



Fatherhood White Paper

Background

Children growing up in fatherless homes face significant challenges, this is true in North Carolina and mirrors the national trend. The absence of a father figure is associated with a range of adverse outcomes. Children in father-absent homes are nearly four times more likely to live in poverty and experience emotional and behavioral problems, such as aggression and low self-esteem. These children are also at higher risk of dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, and engaging in criminal activity. Additionally, the absence of a father in the home often leads to strained family dynamics, making it harder for children to form stable relationships in adulthood.

In Richard Reeves' book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It* explores the unique challenges boys and men are facing in the modern world. In the chapter on Fatherhood and Family Life in *Of Boys and Men*, Richard Reeves delves into The Importance of Fathers: Reeves argues that boys benefit immensely from having a father or father figure present in their lives. Fathers often serve as role models, guiding boys in developing emotional regulation, discipline, and social behavior. He notes that boys raised without their fathers are statistically more likely to face academic, social, and emotional challenges.

Family Structure and Policy: Reeves critiques how modern family policies often overlook the importance of fatherhood. He advocates for reforms that make it easier for fathers to stay involved in their children's lives, even in cases of separation or divorce. This includes policies that promote joint custody arrangements and encourage greater work-life balance for fathers, allowing them to be more present at home.

Each year, The Children's Alliance explores public policy issues to focus on. This year we decided to investigate fatherhood. We have spent significant hours researching and identifying issues related to fatherhood, including the impact of absent fathers in homes, bias of courts against fathers, and other challenges fathers and vulnerable families have. A subcommittee was established to do this work.

We identified three goals:

- Know what available programs and services are in Mecklenburg County
- Look for collaboration & education opportunities in terms of programs and services
- Explore opportunities for public policy work – county, state, and even federal issues that impact fatherhood.

We also agreed that we should make recommendations to the full Children's Alliance Membership as determined to be appropriate.

Non-Residential v Non-Interactive

The terms “non-residential father” and “non-interactive father” describe different aspects of a father’s involvement in a child’s life:

Non-Residential Father - A non-residential father is a father who does not live with his child or children. This typically occurs when parents are separated, divorced, or were never cohabiting to begin with.

Non-Interactive Father - A non-interactive father refers to a father who has little to no involvement or interaction with his child, regardless of his living situation.

Key Differences:

- **Residential Status vs. Emotional Engagement:** The term “non-residential” relates to where the father lives, whereas “non-interactive” refers to how much a father engages with the child emotionally, intellectually, or socially.
- **Contact with the Child:** A non-residential father can still be highly involved, whereas a non-interactive father is largely absent from the child’s life in terms of meaningful communication and support.

Mecklenburg County Research

A big focus for the committee was researching available programs in our county that are doing work to support fatherhood.

Economic Mobility

There is a community prioritizing advocating for fatherhood. Family Stability was identified by the Leading on Opportunities Task Force as one of the important pillars of Economic Mobility. Leading on Opportunity in Mecklenburg County highlights the importance of family stability in promoting upward mobility and positive outcomes for children.

According to their research, children thrive in stable, secure households, which is key to academic and social success. Family instability, often exacerbated by poverty, can lead to difficult choices for caregivers, affecting their ability to provide consistent support and impacting children’s well-being.

A significant pillar of economic mobility includes supporting two-parent families and promoting father involvement. Leading on Opportunity recognizes the critical role that committed, engaged fathers play in creating stable family environments. They emphasize that maintaining strong family units and improving access to mental health, housing, and income stability services are essential to breaking cycles of poverty and improving economic mobility. As an important pillar of support, Leading on Opportunity encourages organizations working with fragile families in our community to invest effort and funding in family support.

DETERMINANT THREE: CHILD AND FAMILY STABILITY

STRATEGY	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION TACTICS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS	CRITICAL PARTNERS*
Strategy L: Encourage the formation and maintenance of committed two-parent families.	L1. Promote marriage, which research shows is the most reliable route to mobility, recognizing it may not be the choice of all couples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop culturally appropriate communications and data-rich messaging strategies to increase awareness of the value of marriage, committed relationships, co-parenting and the potential challenges and related stressors in raising children. • Study, adopt, and implement evidence-based programs that effectively encourage people to be part of committed relationships when considering parenthood. 	Faith Community, Community-Based Organizations, Mecklenburg County DSS
	L2. Advocate for the active involvement of fathers in the lives of their children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand access to evidence-based and informed programs that support responsible fatherhood. • Investigate and, where desirable, advocate for the removal of barriers and restrictions to father's involvement in their child's life due to state and local child support policies and practices and with entitlement and housing programs. 	

