



OPNFF

Ohio Practitioners' Network for Fathers and Families

www.opnff.net

**April 2009
Newsletter**

Let's Connect The Dots!

By James McDonald, OPNFF President

We, the **OPNFF Board of Directors**, applaud all of the public officials, judges, administrators and practitioners who **NOW** are choosing to honor fatherhood in their work with families. There is unprecedented momentum to celebrate and strengthen fathers in Ohio, thanks to the leadership of people who want the best for our children. Many of these leaders are mothers who have always known that daddy makes a **HUGH** difference in the lives of babies, toddlers, and teenagers. It feels so good to see this father-family reconnection happening.

This turn around is the direct result of national, state, and local organizations that noticed the inefficacy of the old ways of doing business. An ole Prophet Ezekiel once told the leadership, "the weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick,

nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost, but with force and cruelty you have ruled them." Harsh treatment of fathers does not seem to benefit their children. It is refreshing to see the policies and resources of community shift toward father inclusive practices, which restore men to a healthy and confident commitment to their families.

We can accelerate the pace. Fatherhood work is relatively new and often done in silos. That is to say, the work of a national fatherhood organization is not necessarily done in association with the work of a state fatherhood organization, which is often not connected to the fatherhood work of researchers, who seldom are aware of the scope of local fatherhood initiatives, while all independently seek funding. **Let's connect the dots!**

While our core competencies vary, our missions are similar and it would be wise for us to align strategies. National Security is a primary mission of the Marines, Navy, Air Force, Army, and National Guard and while all maintain autonomy, there is a jointness of these sister services across a range of military operations. What each contributes materially and logistically to support the other, strengthens every ones capacity to achieve their mission. It will behoove national, state, and local family serving organizations to adopt a similar model.

To that end, OPNFF has a **new Vision Statement: "Practitioners and organizations throughout Ohio will intentionally and strategically engage fathers in their work with families because of the collaborative leadership of OPNFF"**.

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James McDonald has worked 35 years in behavioral healthcare and is the Director of the Muskingum Counseling Center at Six County, Inc. in Zanesville, Ohio. He was on the task force that originated Foreverdads, www.foreverdads.com, (fatherhood initiative in Muskingum County), and is its founding director. He is a past president of the Muskingum County Community Foundation and is the current president of the Ohio University-Zanesville Regional Coordinating Council.

James participated on the OPNFF Planning Council and joined the Board of Directors of the Ohio Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families as a founding member in 2004. He served as Vice President in 2007/2008 and was elected President in December 2008.

James has a B.A. in Psychology from Muskingum College and a M.A. in Public Administration from Ohio University. He has been married to Lisa for 21 years and fathers two children, Sarah Lynn and Michael James. His philosophy: With God, nothing shall be impossible!



*James McDonald
OPNFF President*

“Keeping It REAL”

by Calvin Williams, Director, Lighthouse Youth Services REAL Dads program

“Keeping it real” was (or is depending on your age) an oft used expression to present a bottom-line opinion or fact about something. In Cincinnati, Lighthouse Youth Services has taken “keeping it real” to a new level with the Lighthouse Youth Services’ Responsible, Effective, Accountable and Loving (REAL) Dads program.

While the fatherhood movement’s aim is to support fathers from all walks of life, fathers who are engaged with public systems present unique challenges and opportunities for children, families and communities. Lighthouse REAL Dads chooses to work with and support fathers who are involved with the Hamilton County Child Support Enforcement Agency (the CSEA) precisely because of the benefits to children and their mothers when fathers are supported in their parenting role and in their ability to consistently meet their child support obligation.



Lighthouse Youth Services received a federal fatherhood demonstration grant in 2006, being one of a handful of organizations nationally that received a five-year funding commitment. While the overall program model proposed to the federal Department of Health and Human Services was strong (the Lighthouse application received a perfect score!), clearly the key element was the partnership with Hamilton County CSEA. The CSEA has always enjoyed a good reputation for strong outreach and working with community-based non profits. This time the CSEA signed an actual Memorandum of Understanding with Lighthouse to commit to this project. This was the first time there was a total collaboration and

partnership a community-based organization.

As you already know, signed paperwork only goes so far in making a project successful. It’s the relationships and the outcomes that matter most. The relationship between Lighthouse and the CSEA is as good as it gets. It starts with complete buy-in from the top leaders at both organizations. Lighthouse President Bob Mecum and Jeff Startzman, HCJFS Assistant Director, Child Support Services are passionate co-owners of this project. Mr. Startzman has always been open minded and practical about improving how child support services are delivered to consumers, be they mom or dad. The REAL Dads project allows him to live out some of his core ideas about best ways to get resources to children and families. Mr. Mecum describing why Lighthouse Youth Services decided to get into the fatherhood field states, “For years we’ve run group homes

and crisis centers for children and youth. It came to us that a common thread in all this distress in the lives of these youths is an absent or ineffective father. Given a chance to do something about that, we decided to act.”

