

USING TANF FUNDS TO SUPPORT FATHERS

AN NRFC SPOTLIGHT ON THE OHIO COMMISSION ON FATHERHOOD¹

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program was created in 1996 as part of a broader welfare reform effort to promote work, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility among welfare recipients while giving states more autonomy in designing and administering their welfare programs. Part of this reform involved a greater focus on fathers and enforcing child support obligations. States were required to implement measures to ensure that non-custodial parents, usually fathers, fulfill their financial responsibilities to their children. Since then, however, child support policies have evolved to recognize that supporting children involves more than just financial contributions. Many states have expanded their traditional approach of focusing solely on financial responsibilities and are encompassing various aspects of parental involvement and support for children's well-being into their programs.

The TANF block grant's overall purpose is to "increase the flexibility of states" to meet four statutory goals.² Each of these goals can arguably be best achieved when fathers are involved, so TANF funding provides an excellent opportunity for states to find ways to strengthen and support priorities, programs, and services that advance the work of responsible fatherhood. The latter two goals speak most directly to fatherhood-related services:



PROVIDE ASSISTANCE

to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives



END DEPENDENCE

of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage



PREVENT AND REDUCE

the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies



ENCOURAGE THE FORMATION

and maintenance of two-parent families

All states may choose to allocate a portion of their TANF dollars to support fatherhood work. In addition to serving TANF recipients, states can also decide to set aside some of their TANF funding for services that support fathers. However, despite this funding opportunity, very few states have taken advantage of it. There may be many reasons for this. States may have other priorities for the use of their TANF dollars, decision makers may not be aware of all the benefits of father involvement for child wellbeing, or TANF program leaders may have limited knowledge or awareness about the components of fatherhood programs and how to start and maintain fatherhood programming. Perhaps most significantly, there may be concerns that adding fatherhood services may detract from other TANF staff responsibilities. For example, the time commitment required to monitor client work requirements and other TANF-based services may limit the capacity of TANF staff to focus in-depth on fathers' needs.

To demystify the process for using TANF funds to support fatherhood programming, this National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse Spotlight looks at how one state, Ohio, has used their state TANF funds to support father-related services through the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood (OCF). The spotlight details the history of how OCF was established, how it works to meet four specific goals, and how its work throughout the state addresses two of the four purposes of the TANF legislation. Finally, it includes brief tips for long-term sustainability for practitioners and legislators in other states.