Note that in 2014, 62% of children lived in a household with two married parents, 7% were not married, and 26% had only one parent.

Youth in Detention

A significant portion of youth in detention come from fatherless homes, though exact percentages can vary depending on the study or region. However, various sources suggest that a high percentage—often cited around 70% to 85%—of youth in detention or those involved with the juvenile justice system come from homes without a father or father figure.

For instance, a report by the National Fatherhood Initiative in the U.S. indicated that approximately 85% of youths in prison grew up in a fatherless home. Other studies also show a strong correlation between father absence and a higher likelihood of involvement in crime, including juvenile delinquency.

Mecklenburg County Fatherhood Advocates & Programs

In addition, the subcommittee talked to the following individuals in Mecklenburg:

Life Connections – Glenn Smith

In 1998, Glenn M. Smith, founder and CEO of Life Connections of the Carolinas, Inc., partnered with the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office to create a Re-Entry program that has provided services to thousands of incarcerated individuals. The Life Connections Re-Entry Program is presently the longest-running and largest provider of life skills instruction with the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office.

The original life skills curriculums were created to provide research-based instruction to improve recidivism and personal development of incarcerated individuals. They presently offer over 15 different courses, including a course that focuses on parent skill building. This course gives incarcerated fathers the skills they need to become effective parents and the confidence to stay connected in their children's lives.

In 2022, the parenting program was expanded to a virtual platform where incarcerated fathers could visually connect and participate with the mothers of their children with their biological and any other children in their household. Classes were held over six weeks,

during which the family could work together to improve communication, conflict resolution, make agreements to household procedures, and develop principles that they would commit to living by. Graduates of the program were then granted a face-to-face visit, which included a meal, awarding of certificates, and delivering presentations from what they had learned.

More recently this fatherhood program has expanded to include Forensic Peer Support Specialists being available for when individuals come back to the community to assist in the transition back to the workplace and their family. If the recently released parent is not entering the household the Peer Support Specialists will be ready to advocate that father, and their children are provided with ample opportunities to connect.

Chablis Dandridge, Local Advocate and Author of Letters to My Sons

Chablis Dandridge has been a consumer of social/human services all his life from the justice system to the mental health system and every system in between. Chablis received his college degree while serving a 13-year prison sentence and paralegal certification, and he learned to speak Spanish fluently during that time. Today, he focuses on reform advocacy and community outreach work and has authored several books, including “A Letter to My Sons, Leaving A Legacy of Love.” He devotes part of his professional attention to providing transitional housing for individuals returning to the community from incarceration. He speaks publicly on human rights and social justice issues and is a tireless champion for recidivism reduction initiatives and youth intervention programs. He is a huge proponent of Forensic Peer Support and is committed to devoting the rest of his life to ensuring that the profession is recognized and employed nationally and internationally.

Letters to My Sons by Chablis Dandridge is a heartfelt and reflective collection of letters written by a father to his son. The book covers a range of important life lessons, values, and guidance that the father wishes to impart to his son as he grows and navigates through the challenges of life. Some of the key themes include: The Importance of Integrity and Character, Resilience and Overcoming Challenges, Personal Growth and Self-Reflection, Relationships and Love and Spirituality and Faith.

The book is deeply personal, written in a nurturing and caring tone, aiming to provide long-lasting wisdom that the son can carry with him throughout his life. It reflects universal values that are relevant to all individuals, regardless of the specific challenges they may face.

Mental Health, Child Support & Fathers – Kelly R. Little, Urban Institute for Families/Fatherhood expert and Founder/CEO

Kelly Little’s diverse background includes consulting with at-risk youth, empowering fathers, educating mothers, collaborating with practitioners, and laser-focused commitment to transformational service delivery for children and families. He worked 20+ years with Mecklenburg County Government working with the RISE Program, Area Mental Health, and Child Support Services Department.

