of the pilot and the efficacy of the curriculum.

The pilot project intended to have Mr. Cox train and certify new Facilitators within each county during the delivery of the 13-week Fatherhood Connection cohorts. During these 13 week sessions, participants were expected to strengthen their understanding of fatherhood roles, improve parenting skills, learn communication techniques and anger management, discuss blended families and co-parenting, address domestic violence, and become more engaged in the lives of their children. Training facilitators would guarantee the program's long-term sustainability, and wrap-around services from the CAAs would provide the necessary support to dads and their families.

Funding and Support

CSBG funds were utilized to implement the program across the three rural Western New York Counties of Cattaraugus, Allegany, and Steuben. \$40,000 in funding was allocated to the facilitation of groups by Reginald Cox, the creator of the Fatherhood Connection curriculum. \$9,999 in funding was targeted to evaluate the program's outcomes by Dr. St. Vil, Ph.D., to determine whether the approach is evidence-based.

Outcomes and Impacts

The pilot project was indeed a success. Thirty (30) men were projected to participate in the 13-week Fatherhood Connection cohorts. Fifty-one men participated, and 30 graduated. Five facilitators were trained across the three-county area and held groups independently. Men who graduated have increased their parenting skills, made connections with their parenting style, handled anger more effectively when frustrated, and identified areas where they need to improve communication with children, caretakers, mothers, and the judicial system. Local partnerships were strengthened and expanded. Partners with expertise in child abuse, mandated reporting, domestic violence, and treatment of sex offenders were able to work with facilitators to shore up policies and practices to hold participants accountable while offering support.

Quantitative data from pre and post-surveys and qualitative data from participant interviews were compiled to create an evidence base. This evidence points to men learning greater accountability and skills for empathy and resilience. While additional data collection and evaluation is needed, it can now be stated that the Fatherhood Connection is evidence-informed and effective in New York State rural areas.

As this was a pilot project, success offered expansion beyond the three-county area. During the pilot project, The Fatherhood Connection entered into a contract with the New York State Council on Children and Families (NYSCCF). It will now be working with ten Community Action Agencies across New York State to identify existing fatherhood work and expand opportunities for engaging fathers.

Also, during this time, the NYS DOS included Fatherhood Programming in its State Plan for CSBG Funds. With this new support from NYS DOS, Community Action can create a sustainable fatherhood focus

across NYS as a means to address the causes and conditions of poverty, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and the academic and social successes of children for generations.

Transformative Impact – Finding a sense of dignity, integrity, and camaraderie in the group context, dads gain a sense of self-worth (how they think about themselves) that directly impacts their self-esteem (how they feel about themselves). This, in turn, increases their desire to provide financial, emotional, and even spiritual support to their children, whether it be doctors' appointments for health care, involvement with school work and teachers for affirming educational goals, and making up or continuing in cheerfully providing child support for the physical needs of the children. They are less likely to be absent, disconnected, or in jail because of those failures. The group dynamics allow for encouragement and accountability in their rights and responsibilities as engaged fathers. Even the fabric of overall societal and community well-being is positively impacted through less easy to measure.

Replicability of the Initiative - Because the "program" emphasizes for men (and service providers) to think steps and not programs, the facilitators have the freedom to invite dads into a movement that taps into their narrative of something larger than themselves. This mitigates the short-term result of just getting a checkmark for a 13-week class and instead create a more long-term transformation from the inside out. Many of the lessons learned and presented are intuitive and user-friendly by picking up on manhood's very desires and design. They are things that directly impact a man's heart with what he already knows to be true. The initiative is replicable because one doesn't need to be an "expert" in all things fatherhood. After all, even the facilitator is still a part of the continued learning and growing methods. This creates a collaborative partnership of all men within the groups to stay on the path of transformation, recognizing the various ways and steps to growth.

Customer Voice Influences the Operation – Because the emphasis is on steps, not programs, men instinctively know or at least learn and feel that they are not just projects to be managed but people to be encouraged. Compared to the many other classes men are required to complete, the fatherhood connection curriculum speaks to a man's heart holistically, and their language begins to change positively. As their language changes, so do their behavior. They share those stories and learnings with other fathers/men giving rise to the interest and pursuit of becoming better together!

Partnerships make this initiative more effective – The connection and collaborative efforts of many different agencies provide a collective strength to the movement. Community members and faith-based organizations offer meals; other service agencies are invited to provide childcare, probation and caseworkers are supportive, recognizing the achievement of their overall goals.