

The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative

Focus Group Report

Follow-Up with 2008 Summit Attendees

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Prepared for:



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Background

In October of 2005, under the leadership of Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, 25 community leaders participated in an initial training session conducted by the National Fatherhood Initiative. This training set the planning stage for the development of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI) and the establishment of the first Fatherhood Summit in the City of Milwaukee in October of 2006. The MFI is designed to provide support, resources, education, and assistance to fathers in the City of Milwaukee. Its primary goal is to promote responsible fathering in the lives of Milwaukee children by addressing the issue of absentee fathers.

The Milwaukee Fatherhood Summits

For the past three years, the Fatherhood Summit has been the centerpiece of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative. The goal of the annual summit is to bring together the Milwaukee community to generate support for fathers, provide resources for men, and address specific issues of fatherhood in the community. Each year, the two-day summits have focused on the key areas considered by the MFI as vital for successful fatherhood: health, employment, child support debt reduction, and driver's license recovery. Summit participants have an opportunity to receive free services or assistance in each of these core components, attend workshops, hear national and local speakers, and visit resource exhibitors. The theme of the 2008 summit was "Building Fathers of Worth and Greatness".

Since 2007, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. has conducted a formative evaluation of the MFI. The Planning Council is a private, nonprofit research and planning organization. The agency's mission is to advance community health and human services through planning, evaluation, and research. A major focus of the Planning Council's evaluation of the MFI has been to facilitate and summarize feedback from participants in the annual summits.

Feedback from 2008 Summit Participants

The Planning Council recently completed a report describing feedback results from individuals who attended the 2008 Fatherhood Summit ("The 2008 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit: Feedback Results from Summit Participants"). The report documented the feedback attendees provided while at the summit, using feedback surveys and workshop evaluation forms. The Planning Council also described the number and demographic characteristics of people who registered for the summit and summarized results from qualitative interviews with members of the faith-based community in Milwaukee.

A total of 808 individuals registered for the summit, including both online and on-site registrants. Most of the individuals who registered for the 2008 summit were newcomers; a relatively small number of individuals reported having attended either the 2006 or 2007 summits.

The vast majority of 2008 summit participants who completed a feedback survey rated the summit very highly. Overall, 98% rated the event as "outstanding" or "good". Almost all "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the summit addressed important issues, offered potential solutions for fatherhood challenges, and provided useful information and materials.

When asked to describe the most important aspect of the summit, respondents noted that the summit was not only interesting and practical, but that it also provided a sense of unity and empowerment. Respondents indicated that the summit helped participants understand and appreciate the importance of fatherhood and that it inspired them to spend more time with their children. Respondents also noted that the summit prompted them to receive proper medical screenings for HIV and other medical concerns. Overall, respondents indicated that they found the speakers and presentations valuable and the exhibits accessible and helpful.

To expand on the feedback received from participants at the 2008 summit, the MFI asked the Planning Council to conduct follow-up focus groups with summit participants. The goals of the follow-up were to explore how attendees incorporated into their lives what they learned at the summit and to generate suggestions for future summits.

Present Report

The present report summarizes feedback from three focus groups conducted with a small convenience sample of men who attended the 2008 Fatherhood Summit and who received direct service assistance during the event. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the ways in which summit attendees utilized the experience of attending the summit and integrated what they had learned into their roles as fathers (e.g., followed through with next steps regarding child support debt, reinstatement of driver's license, finding employment, etc.).

Methodology

The Planning Council, in cooperation with the MFI, developed interview questions to guide focus groups with a small sample of individuals who attended the 2008 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit. To support participant recruitment, the Planning Council developed a flyer inviting summit attendees to participate in one of three focus groups scheduled approximately five months after the 2008 summit was held (i.e., Saturday March 14th, 2009). The MFI mailed the flyers to a subset of 300 people who had attended the 2008 summit and coordinated the sign-up process for each focus group. Because of limited space, individuals were required to register and were selected on a "first come first served" basis. As incentives for participating, the MFI provided breakfast, and participants were entered into a drawing for gift baskets at each session.

Each of the three focus groups was conducted by a Senior Researcher at the Planning Council. Topics for focus group discussion centered on four major areas:

1. Participants' reasons for attending the 2008 summit and their expectations for the event.
2. The changes participants experienced as fathers that they attributed to attending the summit.
3. Fatherhood challenges that participants continued to struggle with after attending the summit, including the types of assistance and support they believed were still needed that could be incorporated or addressed in the next summit.
4. Additional suggestions for the 2009 summit.