Kelly R. Little, founder and CEO of the Urban Institute of Strengthening Families, is a renowned author, fatherhood expert, and emotional intelligence change agent. Committed

to elevating humanity, he is a nationally recognized fatherhood leader, who also specializes in executive coaching, youth programming, and emotional wellness. Kelly's transformative work in shifting perceptions of Child Support Services has garnered nationwide recognition. A certified professional mindfulness teacher, executive coach, and fatherhood expert, He holds an MBA and a Master of Science and Leadership from Pfeiffer University. His passion lies in empowering fathers and fostering healthy connections between young people and mature men to restore to communities.

Child Support

- Child support can be a combative environment between two parents, who both are dealing with emotions and grief. When you put people in unreasonable situations they have unreasonable reactions.
- Child support case workers are overwhelmed as they have a very demanding job. It is one of the most arduous and demanding jobs. It can be very difficult which results in turnover. It takes years to be good at this job, and when skilled workers leave or retire the company loses institutional knowledge. Fathers and Families lose in the end.
- NC has a debt compromise situation that requires them to pay for 24 months before they can get relief. This is an old policy that will take time to correct. They have made significant progress on working with fatherhood programs to create balance in the state of NC. As they have changed their name from Child Support Enforcement to Child Support Services.
- NC Child Support has proactively used the Federal Waiver to support Fatherhood since 2010 and has been a national champion of the work.
- Second-chance citizens have difficulty getting jobs, so there because a challenge with access to visitation because of the inability to pay child support.
- There are no policies for unmarried and courts feel biased toward mothers.
- Many fathers are not in a financial place where they can hire a lawyer.

Kelly created The Urban Institute for Strengthening Families in 2016. The Urban Institute for Strengthening Families works with boys and men, helping them to develop into productive citizens by empowering them through healing, emotional intelligence, and service work that connects them intimately to communities that need them.

“No single factor is more important in the life of a child than the love and support of caring, committed adults.” –My Brother’s Keeper Task Force Report to the President

- When Fathers are engaged and involved with children their impact is positive for children. Research confirms that when Fathers are not emotionally engaged with their children there is a traumatic impact on children. Engagement is emotional and financial (Presence is Critical)
- Parents need a space for healing – not just children
- Generational trauma can become generational blessings. Struggles can become opportunities if we intentionally create space for that opportunity.

Educational Opportunities

Little has consulted and worked with both Dr. Shears and Dr. Herring who are local professors of Social Work (UNCC and JCSU) who are champions of strengthening families that value fatherhood and its impacts, especially in communities of color. From our conversations and engagement, we heard about the following variables:

Strengthening Families

Dr. Jeffrey Shears, School of Social Work UNC-C; Dr. Joshua Kirven, Family Advocate

Making Organizations Father Friendly

Every child has a father. It is important for men to see the importance of the unique gifts and contributions in the life of a child. Often society sees fathers only as providers. We need to shift the narrow focus of monetary impact and embrace the benefits of consistent involvement.

- Currently the system is configured to help moms and moms-to-be. Services are available for mothers, However, there are many barriers and often very few services for men (Housing, Shelters, Financial Support).
- A father can be non-resident but highly involved, the term does not capture the impact of the men who are assets to children and communities.
- We must encourage maintaining a strong co-parenting relationship with the mother, despite not living with the child. Conversely, a father can be residential but non-interactive, offering little in terms of emotional support or day-to-day involvement-which causes significant trauma.
- Society has classified responsible fatherhood to financial component and negated the importance of presence.
- Challenge organizations to create a father-friendly checklist for their agency to identify opportunities for growth. We must understand that people's experience with their own father may impact how they treat the fathers who they serve.

How Do We Make Agencies More Father Friendly?

Making non-profit agencies more "father-friendly" involves creating an environment that encourages and supports the engagement of fathers, recognizing their unique roles in families and communities. Here are several strategies to enhance father inclusivity in non-profit services:

1. Create a Welcoming Environment

- **Inclusive Language:** Use materials, signage, and communication that specifically mention fathers, not just "parents" or "caregivers," to show that fathers are explicitly welcome.
- **Visual Representation:** Ensure that marketing materials, posters, and brochures include images of fathers interacting with their children, especially in diverse cultural contexts.

