Adapting to Fathers' Needs:

Creating Change Using Insights from Customer Journey Mapping

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Administration for CHILDREN & FAMILIES Office of Family Assistance

FATHERS INCORPORATED

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

mdrc BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAPPING

As fatherhood program staff members know well, each father arrives at a program with his own unique circumstances, life experiences, motivations, and goals. While an effective intake assessment helps staff members build an initial impression of his individual situation and needs, we also know ongoing one-on-one and group interaction is needed to fully understand him and see who he might become. Even then, it can be hard to accurately follow his progress through the program and ensure we are meeting his needs in the best way possible.

This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) brief presents an overview of customer journey mapping, an evidence-based tool that helps program administrators and staff members reflect on a father's journey through a program and make service adjustments based on the father's perspective as he progresses through that program. This approach was used by MDRC in Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF), a project that supported fatherhood programs by providing a set of tools that help staff members understand and act on instances where the quality of participants' experiences fall short of program goals. For example, customer journey mapping can help programs identify how their outreach strategies resonate with the community and make changes to avoid driving away otherwise interested participants. Similarly, by better understanding the experiences of fathers as they progress through a program, program staff members can adjust service delivery modes and keep more fathers on track toward successful outcomes. Other family-serving programs that are seeking to engage more fathers may also find benefits to this approach.

What Is CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAPPING?

Customer journey mapping **integrates streams of participant feedback** and program data to inform the development of creative programmatic strategies that support fathers' priorities and goals.

Customer journey mapping is a flexible human-centered design tool that focuses on the experiences of participants interacting with a service. A mapping team (comprising expert facilitators, program staff members, and often participants themselves) develops an imaginary "persona"—a data-driven composite of participant attributes—and examines each of the interactions the imaginary persona would have with program services, along with the thoughts and feelings that the persona may have about the program. By creating a customer journey map, the team identifies interactions that are easy and gratifying for the persona as well as interactions that pose challenges, reinforce barriers, and cause frustrations. Program staff members, as experts on the services they offer and the content of their programs, can see and feel how the persona (or several personas) experiences different stages of the program from start to finish. This tool not only builds empathy but can highlight places where the intent of the program differs from what participants experience.

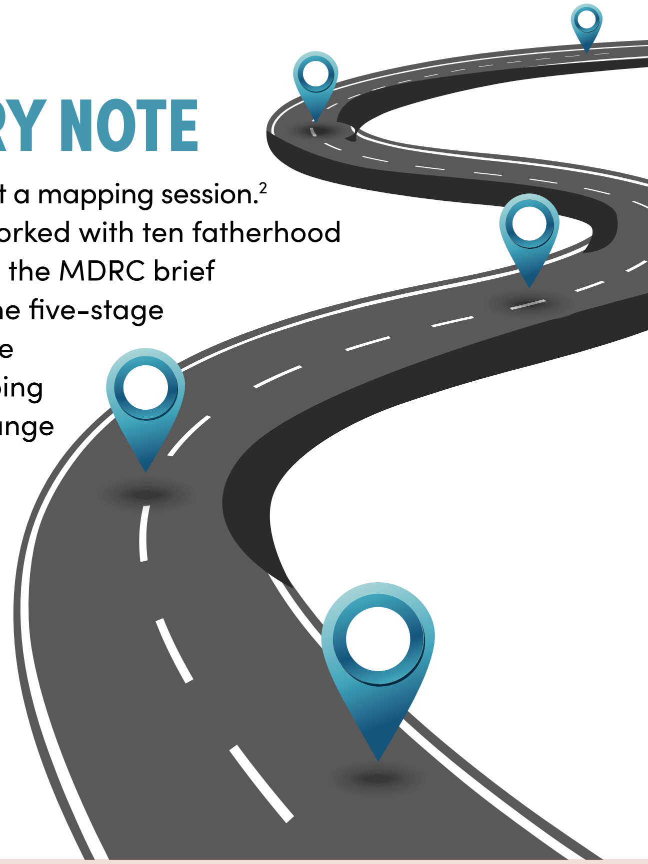
Why Map? FOCUS ON A FATHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Programs operate with innumerable pressures and a scarcity of key resources—both financial resources and the staff's time. Customer journey mapping can help fatherhood programs identify fathers' needs and goals, pinpoint moments that create challenges and opportunities, and narrow their focus on the needs and moments that appear to be most pressing based on participants' experiences. Customer journey mapping can highlight the parts of the service continuum that give participants the most trouble and the interactions that are at the root of negative outcomes like program drop-out.

Participating staff members have described mapping as fun and engaging. And it usually is! But the best mapping sessions are the ones motivated by a burning problem that the program is committed to solving—especially if the issue has stymied other attempts to generate evidence or introduce effective solutions.

