



*The American Fathers Alliance*

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# **FATHERS & FATHERHOOD**

*"Fathers are a replacement for government programs, but  
government programs are not a replacement for fathers."*

**CONGRESS RESPONDS TO AMERICA'S FAMILY POLICY CRISIS  
PUTTING FATHERS BACK INTO THE MIDDLE OF FAMILY LIFE**

## **FATHERS COUNT ACT OF 1999**

Congresswoman Nancy Johnson, Chairman  
Human Resources Subcommittee  
House Ways & Means Committee  
House of Representatives  
Washington DC

Statement of Bill Harrington, President  
American Fathers Alliance

Tuesday, April 27, 1999

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## **BACKGROUND**

Bill Harrington has worked in domestic relations law offices in Seattle and Tacoma, Washington for the last several years. Working as a Legal Assistant, Mr. Harrington has reviewed hundreds of divorce files, drafted hundreds of Parenting Plans, and interviewed hundreds of parents, both mothers and fathers, in all stages of parental separation. Mr. Harrington was appointed by Speaker Thomas Foley as one of his four appointments to the United States Commission on Child & Family Welfare, created under PL 102-521, enacted in 1992. Bill Harrington was a representative for fathers, non-residential parents and second-families.

Mr. Harrington was the person most responsible for arranging the first-ever meeting for fathers movement leaders at the White House in October of 1993 in a meeting with the Domestic Policy Council. Since that first meeting, several meetings were held with the White House Welfare Reform Task Force. Through these meetings and several meetings with both Congressional staff and members of Congress, a number of father-friendly provisions were enacted in the federal welfare reform legislation. Seven fathers representing different organizations testified before the House on different issues but Mr. Harrington was the only leader to testify before the Senate Finance Committee. The testimony was effecting in getting Congress to authorize \$10,000,000 for Non-Residential Parents Access Grants, the first significant federal funding for largely a fatherhood program.

Mr. Harrington appeared on a Fatherhood Panel at the Western States Child Support Conference held in Seattle, Washington in October of 1998..

## **INTRODUCTION**

America is in the midst of a continuing family policy crisis. While policymakers search for answers after years of family decline in America and after years of both Congressional and State legislating on welfare and several issues relating to women and children; America is just now looking toward FATHERHOOD for answers. The American Fathers Alliance supports the work of the House Human Resources Subcommittee in holding this hearing and we look forward to the valuable information various researchers may provide on the value of involved fatherhood and strategies for reversing our decline of positive father parenting in America. What we look for most, is the realization that fathers are parents too, and that America's history of marginalizing positive father parenting has been to the detriment of not only fathers and family life in America, but the greatest detriment has been to the children of America. We urge Committee members, and all interested people, in reading the attached document; *The daddy bond: The earlier a man starts to care for his baby, the better.* This detailed two page article by Richard Laliberte appeared in *Parents* magazine, November of 1995. By detailing the critical value of father parenting in the first six months of life, we ask one question, where is the public policy, law or procedure, anywhere in our welfare system or legal system in any state, especially for unwed fathers, designed to meet this critical aspect of positive child development? Our failure to have answers to this question makes it clear that America's fatherhood crisis is deep and vary pervasive. Further, we must look to the equally pervasive common child residential schedule of EVERY OTHER WEEKEND with the other parent approved by our legal system in most cases. Even though not one recognized mental health professional or reputable author on the subject of parents or parenting, recommends that in most cases, EVERY OTHER WEEKEND meets the needs of a predictable majority of children, this pattern of limited parental involvement by fathers, amounts to a scheme of institutionalized child abuse. This is an outcome in over 60% of all cases of separated parents with court ordered Parenting Plans\Child Custody Orders. This is where the debate over social support and funding for programs for divorced and unwed fathers begins, because it is only with the understanding that what most fathers want most of all is one thing - to be able to see and parent their children - without undue hassle from the mothers and undue interference by government officials.

The American Fathers Alliance joins with many father organizations from all over America, and other supporting organizations and individuals, in wishing for the success of these hearings and the open doors to funding of fatherhood programs that are so critically needed.