- Train Staff: Educate staff on the importance of father involvement and eliminate any biases that might assume mothers are the primary caregivers. Sensitivity training can help staff engage fathers respectfully and equally.

2. Offer Flexible Services for Fathers

- Flexible Hours: Schedule programs or services during times when fathers, especially those who work full-time, can attend (e.g., evenings, weekends).
- Father-Specific Programs: Design programs tailored specifically to fathers, addressing their unique challenges and roles, such as parenting skills, legal rights, mental health support, and employment assistance.
- Partner with Father-Focused Organizations: Collaborate with organizations that specifically target fathers (e.g., fatherhood initiatives) to broaden outreach and better serve dads.

3. Create Father-Friendly Policies

- Promote Equal Parenting: Advocate for equal parental involvement by encouraging co-parenting in programs or advocating for policy changes that provide fathers with the same parental leave and rights as mothers.
- Offer Co-Parenting Support: Provide programs that help fathers and mothers work together, even if separated or divorced, to raise their children in a supportive environment.
- Legal and Child Support Guidance: Offer support or referral services for fathers navigating child support, custody, or family law issues to help them remain engaged in their children's lives.

Changing Societies Norms for Black Fathers

The myths of the Black father have been perpetuated for years. Various studies and reports have repeatedly told us that Black fathers are overwhelmingly absent from their children's lives.

However, while these numbers are nothing to ignore, they contribute to a damaging narrative about black men and negate the achievements of the number of black men who play an active role in their children's lives.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently published new data on the role that black Fathers play in parenting their children. Although 70% of black children are born to unwed parents. The study defies stereotypes about Black fatherhood, finding that black dads are more involved with their kids daily than dads from other racial groups.

Overrepresentation in System

There is an overrepresentation of black men in the Juvenile Justice system and the child welfare systems. Despite a variety of focused interventions at the State and Federal levels, this continues to be a very troubling systemic concern.

Public Policy Opportunity – Support Shared Parenting

22 million parents can't see their children as a result of parental separation or divorce.

Custody- Gregory Hunt, Esq

We began with a conversation with family lawyer Gregory Hunt to learn about how custody works. We wanted to get a snapshot of what happens in family court around divorce. Learn about the “normal” process.

Hunt walked us through the Family Court process as it has to do with custody cases: Divorce, domestic violence, child custody. Hunt represents both moms and dads.

Dads very often give deference to moms. They inadvertently establish that as a status quo. When they leave the house and leave kids with mom.

Mecklenburg County courts are more interested in the child and less interested in the parents' stories. As part of our inquiry, we met with (then) Chief District Court Judge Elizabeth Trosch to gain her perspective. Judges are looking for stability to see who is involved. Judges want to know the reasons the parents are having difficulty working together. In cases where the relationship has soured, it could be due to infidelity or money. Very often, this distrust influences parents' motivation in custody. (This excludes cases with domestic violence.)

Hunt's Advice - Five Things Dads Can Do:

1. Pay your child support. If none is ordered, pay something. Don't get hung up on what it is being spent on. Do not dictate what it is spent on. That is seen by the judge to be controlling.
2. In the beginning – lay out expectations of what custody is upfront in a clear text or email.
3. When you are communicating to the other parent, communicate like you are talking to the judge. An email about your child is not a place for vulgarity.
4. When engaging with your child, leave any “new love” out of it.
5. Remember you are a parent, too. You don't have to defer to the other parent. Do not use your work schedule as an excuse not to do things. Remember the other parent is likely adjusting the schedule to be at the doctors/education appointment. If you are a true co-parent, then so should you.

Lawyer vs No Lawyer

You do not have to have a lawyer in custody proceedings. If you take a no lawyer track it is called Pro Se. Pro se is a Latin term that means "for oneself" or "on one's own behalf". It refers to the practice of representing oneself in a court of law, without the assistance of a lawyer.

All judges are different. Some judges will not hold technical, procedural or paperwork errors against the parents.