Mapping is a great opportunity to step back from day-to-day program delivery, **reflect on how a program operates and how it is experienced by participants,** bring different perspectives and data sources into the conversation, and focus on participants and how well their needs are met at each step of the program.

How to Map? **A CAUTIONARY NOTE**



There are many guides and templates available for how to conduct a mapping session.[2] In the SIRF project, MDRC technical assistance staff members worked with ten fatherhood programs to implement a five-stage process that is described in the MDRC brief "Walking in Participants' Shoes."[3] Tools like SIRF's template for the five-stage process are helpful to get going, and in the next section we share the basic steps of mapping. But programs that are new to mapping might find it useful to work with an experienced facilitator or arrange for the professional development of staff members who will lead mapping efforts. Like any tool, the quality of a customer journey map determines its utility for identifying barriers and developing solutions. Experienced support is especially helpful because successful mapping applies both technical knowledge about the mapping process and human-centered design concepts like flexibility, embracing ambiguity, and learning from failure. The presence of an experienced facilitator also allows program staff members to fully immerse themselves in the experience and focus on the persona.

How Mapping **COMPLEMENTS STAFF EXPERTISE**

The knowledge that staff members hold is critical to effective mapping. They can help create a process map that details—from the program perspective—all the steps in a participant's case, the interactions between participants and the staff, and the back-office work that staff members do that may not be visible to participants. The process map shows the operational side of the program that the mapping team takes the imaginary persona through during a mapping session. Using mapping to add information about the experiences of participants can then further improve understanding and unlock solutions by doing the following:

1. **Illuminating steps** that are clear to staff members but are not recognized or understood by participants
2. **Identifying components** that staff members or program leaders believe to be regular parts of the process that are not being received by participants as intended

EXAMPLE: Intake Procedures

Fathers might feel hassled if they are asked intake questions about information that is already known by a referral partner. A journey map can reveal the costs that this duplication imposes on fathers, in terms of time and effort.

It also can build staff empathy for the frustration that duplication might cause or how it might affect the father's perception of the program. Pain points like this can offer program staff members clues about how they might change their approach or communication to better support participants through necessary program steps.

[2] See the resource list at the end of this brief.
[3] More information is provided on page 5 of this brief and by Behrmann, et al. (2022).

KEY MAPPING ACTIVITIES

The following is an example of a five-step mapping process that was outlined in ["Walking in Participants' Shoes."]() Each program took on the first two steps as homework in advance of a three-hour, hands-on session with the MDRC team in which it tackled the remaining three steps.. Program staff members and leaders can work together to create various personas based on their knowledge and experience of program goals and activities.

Use data and intake information to create a persona

Reflect on the characteristics and histories of program participants to create a complex persona that embodies a typical participant with a rich, full life and an identity beyond the context of the program. (You can create multiple personas to capture different characteristics of participants.)

Lay groundwork by documenting the status quo process

Detail the various steps and interactions that the program has with participants, from outreach and recruitment through assessment and the delivery of services and support (both during and after the program). These steps define the participant experience and shape the journey the persona will take.

Map the persona's journey and experience

Sketch out the persona's journey through the program and in life outside the program. Pay attention to the feelings that interactions with the program evoke for participants. Be sure to include points in the program that may be difficult, confusing, or uncomfortable and areas where the persona might thrive.

Analyze strengths, gaps, and challenges

Study the customer journey map that you have created for this persona and interpret it based on the program's goals, values, opportunities, and constraints. Look particularly for program elements where participants' current experiences may be misaligned with the goals of the program.

Identify (and try!) potential solutions

Discuss lessons that were learned from studying the path of the persona and use these insights to design and implement changes that improve participants' experiences and outcomes.

DATA SOURCES

Many data sources can inform customer journey mapping, including interviews or focus groups with current and past participants, reviews of program data, and analysis of customer feedback from program surveys and online reviews. When mapping, you can use data to fill out the thoughts and feelings a persona might have at various junctures. Importantly, do not presume that participants' perceptions match those of staff members. Even if they come from the same community or have similar life experiences, program staff members will have different perceptions and knowledge than the fathers who are recruited by and participating in the program. Staff members live with the program's rules, materials, and systems every day. It is their job to know the ins and outs and the whys and hows. The process becomes internalized and taken for granted. Good mapping explores the process from the point of view of users who often do not know what is "supposed" to happen. They only see what happens to them and often don't have access to the context or information to help the process make sense or feel legitimate.

