

Testimony of Joseph T. Jones  
President and Chief Executive Officer

Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development  
Baltimore, Maryland

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Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development  
3002 Druid Park Drive  
Baltimore, Maryland 21215  
ph: 410.367.5691  
fax: 410.367.4246

e-mail: [jjones@cfwd.org](mailto:jjones@cfwd.org)  
[www.cfwd.org](http://www.cfwd.org)

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. My name is Joe Jones. I am President and CEO for the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (CFWD) a community based nonprofit organization established in 1999 that provides workforce development, responsible fatherhood and family services to the residents of Baltimore City. I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the staff of my organization and most importantly our program participants.

Ten years ago, when I began to work with low-income fathers there was little research and literature available on responsible fatherhood and the impact of father absence on children and families. The growth of the responsible fatherhood field is illustrated in that today we have an organization such as the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) that serves as a repository for information on fathering and its impact on children, families and communities.

During that time national foundations began to invest in research, policy and practices for this new social science field. This investment was made with the expectation that public funding streams would emerge to support the field. However, this has not become a reality and most foundations have disinvested from this work, the most notable exception is the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The need for organizations that promoted and worked toward achieving responsible fatherhood was met by organizations such as the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), the National Center on Fathering (NCF), the National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL), Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization (IRF) and NCOFF.

I began my work with low-income fathers and their families in 1993 as an Addictions Counselor for a small infant mortality reduction program that operated within the Baltimore City Health Department. This initiative eventually became Baltimore City Healthy Start. At that time I provided services to 35 substance abusing pregnant women. My responsibilities included:

- 1) Getting them into early and consistent prenatal care and drug treatment and
- 2) Helping them manage issues that would affect the development of the fetus.

My work required that I meet these women where they were. This meant that I went to their homes, prenatal clinics, drug houses and other places that they frequented.

This outreach, particularly to their homes, led to my meeting many of the fathers of the babies who would be born to these women. What became clear was that the women and their partners struggled with the same issues. But there were few if any resources in the community to work with these expectant fathers. This reality led to the creation of the Men's Services Program.

I created Men's Services because too many children lived in situations that would almost certainly dictate that they would repeat the cycle of broken families and poverty as did

their fathers. I was able to convince the leadership of Baltimore Healthy Start of the importance of services for low-income fathers. As a result Men's Services was included as a part of a broader strategy to reduce infant mortality.

This time period coincided with the development of the "modern day" era of the responsible fatherhood movement. During this time period organizations and programs such as the NFI, NPCL, and NCOFF emerged. The efforts of these organizations built upon the existing foundation built by NCF and IRF.

I created CFWD to expand and enhance the work I began with Baltimore City Healthy Start. CFWD provides support services to fathers, family services to couples to benefit their children and workforce development services to both men and women throughout Baltimore City. **Additionally, to support the programmatic work of the organization we have developed the Men's Services Father's Journal, 50/50 Parenting and Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families curricula.**

Responsible fatherhood and healthy marriages are not either or propositions. They are complimentary to each other. Men who understand and are able to fulfill their roles as fathers will also be able to be good partners. However, my experience is that many of the men we serve have a strong desire to be good fathers and good partners. But, simply, don't know how. Many of these men have never had an example of fathering having been reared in homes without fathers. And have essentially learned to be men and fathers on their own. This happens in communities where all too often involvement in drugs, alcohol, violence, incarceration and FATHERING CHILDREN out of wedlock determine manhood.

The lack of father involvement not only impacts a man's ability to establish a meaningful relationship with a woman and provide for a family but also affects his ability to be an effective parent.

The services provided by responsible fatherhood programs can reduce the barriers that prevent men from becoming role models for their children, valuable employees, taxpayers and husbands or responsible co-parents.

The field of responsible fatherhood has responded to and grappled with a number of challenges in its mission to help children, including the following.

**Public Awareness:** NFI has been instrumental in resolving this issue. It has heightened the importance of fatherhood and the impact of father absence on our nation.

**Child Support:** As the result of NPCL's Peer Learning College and other efforts child support and responsible fatherhood programs created the framework to pursue mutually beneficial relationships. Child Support Commissioner, Sherry Heller, in her speech at the National Child Support Enforcement Associations Mid-Year Policy Forum underscored the distinction between deadbeat and deadbroke fathers and reiterated her dedication to continue working on behalf of low-income dads.

**Domestic Violence:** As a result of the work of Dr. Ronald B. Mincy former Senior Program Officer at the Ford Foundation a working group of fatherhood practitioners, domestic violence professionals and public policy advocates was

convened. An outcome of this work has been the mentoring of CFWD by Dr. Oliver Williams of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African-American Community, Jody Rafael of DePaul University and Anne Manard of the Domestic Violence Resource Network on the issue of domestic violence. This mentorship provided CFWD with the capacity to partner with a the House of Ruth Maryland, a Baltimore-based domestic violence organization.