## **FIRST THINGS FIRST**

To its credit, in 1996 Congress and President Clinton through the Personal Responsibility Act, enacted a special program entitled: Non-Residential Parents Access Grant Program. Congress appropriated \$10,000,000 in federal funding to start this program. All 54 jurisdictions have develop programs and applied for funding, both the public and private sectors. This was the first and very honest recognition that non-residential parents, somewhere between 85 and 90% of whom are fathers, were in need of federal programs and financial assistance to enable them to be more involved with their children and better parents. In effect for years, we had a national tolerance program for parental kidnapping of children. Father\child relationships had no recognized value and violations of court orders concerning father\child relationships are still routinely ignored. Fathers are an unrecognized national victim of systematic and routine violations of civil rights - the fundamental right to be a parent. When the White House Welfare Reform Task Force submitted its proposal to the president for his final consideration, the collective task Force recommendation was for an appropriation of \$200,000,000 per year for the Access Grant Program. The American Fathers Alliance calls upon Congress to fully fund the one existing

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fatherhood program in the amount of \$200,000,000 per year as a first gesture of serious attention to the needs of all fathers at the start of the 21st Century. If we are to invest in the future of our children, that investment must start here.

## **UNWED FATHERS**

The most critical issue for never-married fathers is establishment of the parent\child relationship. Even though Congress has enacted wide sweeping paternity establishment goals to the several States, Congress failed to create programs to assist unwed fathers in delicate social situations from enacting the critical parent\child parenting relationships. Research has shown that if unwed fathers physically hold their newborn child in their hands within the first 24 hours of life, these fathers are 50% more likely to stay involved in the life of their child. Congress should create such a program for fathers at hospitals and birthing clinics, and fund the program sufficiently. When enacted and properly funded, this success would greatly reduce our difficulties enacting realistic child support orders, WITHOUT FABRICATED ARREARAGES, and instead create voluntary paying fathers in more cases of children born to unwed parents. The key issue missing from existing policy is the dignity of the infant\father relationship. Again, as stated in the attached research from Parents magazine, we see the value of an involved father in the first six months of life. This tangible investment of an involved father is the best early child development program. An involved father is the cheapest investment the federal government can make in the lives of these children. AGAIN, A FATHER IS THE REPLACEMENT FOR GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS, BUT GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS ARE NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR FATHERS !!!

Secondly, for unwed fathers, is needed a program to determine the best living environment for the child prior to entry of any court order. Congress should enact a national Friend of the Court program, modeled after Wayne County in Michigan. This program acts quickly when either parent first contacts the government for services. The parents are asked to immediately come in for parenting interviews, and a professional does a parenting assessment, and renders a recommendation to a Judicial officer. In this current program, a slight majority of parents recommended for child placement, as in the best interest of the child, are FATHERS. This program of fairness for children born in sensitive and delicate situations, should be modeled and expanded to other critical urban areas.

Further, this Wayne County program in Detroit reflects the second level of the best interest of the child, THE BACON TRAIL. Once we have determined, initially, the best interest of the child, we can look at stability and employment, and childcare services, WITHOUT the necessity of government funding. Most fathers are willing and wanting to work. With a child in their home to care for, and with the *dignity of being a fully engaged and responsible parent*, the father is more likely to raise the child without needed public services for either the father or the child. We know from federal welfare reform the easy cases are now off the welfare rolls, and we are left with the longer term, more difficult family situations. Research shows that by the end of the second year after the birth of the child, the average father is earning at or around \$15,000.00. This puts the father\child relationship just above the federal poverty level, and moves the child out of a dependency lifestyle. In comparison with their mothers, the child would remain in a dependency lifestyle for several years, living through public subsidies of various forms funded through a variety of federal programs. THE BACON TRAIL, the home with the bacon and a strong work ethic, is most often the proven better home for the child. Congress needs to fund programs where fathers can have contact and get assistance in providing and protecting their young children, and where residential placement with the father, is in the best interest of the child.

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Additionally, The American Fathers Alliance, Statement for the Record, at the March, 1999 hearing on Childcare, provided another father-friendly strategy for positive father-child relationships and reduces federal expenditures. Having a Father as First-Choice childcare policy, we can use limited federal resources for the truly needy cases, where there is no father available for childcare.