Very often a client will want to share their narrative. Some judges will allow it. A lawyer can listen to their client's narrative and help determine issues that need to be brought before the judge and shared in detail.

Domestic Violence/ Child Abuse

Part of the custody process may involve allegations of domestic violence (dv) and/or child abuse.

Domestic violence is the pattern of intentionally using violent and/or controlling behaviors to gain power and control over a family member or dating partner. This behavior can take place during the relationship or after the relationship has ended. There are several forms this type of violence can take: physical, sexual, psychological, financial, and misuse/manipulation of systems to name a few. Currently, our statute focuses primarily on the physical, sexual, and psychological forms of domestic violence.

Chapter 50B of the North Carolina General Statutes provides domestic violence relief in the form of a protective order. N.C.G.S. §50B-1 requires someone seeking protection to show at least one of the following was done to them as a result of a personal relationship:

1. Actual or attempted physical injury
2. Fear of imminent serious bodily injury or continued harassment as it is defined in G.S. 14-277.3A causing substantial emotional distress
3. Sexual assault

Oftentimes, the Court is asked to make child custody determinations where domestic violence is or has been present.

Contrary to popular belief, an offending parent will not automatically be denied custody or visitation of a shared child. This is unless the offending parent is criminally convicted of certain forms of domestic violence related to sexual assault. Parents with a history of domestic violence are often required to continue interacting on some level with each other as well as the child in order to facilitate a custody arrangement and some form of co-parenting or parallel parenting.

Child Abuse – This goes straight to CMPD, DSS and Pat’s Place. For physical, photo evidence can be presented. Mental Health providers are also part of the intervention process on situations where that is called for.

Defacto Presumed Shared Parenting

The legal term de facto (Latin for “in fact” or “in practice”) refers to situations, relationships, or states of affairs that exist in reality, even if they are not formally recognized by law. It is often used to describe circumstances that function in a certain way without formal legal recognition or status.

According to Judge E. Trosch, Mecklenburg County Judges start at a defacto 50/50. If there is any bias that is seen it is that mom’s lose jobs less frequently and judges seem to lean more toward keeping children on mom’s insurance.

We also spent time talking to a father – Dann Gwyn, who fought for custody in both New Hanover and Mecklenburg County about his experience. He had a mixed experience and had no significant barriers in custody or in gaining legal representation. He now is a volunteer working with the National Parent Organization (NPO) to ensure all parents have the opportunity for equal parenting time.

Last year grandson Ben turned 30, but we were not together to wish our Earth Day boy a happy special birthday. He never answered my calls and texts. In his honor, I decided to donate money to Trees Charlotte to help plant trees all over our lovely city. Now Ben's name is engraved on a metal leaf in Freedom Park's Memorial Garden. But will he ever see it?

Meanwhile, I carry Yetta and Morris on my finger—and all our grandchildren in my heart.

Now I live at The Cypress of Charlotte, a retirement community for seniors, and enjoy other grandparents' grandchildren when they visit. I pray Ben will come someday. I'll give him a huge hug, a kiss, and Yetta's diamond.

Exert – *Yetta's Diamond*, by Shelia Peltzer

North Carolina's Battle for Shared Parenting

National Parent Organization (NPO):

The first state to pass a shared parenting presumption law was Kentucky in 2018. Kentucky's law presumes joint legal custody and equal physical custody for temporary and final court orders. However, a preponderance of evidence can rebut this presumption, and domestic violence and child abuse cases are an exception.

These laws are overwhelmingly popular and have resulted in fewer contested divorces, fewer cases of domestic violence, and better lives for Kentucky's children. Since NPO's groundbreaking work in Kentucky, NPO has helped get strong equal shared parenting laws enacted in other states: Arkansas (2021), West Virginia (2022), Florida (2023), Missouri (2023), and New Hampshire (2024).