All of these challenges have been confronted without significant public financial support.

The field of responsible fatherhood recognizes that the institution of marriage is an important and central component to promoting the well being of children. However, the field has not had the resources to take on this issue en masse. It is my firm belief that the field of responsible fatherhood can rise to meet this challenge, but there must be a bridge, between the fields of marriage and responsible fatherhood. We need to establish common ground to create a level of understanding, communication and respect.

Common ground between the two disciplines is only a start to building strong families through either marriage or co-parenting. However, there must be systems, structures and most importantly outreach and services that prepare low-income men to be providers and nurturers. And if a man and woman agree, husbands.

In my opinion there are a number of factors that contribute to a healthy marriage. They are:

- 1) Work that provides you with a sense of pride and purpose;
- 2) Freedom from the demons of alcohol and drugs;
- 3) Ability to communicate and respect your partner; and
- 4) A community that values marriage.

Unfortunately, for many men served by responsible fatherhood organizations the social welfare system does not recognize nor provide access to the type of services that would strengthen them to be partners in healthy marriages and relationships.

Fortunately, the field of responsible fatherhood and its programs has served as a viable resource for men who often have no other place to turn.

Prior to the emergence of the national debate on marriage CFWD recognized that unlike **mainstream** parents, low-income moms and dads don't have access to the resources that will help them overcome the challenges that occur within their relationships. There are no resources that could assist them to communicate, negotiate, compromise and decide how they will jointly raise their children. For this reason 50/50 Parenting was created. We expanded upon those concepts with the development of the Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families curriculum. This is important because even parents who are no longer in a romantic relationship could benefit from relationship and marriage services, because ultimately they will end up with new partners.

Simply put, from my experience many single female-headed households were evolved because the parents gave up. I firmly believe that if they possessed the skills to manage their relationships, had access to meaningful employment, the ability to manage stress and additional supports to manage their lives their relationships could succeed for a

period of time. Some would choose to marry and some would work cooperatively to raise their children, though they may no longer be romantically linked.

As an organization we were forced to figure out how to respond to the issue of marriage. When one of our families invited me their home and indicated that they not only wanted to get married, but wanted get married at our facility. We were totally unprepared for this request. I sat with this family, who I had known for some time. I thought about the challenges they had overcome; addiction, \$ 30,000 in child support arrearages, six children between them, and living in public housing with very little income.

That night sitting in their living room, I asked God to help me give them a response that was respectful of the relationship we had developed and honest to their life situation. With divine guidance I told them that if they met with a member of the faith community of their choosing, received premarital counseling and that if that faith leader called me to affirm their potential as a married couple. I would consider their request.

This family took me up on my offer. Forced to keep my word, we arranged to transform our training room into a wedding chapel. I am pleased to introduce you to that family, Dwayne and Brenda Grimes.

Also, we have Dominic Walker, Charice Diggs and their infant son Zion. Dominick and Charice represent a couple who are committed to their young family and who are considered to be in the midst of the magic moment. The magic moment is considered by researchers and policy makers to be the optimal time to build strong families. Dominick and Charice have recently graduated from our 50/50 Parenting Program and they look forward to building a bright future together, overcoming the social and economic challenges to their new family.

To get fragile families to the point where they were able to consider marriage takes tremendous effort on their part and lots of support. But for so many challenged families there is no Men's Services Program and CFWD to guide them on their journey to family formation. This is a challenge we must overcome if low-income families are to consider marriage.

To effectively design and implement public policy that promotes healthy marriages and has the potential to create stable households where children can grow and thrive, we must create systems that are prepared to accept these parents where they are. The spirit of this concept is embodied in the bipartisan approach taken by leaders such as Senators Santorum and Bayh.

I wish I could tell you that the traditional way of marriage, where people marry and have children is the norm in my community, but that simply is not the case. But that doesn't mean that a strategy to promote healthy marriages is not applicable to their situations. These families must be met where they are: living in challenged communities struggling to meet the demands of family formation.

My organization has accepted this challenge. However, let me be clear as it exists today the responsible fatherhood field does not have the infrastructure or resources to absorb the number of families who could benefit from such a partnership. However, we must identify areas of common ground. There's too much at stake. This doesn't mean that we have to agree on every single point, but we must build upon our well-intentioned

positions. Also, there are many stakeholders who have a role in our work, including our partners in the child support, healthy marriage and domestic violence communities.