> "The customer journey mapping process really encouraged us to challenge our assumptions. We discovered early on that with different teams in different locations, we had dramatically different perspectives on many issues, so it was helpful to talk through these differences and rely on the collective wisdom of our group. Yet it was even more elucidating to adopt the perspective of our participants. This really highlighted the areas we had for improvement in ways we had not considered before."
>
> – Geraldine (Vonnie) Germain, Connections to Success

EXAMPLES
of the Application of Customer Journey Mapping in Fatherhood Programs

MDRC has used customer journey mapping to address many different challenges and opportunities that are faced by fatherhood programs. Below are examples of personas that some fatherhood programs created during a mapping process, along with the solutions the mapping teams identified to improve customer experiences from recruitment and outreach to intake and assessment, delivery of services, and follow-up with program alumni.

OUTREACH TACTICS AND MESSAGING SOLUTIONS for "Ben's" Journey

"BEN"

» Two children, ages 8 and 12, who live with former partner. No formal custody arrangement. Pays voluntary child support. Main supports are fatherhood program staff members and current girlfriend. Looking for stable, full-time employment. Earned a high school diploma. Struggled in school—not because of grades, but because of competing responsibilities (early parenting, work, sick family member, criminal justice involvement). Does not have a computer or internet access. Travels 30 to 45 minutes to attend program (gets a ride from a friend or transit support from the program).

Question that prompted mapping: how to avoid losing fathers between their initial contact with the program and the first day of the group workshop.

- Define the types of fathers who are enrolling and map the unique experience of different types. Develop targeted branding, outreach materials, scripts, and sample action plans for each type of father.
- Showcase tangible benefits beyond monetary incentives. For example, provide examples of jobs that fathers who attended the program have—or the names of their employers—or share the number of fathers who wrote a parenting plan with the program and are actively using it with their coparent.
- Enhance implementation prompts, personalization, and reminders in the period between intake and initial engagement. For example, personalize reminders using a participant's stated goals: "Just a reminder, Monday is the first day of the new fatherhood group, so we'll be able to start discussing questions about seeing your son then. Let us know if you need a ride."
- Focus on ways to manage potential participants' first impressions of the program. Consider how first contact with a father occurs—is it though social media, outreach workers, peers, case managers, or group facilitators? What is the message that is delivered, and how is it likely to be received by potential participants? How are potential benefits described? Is there an expected commitment or is it an offer to try the program without commitment? Do outreach staff members actively listen and learn about a potential participant's situation before suggesting ways that the program might be helpful, or do they deliver a generic message or description of the program?

"ANDY"

» From Mott Haven. Noncustodial parent of two children, ages 5 and 12. Frustrated by child support garnishments. Hostile coparent relationship. Family and friends support him. Learned about the program from a friend who participated. Hopes to find employment, reduce child support arrears, and receive help with coparenting. Prefers virtual classes. Moves frequently. Skeptical of parenting classes.

PEER SUPPORT SOLUTIONS
for "Andy's" Journey

Question that prompted mapping: how to keep fathers engaged after they enroll.

- Assign a peer "buddy" during intake. Give the buddy tips on ways to deliver encouragement and reminders at each phase of the program and to celebrate the achievement of milestones.
- Define mentor roles for community outreach. For example, assess which social media groups local fathers are likely to use and ask program alumni to promote the program, encourage ongoing participation, or work with other alumni to host an online group for local fathers where they encourage participation in the program.
- Acknowledge each program milestone with a presentation of a "mentor-in-training" badge that certifies fathers each step of the way. At each milestone, the father's new level should have a defined role within the program with a clear set of responsibilities—all the way to official "mentor" status, which is reached after program completion.
- Use e-mentoring to reinforce or practice primary workshop lessons. E-mentoring retains the focus and content of a traditional mentoring relationship but uses technology to facilitate the flexible building of relationships between mentors and mentees. For instance, e-mentors can check on progress by email or videochat to better fit into the busy schedules of participants and support continuous learning and improvement.

"ALEX"

» Noncustodial parent to one child, age 12. Married with one other child, age 2. Alex's mother and wife support him. Works in food service. Challenges with substance use and with seeing oldest child. Lives in a small town. Seeking support from other fathers, activities to get him out of the house, and financial assistance because money is tight.

CASE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

for "Alex's" Journey

Question that prompted mapping: how to individualize father engagement better.

- Train case managers to take a coaching stance with fathers when setting goals and during ongoing activities—that is, the case manager should embody the role and mindset of a coach and orient activities toward promoting the client's growth and development. Case mangers could be supported in developing and enacting their coaching stance in person or remotely.
- Create materials or messages that are informed by evidence (for example, "From Unexceptional to Unforgettable: How Fatherhood Programs Can Engage Clients Using Behavioral Science") to support fathers as they navigate systems and see their needs met by the fatherhood program.
- Address fathers' needs by engaging with systems or referral partners in different ways—for example, warm handoffs, informal and formal communication, information sharing, team meeting approaches, service delivery approaches, and messages to fathers and the community.

REFERENCES AND HELPFUL RESOURCES

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