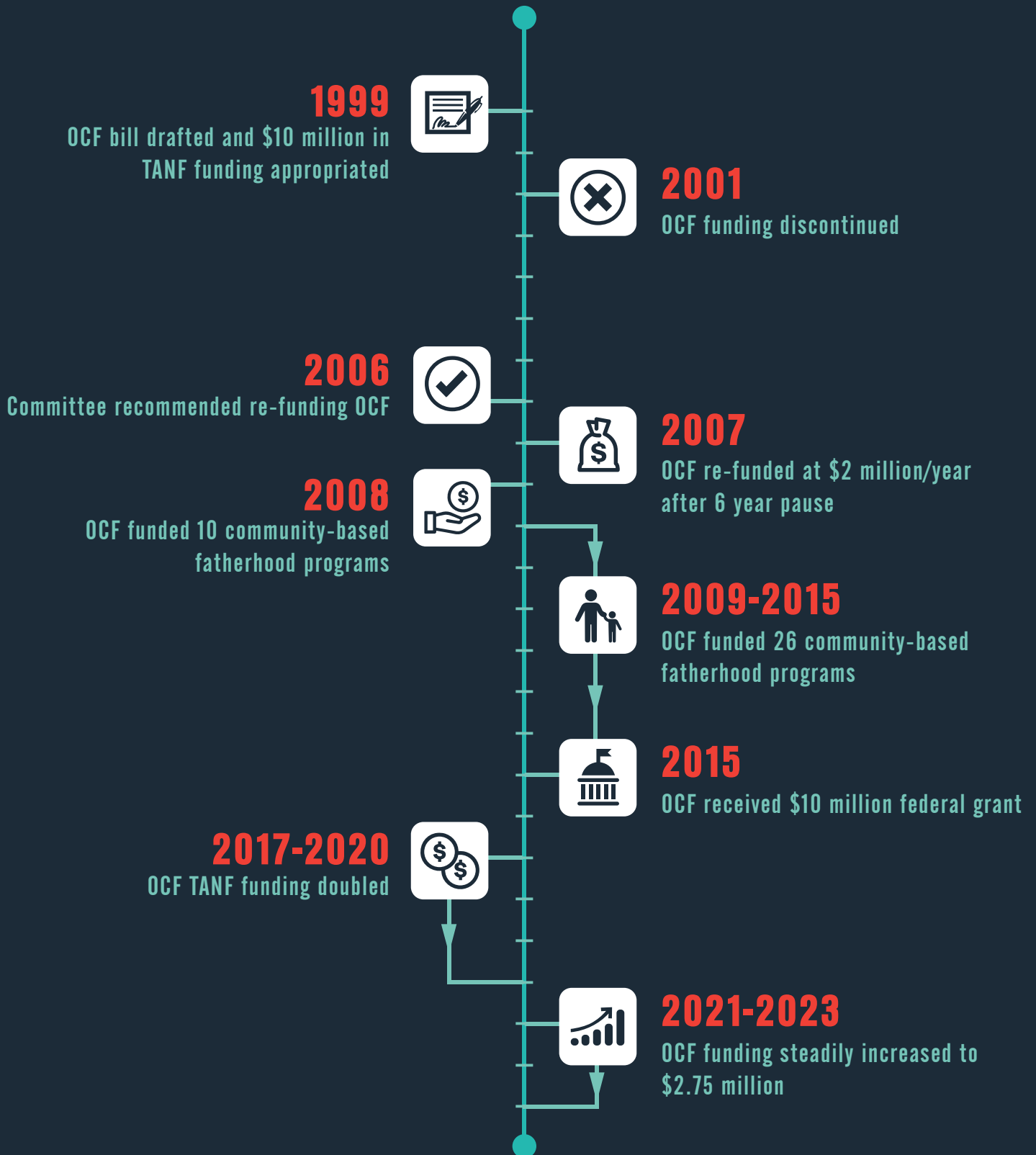
² [Govregs.com](https://govregs.com) (2024)

OVERVIEW OF THE OHIO COMMISSION ON FATHERHOOD

The [Ohio Commission on Fatherhood \(OCF\)](#) is a state agency created in the late 1990s to promote responsible fatherhood and support fathers in their roles as parents, partners, and providers. The Commission works to strengthen families by addressing the unique challenges faced by fathers and encouraging positive father involvement in the lives of their children and families. OCF collaborates with various organizations, community groups, and government agencies to develop and implement programs, initiatives, and policies that support fathers in their parenting roles. The overarching purpose of these activities is to improve child well-being, strengthen family relationships, and reduce barriers that fathers may encounter in being actively engaged in their children's lives.



OHIO COMMISSION ON FATHERHOOD (OCF) HISTORICAL TIMELINE OVERVIEW



OHIO COMMISSION ON FATHERHOOD (OCF)

HISTORICAL TIMELINE DETAILS

1999

State Representative Peter Lawson Jones was invited to a symposium in Cleveland, Ohio, to address the topic of improving family relationships and strengthening parenting skills. Former Governor Bob Taft offered a provision in the budget bill for non-custodial low-income fathers to secure job training and employment. Representative Jones drafted the bill that would establish OCF through the state's 2000–2001 biennial budget bill and be codified in Section 5101.34 of the Ohio Revised Code. Ten million dollars in TANF funds were subsequently appropriated for OCF.

A POLICY WINDOW OPENS FOR FATHERHOOD

States seeking to add fatherhood programs and initiatives to TANF programming need a person or group to champion those efforts. The original champion for establishing OCF was Representative Peter Lawson Jones. Representative Jones has spoken openly and passionately about the indispensable presence of his father in his life. In the late 1990s, a policy window opened when former Governor Bob Taft offered a provision in the budget bill for non-custodial low-income fathers to secure job training and employment. This opening combined with Representative Jones' enthusiasm led to "fatherhood" being added to the policy agenda in Ohio with bipartisan support.

2001

Funding was discontinued, but OCF was not decommissioned. During this time period, efforts to support Ohio fathers continued through the Ohio Practitioners' Network for Fathers and Families (OPNFF).