Of course, all of that passion and commitment had to trickle down to front-line staff at the CSEA, and had to be inculcated at Lighthouse in the staff we hired and developed to work in the fatherhood field. I offer an axiom to describe how we continue to make that happen: communicating to understand is communicating for success. Whenever we’re interacting with the CSEA staff, we listen to understand what is important to them, overall or at that very moment. Our responses - thoughts,

ideas and strategies - are infused with that understanding, creating continuous forward movement towards problem-solving, progress and success. The CSEA offers the same level of respect and intention in communicating with Lighthouse. In the process of hiring staff for Lighthouse REAL Dads, we offer some heady aspirations right away. At the initial interviews, all candidates are told the same two things, “If you are selected, you will be transformed by this work”, and “If selected, you will be a part of a program that strives to be the best fatherhood program in the country”. When candidates are hired, we inundate them with our core belief about what it takes to successfully serve fathers: listening and respect. It could be said that core values drive this partnership. Our two organizations know who we are separately and appreciate who we are together.

So what does this relationship and partnership mean for fathers and their children? It allows for a model of service delivery that offers overt benefits and support to program participants. Lighthouse REAL Dads provides immediate relief through a cessation of enforcement activities and an automatic reinstatement of driver’s license privileges upon completion of intake into the program. After intake, participants are moved to the Lighthouse REAL Dads caseload in the child support system. That caseload is managed by Allen Clay, the child support technician assigned to work solely with the Lighthouse REAL Dads program participants. Mr. Clay provides one-on-one consultations regarding the participant’s child support case(s), and actually becomes their child support worker for the duration of their time in the program. He connects to the CSEA database from the Lighthouse REAL Dads community-based facility, where he is stationed twice per week, and is available to program participants via his cell phone or at his county office as well. Mr. Clay does a fantastic job of establishing rapport and making participants comfortable about facing whatever challenges their child support case presents. While Lighthouse REAL Dads is a parenting program, not a child support collection program, it bears mentioning that the REAL Dads caseload

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paid over \$113,000 in child support last year. This is from clients who came to the program not working and not paying. As the sole manager of the Lighthouse REAL Dads caseload, Mr. Clay ensures that no enforcement actions take place against participants who are active in the program. It would be easy to think that the protection from enforcement actions is a powerful benefit that would attract many fathers to the program. As ESPN's college football commentator Lee Corso would say, "not



so fast my friend". Fact: in the three years the program has been operating, the "protection" from enforcement actions is almost never brought up by Lighthouse REAL Dads program participants as a significant benefit. The persistent myths and stereotypes of low-income, non custodial fathers take another blow. Clearly, the vast majority simply want to pay their child support, be with and parent their children.

Fatherhood research and practice has shown that for low-income, non custodial fathers, there are significant and tangible barriers to doing so. That's where the Lighthouse REAL Dads Life Coaches come in. As a program participant put it one day after I described the role of his Life Coach, "...so it's like having an adult mentor". The Life Coaches perform an in-depth intake and assessment to understand the participant's strengths, needs and challenges. From that information they develop an individualized service plan with the participant that includes goals and target timelines for completion. This really is the heart of the program – the participant and the Life Coach working together to accomplish his goals in

the areas of parenting, employment, child support and overall life skills. Order modification, custody, parenting time, housing, arrearage forgiveness, referrals to other service providers, court advocacy, employment, locating children or an absent mom, incentives and participant support items, listening, education and more are services provided by the Life Coach. A good number of fathers come to us with little or no natural support systems in their lives. So when they come across a person who is committed to listening and is able to offer concrete services that make a difference in their lives, they express relief and gratitude. I can't tell you how many times I've heard a father offer the "if it wasn't for you all..." sentiment to express where he may be without Lighthouse REAL Dads. With all of this said it would be easy to think we were hot from the start. That was not the case.

We began admitting participants to Lighthouse REAL Dads in March of 2007. It was slow and tough sledding to get off the ground as we could barely get a father to enter our door. The strategy at the time was to send out letters to those in the child support system with mailing labels provided from the CSEA database. We mailed well over 1500 letters in those first six to nine months. All of that effort yielded a total participant caseload of about forty-five, and a first fatherhood class with about seven guys. That's how it went for most of 2007. Then, an explosion occurred. Benefiting from some good media exposure and changing the enrollment criteria from 17 years and up with at least \$2000 in arrearages, to 17 and up with a child support case, regardless of the status of the case, we hit our stride. From late 2007 to now, we've received close to 450 self-referrals and completed intakes on 360 fathers. Today, we send no letters nor do any intentional recruiting, yet every month about 25-30 fathers inquire about the program. It's said that word of mouth is the best advertising. The word on the street in Cincinnati is that Lighthouse REAL Dads is "for real".