### **FRAGILE FATHERS - FRAGILE FAMILIES**

The American Fathers Alliance fully recognizes the dysfunctional childhood many fathers experienced, and further, that a number of fathers have fallen victim to life's many compromises and find themselves in economic chaos and a significant number involved with substance abuse of one kind or another. Fatherhood programs are needed to assist these fathers in re-gaining their personal and parental equilibrium so they can function as responsible citizens, and most important, function as male parents. Congress would do well to provide funding for a variety of programs to assist male parents who really want help and are willing to work within guidelines until they can operate on their own and secure living wage employment. This is one area where Child Support policies need to be flexible to avoid unjustifiable increasing ARREARAGES, and unrealistic orders when the fathers are not working for pay, but rather are working on their personal character so that they may once again function as male parents without any social support. Rather than making permanent criminals out of these imperfect parents, Congress can create programs that will offer America's greatest gift: A SECOND CHANCE.

### **DIVORCED FATHERS**

Most divorced fathers are in need of a single national program - a program for FAIRNESS. Unjustified anti-father bias is rampant in our legal system in all states as well as in all social service programs. Congress could meet a minimum need of all fathers by funding serious educational programs on the extensive value of positive father parenting and FATHER-LOVE. Judges and other courthouse professionals involved in working with separated family members, need to understand the significant negative impact of orders that unreasonably work to deny the formation and/or maintenance of father-child relationships. Congress should fund research to determine the number or percentage of children of divorce, who experienced unreasonable and unjustified limited contact with their fathers, and who later engaged in anti-social behavior and/or criminal contact. If we want to assess the social cost of fatherless children, we need to look at this crucial area. The answers are there and they are not pretty, but if we are to maintain this national standard of discrimination against fathers and children, we need to at least understand the consequences of this conduct. If America wishes a more gender-neutral program of deciding divorce outcomes, an extensive Judicial educational program on fatherhood needs to be funded. The report of the United States Commission on Child and Family Welfare: Parenting Our Children - In The Best Interest of the Nation, 10-96, should be reviewed for its many positive parent recommendations. The Minority Report's of Commissioners John Guidubaldi and Bill Harrington should be reviewed for more specific recommendations directed at fathers and fatherhood.

Divorced fathers cover the spectrum of all income levels. For significant numbers of what were middle class fathers at the time of separation, once these fathers are assessed significant child support orders, orders for maintenance/alimony, and temporary attorney fees, significant numbers of these middle class fathers actually meet the low income or poverty levels needed to qualify for program assistance. These fathers deserve federal funding for non-profit programs to assist fathers in all areas of family law, including calculation of child support.

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## **CONCLUSION**

Children NEED fathers. Fathers ARE parents. If we are to see dramatic change in the lives of our children then government needs to pay attention to these two simple statements and apply them to any programs and legislative solutions they consider when dealing with families. We cannot continue to treat fathers as paychecks and visitors in the lives of their children and expect children to grow into wholesome adults. Fathers need to be treated AS parents and recognized for the valuable contributions that they endow upon their children. For those less educated, programs should be developed that help educate the needy. It is not financial need that should drive legislative action for families, but rather, educational need that will bring us out of the darkness which lies before us. Until we resolve to treat fathers as parents and children as beings in need of their fathers, we can only expect the worst from future generations.

***What we must do:*** Congress should approve father-friendly legislation under the Fathers Count Act of 1998. This legislation should make positive father parenting a national priority. Congress should approve substantial funding - at least \$2 Billion for nationwide and targeted fatherhood programs. A public relations campaign should be launched to make the word "FATHER" a positive term in American discourse and a greater reality in every day family life. An inventory should be taken of federal laws, policies and programs that serve to discourage father involvement, and a campaign launched to repeal these provisions and substitute father-friendly sections. Congress should encourage the National Governors Association to survey state laws, policies and procedures for language that serve to discourage father involvement, and undertake efforts to repeal these provisions and substitute father friendly provisions. The term "DEADBEAT" should be outlawed and classified as a hate term in criminal statutes, and become actionable when used against individual parents by public officials and social service bureaucrats.

The 21st Century should begin with an equal call to parenthood and greater involvement in the lives of children by loving and caring fathers as well as mothers. The federal government should become father-friendly by moving to prioritize parenting matters equally for mothers as well as fathers and de-emphasizing financial outcomes as now our highest priority for children.

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