OHIO PRACTITIONERS' NETWORK FOR FATHERS AND FAMILIES (OPNFF): AN INDISPENSABLE PARTNER OF OCF

OPNFF is invaluable to the fatherhood work in Ohio. It consists of a board and membership that includes fatherhood practitioners and professionals across Ohio. OPNFF and OCF work together to champion fathers and fatherhood programming in Ohio. Their private-public collaboration strengthens Ohio's capacity to best serve fathers, children, and families.

2006

Acting Governor Ted Strickland appointed a review committee that issued a report recommending re-funding OCF.

2007

After a six-year pause, OCF was funded again at the rate of \$2 million per year in the 2007–2008 biennial budget.

2008

OCF provided subcontract funding for 10 community-based fatherhood programs to deliver parenting, coparenting, and economic stability (i.e., job readiness and employment) services to Ohio fathers.

COPARENTING CONTEXT: ESTABLISHING THE RIGHTS OF UNMARRIED FATHERS

In the mid-2000s, some fatherhood programs and new “Healthy Marriage” programs around the United States were funded to strengthen families and encourage the creation of stable two-parent families. Marriage, not coparenting, was the initial focus of these early programs. In Ohio, much of the driving force behind a focus on coparenting had to do with fathers’ rights (or lack thereof). In the state of Ohio, unmarried fathers who do not sign a paternity affidavit do not have legal rights to spend time with their children. Fathers must establish paternity with the courts and request a parenting time order. This disenfranchisement is not uncommon. For example, in the state of [Georgia](#), fathers who are not married to their child’s mother at the time of birth must undergo a lengthy and expensive legitimization process to establish paternal rights.

2009–2015

Over this six-year period, OCF funded 26 community-based fatherhood programs. The agency received \$1 million in TANF funds per year in the 2010–2011 biennial budget and launched the Ohio County Fatherhood Initiative to support 12 Ohio counties with community mobilization training and capacity-building grants. The following year the current Executive Director of OCF, Kimberly Dent, was appointed. In 2015, OCF received a \$10 million federal [grant](#) to serve new and expectant fathers. It was also the first year that less experienced fatherhood programs received funds and technical support.

2017–2020

The state’s 2017–2019 biennial budget increased OCF funding from \$1 million in TANF funds per year to \$2 million in TANF funds. OCF funded five evidence-based fatherhood curricula trainings for new practitioners. OCF and OPNFF co-sponsored a statewide fatherhood summit.

2021–2023

OCF funding steadily increased to the maximum amount of \$2.75 million in TANF funds at the end of June 2023. As a result, the number of fatherhood programs supported by OCF increased to nine core fatherhood grantees and eight pilot fatherhood programs during this time. Ten counties participated in the Ohio County Fatherhood Mobilization Initiative, and each year the Governor has declared June as Responsible Fatherhood Month.

STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE

OCF is housed within the [Ohio Department of Children and Youth](#). The Commission is led by an Executive Director who is appointed by the Governor, oversees all activities of the Commission, and is advised by Commissioners who serve in an advisory capacity. The Commission includes 20 Commissioners who come from all three branches of state government, the private sector, and various state department directors (e.g., Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Ohio Department of Education, and Ohio Department of Health). This collaboration is critical to OCF's success. Commissioners representing various departments help ensure interprofessional collaboration when working with overlapping populations. Five seats are reserved for citizens of Ohio who are appointed by the Governor. These citizens have extensive expertise in the area of fatherhood. All Commissioners complete an annual ethics training and are required to attend in-person OCF meetings that are held four times a year in Columbus.

The Commission has four key goals:

1

Engaging with the community to raise awareness about the importance of fathers.

2

Training practitioners to support fathers in their communities.

3

Developing policy recommendations.

4

Providing funding to local fatherhood organizations and other family support providers to support TANF goals.



Raising Community Awareness about the Importance of Fathers

**CHILDREN
FARE
BETTER
WHEN THEIR
FATHERS
ARE
ACTIVELY
INVOLVED
IN THEIR
LIVES**



Research evidence is clear that children fare better when their fathers are actively involved in their lives, and these positive outcomes can begin prior to the birth of a child. Much of OCF's work is focused on raising awareness throughout Ohio of a father's critical role early in his children's lives. For example, because recent data indicates that African American babies die before their first birthdays at almost three times the rate of white babies (U. S. Department of Health & Human Services, Office of Minority Health, 2022), OCF works with their funded grantees to support and encourage expectant fathers and fathers of infants to provide emotional support and stability for mothers during pregnancy and childbirth. Services for fathers include support and information on safe sleep practices, smoking cessation, the importance of breast feeding, and safe birth spacing.³

