Father Involvement to Strengthen Families Through WIC

The Challenge: Positive father involvement has a protective capacity and is linked to a child’s self-esteem as well as reductions in poverty, health, emotional and behavioral problems; incarceration; high school drop-out rates; teenage pregnancy and substance abuse. For unmarried couples, father involvement is strong during pregnancy but begins to decline after the baby’s birth. It is important that researchers and practitioners begin to understand what barriers might contribute to this decline by speaking with fathers and use this information to develop interventions that promote father involvement.

Project Goal: The Racine Kenosha Community Action Agency (RKCAA) wanted to develop an action plan for increasing fathers’ involvement in their pregnant partners’ and young children’s lives. The project sought to gain a better understanding of fathers’ needs and strategies for engaging them, mapping out community resources and developing a father involvement program model. RKCAA operates the supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) in Kenosha and worked with new and expectant fathers visiting the WIC office.

Results: With the assistance of WIC staff, the research team surveyed 171 men and conducted two focus groups to better understand the needs of fathers. RKCAA staff also developed an asset map of local resources to support fathers. Using this information, the project team piloted strategies to involve fathers in cooking sessions and include fathers in programming activities throughout the year. There was no formal method of documenting father participation in WIC appointments and other activities. The project team successfully worked with the state WIC office to amend the state tracking system, ROSIE. This change has created an opportunity for the Kenosha WIC office to track and analyze data on father involvement.

The project team developed a comprehensive Father Information Program Model. This model suggests a two-pronged approach for engaging fathers: (1) increase involvement in WIC-related activities by fathers (and other important male figures such as stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, etc.), and (2) link fathers to additional programming and support services (for example, providing wraparound services, developing a stronger referral system and implementing the evidence-based Nurturing Fathers Program).

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