Our very first class had seven participants. Today, doing three classes per year, we routinely register close to 60 fathers for each class and our completion numbers keep rising. The last class saw close to 30 fathers complete the course. The combination of the curriculum, the Nurturing Fathers Program, the community-based facility and a promise to fathers that they will not be "told" anything is hard to beat. It's important to us that fathers know that what they bring to the class is valued; their strengths, wisdom and experiences. The set up for the class is that we will explore fatherhood using the Nurturing Fathers material, augmented by the father's knowledge and experience. I'm often moved when facilitating the class. To see a room full of fathers, who keep coming back week and after week, even though they have pressing day-to-day issues, is powerful. It is inspiring to see how they react to the ideas and suggestions contained in the material. We had a site visit from our federal Program Officer from the Office of Family Assistance last year and one of her duties was to observe a class. The class for that evening was "Men & Feelings" and she thought she would observe men having some difficulty with that subject. To her surprise she witnessed a room full of men speaking with clarity and depth about their struggles and efforts to understand what they feel and how



to express it. One of my favorite examples of the impact of the class occurred at the last class graduation. Prior to that graduation and throughout that class, there was a father who was just not getting the nurturing con-

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Ohio Practitioners' Network
for Fathers and Families

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JOIN US! And be part of a growing network of nearly 700 fatherhood advocates & practitioners.

**Membership in OPNFF is FREE: Join Online Today
www.opnff.net**

Let's Connect the Dots!

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The focus of the OPNFF Board, 650 members, and stakeholders will be to create new systems of networking among sister organizations to accelerate the fulfillment of our awesome missions. We have created the following Task Forces:

Task Force

Administrative
Resource
Policy
Advocacy/Network
Training/Education
Public Relations

Chair or Co-Chair

Steve Killpack and Rev. Brian Moore
Terry Miller
Scott Neely
Calvin Williams and Dr. Brian Moore
Muqit Sabur and Michelle Robinson
Eli Williams

In the next OPNFF Newsletter the goals of each Task Force will be listed. We will invite members to join the Task Force that best suits their expertise and interest.

On Father's Day 2008 President Barack Obama said, "Life doesn't count for much unless you're willing to do your small part to leave our children, all of our children, a better world – even if it's difficult – even if the work seems great – even if we don't get very far in our lifetime." Let's commit to this challenge and connect the dots and together create a world of wholesome families.

Members of the Board of OPNFF can be contacted at info@opnff.net

"Keeping it REAL"

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cept. He would take up lots of class time seemingly challenging the nurturing parenting style and concepts, making for some challenging facilitation. At one point, holding up the class, he asked me point blank, "Mr. Calvin, do you use this stuff with your son?" "Absolutely" I replied and went on to describe how well things go in our relationship. Still not convinced, he sank back in his chair and begrudgingly allowed the class to continue. At the graduation and after the ceremony ended, a woman with three children came up to me and asked if I was Mr. Williams. Responding affirmatively, she proceeded to give me a good strong hug and introduced herself as the wife of the class participant. She went on to say, "You have no idea how much this class has changed him. The whole family notices

his change. Thank you so much". Wow. Instead of the father not getting the nurturing concepts, he was working out within himself his change to that way of parenting and then going home and practicing. Not surprisingly, the fathers who take advantage of the class and are engaged and working with their Life Coach have the strongest outcomes.

Lighthouse REAL Dads operates within the whole of the fatherhood effort in Ohio. Our work serves the development and progress being made in public systems that engage non-custodial fathers and we are committed to developing best practices in that regard. We know that serving fathers in the Hamilton County Child Support system is good for the fathers; the mothers of their children and of course the children themselves. More anecdotal or instinctive is our knowledge that we are saving taxpayers significant amounts of money. The cost to continually incarcerate

and re-incarcerate men for an inability to pay support is simply not smart and doesn't yield a lot of needed support to children and families. Add in some of the attendant costs associated with incarceration, such as the process of arrest and time in court, and then factor the costs to the incarcerated father, such as losing a job, a car, a drivers license and place to live. You can see how the cycle gets going. You or I would be hard pressed to completely start all over again two or three times per year. This public-private partnership between Lighthouse Youth Services and Hamilton County CSEA is an emerging best practice that is proving we can be smarter about helping children get the love, support and resources from their fathers even when the father is not in the home.

For more information about the REAL Dads program, contact Calvin Williams at Lighthouse Youth Services, 513.891.3347 x 120

The mission of the Ohio Practitioners' Network for Fathers and Families is to enhance the outcomes of children, families and communities by providing information, training and encouragement to father and family-serving practitioners.