Other services to encourage and support greater father involvement include:

1. A collaboration between Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Ohio Department of Children and Youth, Ohio Department of Medicaid, and Ohio Department of Health (ODH) to decrease infant mortality rates in the state.
 - ODH's Home Visiting program, Help Me Grow, provides family support by going directly to homes to equip families with the skills, tools, and confidence to nurture and grow healthy children.
 - Through a referral process, Home Visiting professionals connect new and expectant fathers to OCF's fatherhood programs throughout the state for more resources.
2. OCF also partners with the Ohio Hospital Association for the Ohio First Steps Initiative, recognizing hospitals who engage with fathers and their partners to support family breastfeeding goals.
 - Hospitals receive a designation as they complete the "Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding" program, indicating to the community that they are safe birthing locations for families who would like to breastfeed.

³ Safe birth spacing refers to the time period between the birth of one child and the next child. Once mothers give birth, they are encouraged to wait a minimum 18 months before conceiving again. Eighteen months is the recommended recovery time from a pregnancy.

2 Training Practitioners

Increasing the competency of state and local professionals in Ohio to serve fathers is a major focus of OCF's work. In 2011, the Commission established the Ohio County Fatherhood Mobilization Initiative to help develop solutions at the local level. Selected counties participate in a six-month training process that prepares them to conduct a needs and assets assessment within their communities and develop a community action plan for fathers. Each county receives a \$10,000 implementation grant, and technical assistance from OCF and OPNFF to help implement their community action plan. To date, 31 counties in Ohio have participated in the project. Each county must appoint at least seven leaders from the community to join the initiative and serve on a leadership committee. They must fit one of the following categories:

- County Commissioner or State Representative, or designee
- Juvenile or Domestic Relations Judge, or designee
- Director of county child support services, or designee
- Director of county children services, or designee
- Faith-based community leader, or designee
- Business organization
- Community father
- Representative from the jail or community corrections facility located in the county.
- Leader from local school district, or designee

Local county leadership meets to assess what's happening in their county using the Kids Count Data Center, the premiere source for data on child and family well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). Data points like the divorce rate, graduation rate, and out-of-wedlock births are used to identify pain points for fathers in the community. The leadership committee designs a community action plan to alleviate challenges that may be hindering fatherhood engagement. Fathers, like mothers, can face a variety of challenges including mental health issues, unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, and issues related to parenthood and family dynamics. However, services specifically tailored to the needs of fathers have often been less prevalent or not as well developed as services for mothers.

WORKING WITH STATE & LOCAL OFFICES OF CHILD SUPPORT

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One branch of the social service system that has often struggled to prioritize father engagement is the Office of Child Support. By engaging Ohio child support leadership and facilitating awareness-building training sessions for state and local staff, OCF has helped child support workers recognize the impact of implicit bias towards fathers and work to engage fathers more consciously. For example, in late 2023, OCF hosted the Elevate Fatherhood Ohio Awareness and Training Event that included a session on navigating bias in fatherhood. Efforts like these have made the county child support and children services offices more inclusive environments and enhanced their organizational effectiveness.

3 Developing Policy Recommendations



Fathers often experience a plethora of barriers to full engagement with their children, ranging from interpersonal to cultural and societal sources. When fathers need help, many do not seek it because of the biases that often exist within our social systems and policies. These internal systems' issues are not often witnessed first-hand by those in law-making positions. Front-line staff members, however, have greater insight into structural issues that may be alleviated or resolved through policy change. OCF builds on their insights and participates in cross-system discussions to help improve father-inclusive practices and recommend policy changes.

Policy change is most often initiated by developing and implementing pilot programs to target a specific barrier. For example, OCF funds a pilot program that embeds fatherhood practitioners within the Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services. The benefit is that practitioners are present during case planning meetings and can glean a better understanding of the work of frontline children's services staff. This program also provides opportunities to help change negative culture through training and in-house conversations. Changing the culture within social service systems can positively impact fathers' involvement and, therefore, improve outcomes for children.

