



I am Glenn Pasewicz, Executive Director of the Joint State Government Commission. First, I'd like to thank the Children and Youth Committee Chairs, Representative Bullock and Representative Jozwiak, and the members of the committee for providing us this opportunity to present the recommendations developed in the report, *Greater Father Involvement: Fostering Engagement of Fathers in Improving the Well-being of Their Children*. The report is available on our website at <http://jsg.legis.state.pa.us>.

For those in the audience who are unfamiliar with the Commission, it is the primary public policy and statutory research agency for the House and Senate and was established in 1937. Our current staff of 10 writes reports at the direction of either chamber on any topic. Our objective is to write reports so that a person can pick one up, read through it, and at the end can either make informed decisions or know what they need to know more about.

Act 114 of 2022, known as the Greater Fatherhood Involvement Act, directed that the Commission appoint an advisory committee to, among other tasks,

- evaluate governmental programs and initiatives that impact fatherhood,
- develop a comprehensive plan that will support early connection of fathers to their children,
- investigate workforce development programs that assist fathers in preparing for, finding and securing employment,
- research ways to involve fathers through skills-based educational programs that foster quality coparenting relationships,
- consider development of conflict resolution skills training,
- propose changes to statutes, regulations, administrative rules, and policies that impede the development or implementation of greater father involvement measures; and

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- make recommendations regarding the possible establishment of a long-term or permanent fatherhood commission.

The advisory committee consisted of 13 members who represented different aspects of research, advocacy, and professional experiences, and who reside in different regions of the commonwealth. They were from Erie, Pittsburgh, State College, Scranton, Harrisburg, Lancaster, Montgomery County, and Philadelphia. They are educators, university professors and researchers, mental health providers, advocates, consultants, and people with years of experience in domestic relations and the judicial branch. Importantly, many of them have lived experiences related to the issues addressed, whether as young people or as fathers themselves.

The Advisory Committee met five times between June and October 2023, in both in-person and in Zoom meetings. Our staff did the background research, writing, and facilitated the meetings, while the Advisory Committee members considered the topics and discussed them at length. In the end, 11 recommendations were agreed to by consensus and the final report was released in January 2024.

### Recommendations

Current efforts to improve fatherhood engagement are fragmented and uncoordinated. The approach to encouraging greater fatherhood involvement is two-fold. One, on a broad societal level, the message needs to be conveyed that fathers are vital to the welfare of their children and that their contributions should be respected and applauded. Few people respond well to lectures about how they should conduct themselves. Few young men are going to pay attention to suggestions on how to be a better father when complying with these suggestions when they are a condition of a benefit conferred or a “reward” for compliant behavior. And few young men are going to actively seek “advice” or “therapy” on how to be a better father. Their participation in their children’s lives must be voluntary to be genuine. A large part of the more global answer to the question of how to increase fatherhood involvement is to normalize it, to encourage young men to aspire to be more involved father, and feel recognized for doing so. Media portrayals of fathers can play a huge role. Social media, advertising, and visual and performing arts should be encouraged to portray fathers as actively involved in their children’s lives. This kind of public media campaign needs to be coordinated and promoted by a group dedicated to spreading the message of greater fatherhood involvement.

1. The first recommendation is for the establishment of a permanent commission on greater fatherhood involvement in either the Department of Human Services or the Department of Community and Economic Development. There is also support for the creation of the commission as an independent free-standing agency.

The commission would:

- coordinate programs among the various state agencies,

- serve as a navigator to assist individuals in finding services,
  - serve as an ombudsman to investigate complaints regarding perceived bias against single fathers in areas such as custody, housing, and employment barriers encountered by the formerly incarcerated,
  - help abolish stigma and discrimination against fathers, and shape public opinion regarding the value of single fathers in the lives of their children,
  - provide educational and outreach materials,
  - provide training to agencies and social service staff on ways to interact with fathers to encourage their greater involvement, and
  - promote the positive depiction of father involvement in visual media, including advertising and marketing materials.
2. As a rule, equal parenting time should be the default custody arrangement, regardless of the age of the child.
    - a. A meta-analysis of 60 studies of joint custody versus sole physical custody’s impact on children’s outcomes looked at three of the factors that have been cited as the variables that have the most impact on the success of joint physical custody. The analysis found that joint physical custody provides more overall benefits to children than sole physical custody despite what other variables might be present. This can create a greater bond and opportunity for role-modeling in the execution of routine daily activities, such as cooking meals, running errands, getting ready for school, doing homework and going to appointments.
  3. While some counties require mediation and co-parenting classes before the parties move to litigation, not all do. Consideration should be given to making these processes a statewide requirement.
    - a. Alternative mediation and conflict resolution methods (also commonly referred to as Alternative Dispute Resolution “ADR”) are becoming an increasingly popular way to avoid the cantankerous pathway through litigation. ADR can provide fathers with the opportunity to work with the mother of their children to avoid costly, time-consuming court proceedings and to assert their own decision-making power in matters involving their children. Many ADR methods can assist parents to agree on a parenting strategy and visitation schedule to settle their case outside of the court and with a more personalized approach. In utilizing this process, fathers will not have to worry about the perceived unfairness of the family courts. Instead, they can play an integral role in determining the outcome of their case.
  4. Paternal family leave should be offered at the same level as maternity leave, at a minimum.
  5. Flexible family leave should be available to allow fathers to attend parent-teacher conferences, IEP/504 meetings, medical appointments, and other decision-making meetings affecting the welfare of a child.

- a. Studies have found that workplaces that encourage greater fatherhood involvement provide benefits to the fathers as well as the employers. Fathers work harder, have more loyalty, have higher job satisfaction and less work-family conflict. Such policies also help recruit talented employees and can even boost stock prices when first announced. Other benefits include less risky behaviors, more altruistic social relationships and higher incomes. Flexible schedules lead to higher levels of involvement with the children, even for low-income and non-resident fathers. The ability to work from home may also have a positive impact. While paternal paternity leave is becoming more available in the United States, stigma regarding the “unmanliness” of considering family in work condition decisions, concerns about demotion, lower performance evaluations, reduced pay and benefits, may lead some fathers to be reluctant to seek paternity leave.
6. Consideration should be given to require mothers to identify the father of a child at the time of birth, unless extraordinary circumstances exist, such as the child is a product of rape. If the identity of the father is uncertain, then genetic testing should be ordered for any potential or putative father.
  - a. Existing rules make it hard for an unmarried father to prove paternity. In order to claim paternity, an unmarried man must either have the cooperation of the mother or be able to convince the courts that he is the biological father. The father of a child born out of wedlock may file an acknowledgment of paternity, but only with the birth mother’s consent. If she fails to consent, he must petition the court for a determination of paternity and request genetic testing. While an unmarried father can pursue a claim of paternity, it may be blocked and prevented by the presumption of legitimacy or the paternity by estoppel doctrines. Finally, in light of all the factors, doctrines, and counter-doctrines, the courts will ultimately decide paternity on a case-by-case basis with the “the best interests of the child” trumping all other arguments.
7. The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) should maintain data on custody and visitation violation complaints, enforcement, and disposition, including cases processed by non-judicial officers within the courts.
8. Consideration should be given to encourage all counties to follow the U.S. Department of Human Services guidance that discourages the collection of child support against parents whose children are in foster care and to dismiss any arrears that may have accrued while the child was in foster care.
9. The Unified Judicial System in Pennsylvania should consider adopting the concept of family access motions. A process like one enacted in Missouri can serve as an example. In Missouri, a parent can proceed *pro se*, the court must issue a summons within five days, and enforcement can include a compensatory period of visitation, custody or third-party custody at a time convenient for the aggrieved party not less than the period of time denied; participation by the violator in counseling to educate the violator about the importance of providing the child with a continuing and meaningful relationship with both parents; assessment of a fine of up to five hundred dollars against the violator payable to the aggrieved party; requiring the violator to post bond or security to ensure future compliance

with the court's access orders; and ordering the violator to pay the cost of counseling to reestablish the parent-child relationship between the aggrieved party and the child.

10. Although children and youth workers are routinely expected to search for family members when exploring placement options for foster or kinship care, special efforts should be intentionally made to identify paternal relatives of non-resident fathers who have never been married to the child's mother. The Advisory Committee feels it important to remind caseworkers that these individuals frequently exist, though they may not necessarily be identified by the mother in an interview and can be easily overlooked. In general, additional efforts should be made to improve father engagement in the child welfare system. Though few studies have analyzed the benefits of involving paternal relatives, there is evidence that support from extended family can have a positive effect on a child's well-being and protection.
11. Prenatal programs should include mental health screenings for fathers and provide training to healthcare providers to encourage and welcome fathers into the prenatal process.