North Carolina	Grade	Positives	Negatives
North Carolina Child Support Guidelines	D-	<p>North Carolina's PTA appropriately takes into account the effect of the PTA on both parents' households.</p> <p>North Carolina's PTA appropriately results in no presumptive child support transfer payment when parental income and parenting time are both equal.</p>	<p>North Carolina's PTA has an extraordinarily and unjustifiably high threshold of 123 days.</p> <p>North Carolina's PTA has an extremely large discontinuity (or discontinuities), creating an extremely large cliff effect or multiple cliff effects.</p> <p>North Carolina's PTA significantly overestimates the fixed, duplicated costs involved in shared parenting.</p>

(Above: In the first of its kind study, NPO has examined in detail the child support guidelines of each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, grading them on the degree to which they encourage or discourage shared parenting. In particular, the 2022 NPO Child Support and Shared Parenting Report Card evaluates the states on their parenting time adjustment (PTA), sometimes called a 'parenting time offset' or a 'residential time credit'. This is a mechanism by which child support guidelines allocate resources for rearing children between the children's two homes.)

NC has had several efforts to pass legislation in conjunction with National Parents Organization (Matt Hale). Ashley Nicole-Russell an attorney in the Eastern part of the state has spearheaded this in the past. Hurdles have been no support from the Family Law lobbyist and even some advocates. Our subcommittee met with both Hale and Nicole-Russell to gain their perspectives.

NPO has been supporting these efforts in North Carolina. Often there are concerns about the appropriateness of shared parenting arrangements for young children and for cases where there is ongoing conflict between the parents. There is sound research to support the conclusion that shared parenting benefits children in both of these situations. And we have some compelling research indicating that presumptions of shared parenting, far from putting potential victims of intimate partner violence at risk, actually decrease the incidence of such violence.

We can also put divorce professionals in contact with peers (judges with judges, attorneys with attorneys, etc.) in states that have established shared parenting presumptions to address concerns they might have about establishing shared parenting presumptions.

Opposition In North Carolina

Opposition over the years from our NC Family Law Council, from Rep. Sarah Stevens (a family lawyer who may next take Speaker Tim Moore's place), & from the domestic Violence (DV) community. We believe our next bill should be titled "PRESUMED SHARED PARENTING, REBUTTABLE IF PREPONDERANCE OF EVIDENCE OF ABUSE OR NEGLECT."

We convened a meeting with local advocates in Mecklenburg County and with leading Shared Parenting Attorney advocate Ashley Nicole-Russell. The gap against this law is closing. The last sticking point is the important language is surrounding domestic violence and child abuse – preponderance of evidence versus beyond a reasonable doubt. Experts believe this allows for decisions in the best interest of the child.

Summary

For over a year the Fatherhood committee explored the challenges and impacts of father absence, particularly in Mecklenburg County. Fathers play a critical role in promoting children's emotional, social, and academic well-being. Many conversations highlighted the correlation between fatherlessness and issues like poverty, juvenile delinquency, and family instability. We spoke to many local experts who advocate for policies supporting father involvement, such as shared parenting laws and accessible resources for non-custodial fathers. We learned about community programs and leaders promoting fatherhood, such as Life Connections and the Urban Institute for Strengthening Families. We spoke to advocates who challenged us make agencies more "father-friendly" by addressing systemic biases and enhancing support services.

Recommendations to Children's Alliance Members:

1. This subcommittee recommends that this report be shared with the entire Children's Alliance Membership and to recommend that each agency in our network examine its current practices and policies to determine how "father-friendly" the agency is. After 60 days of the White Papers release, we will have a check-in for our members to discuss results or changes.
2. The next step in creating a "father-friendly" agency is to examine bias staff may have toward fathers. It is important to have constant conversations about the role of fathers in children's life. These bias like other bias that may influence decisions made.
3. It is likely that during the next long session of the NC General Assembly that a "shared parenting" bill could be introduced. How far this bill might proceed through committees and the overall legislative process is uncertain. That said, we are recommending that once the bill is introduced, The Children's Alliance carefully examine the bill to determine if previously identified concerns have been properly addressed. If so, the full membership determines whether a formal endorsement is appropriate.
4. If appropriate, create a summary page of this whitepaper and make this a resource to members.

The Fatherhood Subcommittee:

Contributing Members/Agencies:

Glenn Smith, Life Connections of the Carolinas; Sheila Peltzer, KN2P; George Metz, Freedom School Partners; Carrie Christian, Families Forward Charlotte, Jenny Harbin, The Children's Alliance; and Frank Crawford, The Children's Alliance

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