Fatherhood practitioners are often well positioned to help with the first stage of policymaking cycles based on their direct experience with supporting fathers. Problems communicated to OCF through the lens of a fatherhood advocate can be passed along to help policymakers identify problems and set agendas. Because OCF's structure allows for majority and minority General Assembly members to serve as Commissioners, these issues are more likely to be added to the policy agenda and have the potential to move throughout the policy cycle. This essential structural component serves as a conduit of knowledge about the importance of fathers to lawmakers and, therefore, can impact changes in policy.

4 Providing Funding for Local Programs to Support TANF Goals

Since its inception, OCF has funded more than 40 organizations to support the implementation of fatherhood-related services. The majority of funds are awarded to nonprofit, government, and faith-based organizations. Grantees are required to focus on providing services under three pillars set by OCF: parenting, coparenting/healthy relationships, and economic stability (i.e., job readiness and obtaining/retaining employment). Each grantee can receive additional incentives for serving new and expectant fathers. As of July 2023, nine current grantees are implementing fatherhood programs in various counties in the state.⁴

As Table 1 shows, OCF grantee programs provide direct services that meet two of the four TANF goals.⁵

TABLE 1: OCF FATHERHOOD PROGRAM ALIGNMENT WITH TANF GOALS

REDUCE OUT-OF-WEDLOCK PREGNANCIES:

OCF Fatherhood Program Goal: Healthy Relationships

- OCF funds programs like “No Kidding Ohio” to educate and inform teens on the realities of being a teen parent so they can make informed life decisions with help from peer educators.
- OCF fatherhood grantees serve young fathers to help reduce subsequent unplanned pregnancies.

PROMOTE THE FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF TWO-PARENT FAMILIES:

OCF Fatherhood Program Goal: Parenting, Coparenting, and Economic Stability

- The TANF statute explicitly states two-parent “families” rather than two-parent “households.” OCF’s coparenting component ensures parents can effectively share the responsibilities of child-rearing outside of an intimate relationship.
- All elements of fatherhood programming funded by OCF center around strengthening the two-parent family, even if the parents are not together.

**OCF
HAS FUNDED
MORE THAN
40
FATHERHOOD
RELATED
SERVICES**



⁴ <https://fatherhood.ohio.gov/static/Map%20of%20Counties.pdf>

⁵ Although OCF’s fatherhood programs do not explicitly focus on the first two TANF Goals (Providing assistance to needy families and Ending dependence on government benefits), fatherhood programming may also have a positive unintended impact toward those goals.

Three Tips for Practitioners and Legislators in Other States from the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood

1) Identify the person or group to champion fatherhood efforts.

The fatherhood space has become so significant that it is likely that advocacy groups already exist in your state. These groups can be leveraged and may even have already built the foundation for this work. Find out who those groups are and if a coalition is already present that includes members from various sectors. In Ohio, OCF's strong partnership with [OPNFF](#) allowed them to continue making an impact even when state funding was not readily available.

2) Don't assume everyone knows fathers are important.

Although more people are now acknowledging that fathers are indispensable to the family unit, there are still some who may lack empathy or compassion for fathers and the challenges they experience. Healthy and engaged fathers improve outcomes for children.

3) Using data is the best method to tell your story.

Documenting specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (SMART) deliverables and outcomes will ensure you are equipped to tell funders about the importance of healthy and involved fathers. As an extension, individualized case management is the best method to capture data. We must improve outcomes for children, and we can achieve this by serving, educating, and empowering fathers to be the best parents, partners, and providers possible!

LOW-INCOME FATHERS OFTEN VIEWED AS THE UNDESERVING POOR

At the height of a global pandemic in 2020, Congress passed a coronavirus stimulus bill (CARES Act) totaling \$2 trillion in economic relief to various groups, including student loan borrowers and custodial mothers. These funds were meant to offset the financial losses that everyday Americans suffered as a result of COVID 19. One group excluded from the first round of stimulus relief payments were non-custodial parents (mainly fathers) who were behind on child support payments. Although this error was corrected in the second round of stimulus payments, initially excluding these fathers in the first round speaks to how low-income fathers are often viewed as, what sociologists have called, "the undeserving poor."

(Cammatt, 2014)



RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Ohio Commission on Fatherhood. State Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Report](#)
- [Pathway Inc. Brothers United. 2023 Annual Impact Report](#)
- [Ohio Commission on Fatherhood 2023-2025 Fatherhood Grantees](#)
- [Ohio County Fatherhood Mobilization Initiative](#)
- [2023 Elevate Fatherhood Ohio Awareness and Training Event](#)

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