Detailed notes from the three focus groups were reviewed using qualitative analytic techniques. Key themes were manually coded and relevant quotes related to those themes were identified.

Focus Group Results

Participants were asked to provide basic demographic and background information at the outset of each group. The facilitator then guided the groups in conversations that elicited descriptive information about: 1) participants' expectations prior to attending the 2008 summit, 2) the concrete as well as the more intangible outcomes participants experienced after attending the summit, 3) the continuing challenges they faced as fathers, and 4) potential areas of improvement for future summits.

Focus Group Participants

A total of 30 summit attendees responded to the recruitment flyer, with 22 men and one woman initially signing up to attend the focus groups. A total of 12 men ultimately participated in one of the three focus groups.¹ Each group lasted approximately one hour and 15 minutes.

Demographic information was available for 11 of the 12 focus group participants. All 11 were fathers over 30 years of age. Seven men reported having 3-5 children, three participants had 1-2 children, and the remaining member had more than five children. All participants had attended the 2008 summit. Seven were first-time summit attendees, while three had attended the 2007 summit and one had attended all three summits. Ten of the focus group participants identified themselves as African American, and one identified himself as Caucasian. At the time the focus groups were held, seven men were searching for jobs and four were employed.

Participant Expectations of the 2008 Summit

Participants' reasons for attending the 2008 summit fell into three general areas: interest in addressing child support issues and/or arrears, hearing positive things about previous summits from family and friends, and a "sense of unity and coming together" for fathers. Expectations for the summit varied among the men, ranging from interest in various kinds of general assistance around issues related to fathering to very specific hopes that their child support interest payments could be reduced.

The primary reason focus group participants noted for attending the summit was to learn more about and address child support issues. One participant had heard on the radio that the summit could help reduce interest payments. Several voiced frustrations with managing child support interest, processing fees, and other penalties for late payments. Another participant with a relatively large number of children hoped the summit would help ease his sense of anxiety and despair at the amount of child support interest he was required to pay. Further, he was looking to help lift his psychological sense of being judged as a failure at fathering. This participant explained, "People look at you in a certain way ... they judge you as a father, but there is no way you can pay everything [interest] you owe." Milwaukee County's arrears collection process was perceived as being chaotic, confusing, and at times unfair. "They were still expecting me to pay child support while I was incarcerated," related one participant, "how was I going to do that?" Another said that he had paid more interest than actual child support. Participants hoped that the summit would provide them with concrete means to address their financial and emotional troubles with support payments, specifically by having their interest debt reduced.

Other reasons and expectations cited for attending the summit included driver's license reinstatement, learning about the legal system, and finding leads for jobs. One participant brought his teenage daughter to the summit to learn about men's issues. Several said they had heard positive reviews from others who attended past summits who described the experience as fathers "coming together." One called the summit a "stepping stone for brothers that don't know how to walk."

Impact of Attending the Summit

Overall, most of the participants indicated that they viewed the summit as both "valuable" and "worthwhile." They found it to be "well organized" and "inspirational," as well as a source of concrete assistance. As one participant said, "I got a lot more than I expected."

¹ A total of 12 men participated in three focus groups, with four in attendance at Session #1, five in attendance at Session #2, and three in attendance at Session #3.

Two of the participants, however, were less positive than other group members. One said he “didn’t get much from the summit,” reporting, “I took some classes and I was out the door.” Another was disappointed because he felt he did not receive the help he desired regarding child support matters.

When participants were asked to describe the impact that the 2008 summit had on their lives, several concrete outcomes were generated. Some participants obtained a reduction or even a cancellation of interest on their child support, bringing them a significant sense of relief, at least temporarily. One stated he had a full \$40,000 in interest and arrears forgiven at the summit. Two other participants reported that they had acquired a job because of the summit and one had subsequently enrolled in school. Another participant was able to secure a much-needed loan after mentioning the summit and the MFI director’s name to a loan officer. Another began volunteering his time in community work. Two men had their driver’s licenses reinstated.

Another impact described by focus group participants was the sense of “engagement” they felt in being able to discuss and then reflect on fathering. “At first I just came to kind of check things out,” said one participant, “but since the summit I have been thinking hard about these men talking about how to be a father. I sat and listened to them talk about their situation and how they worked on becoming a good father and I was thinking about how I can do the same with my two boys ... When do we get a chance to talk about these things?” He concluded by saying that what he heard about during the summit was something he is now “passing on” to his two sons, “...about how to be a good father to their children.”

A common theme arising from the focus groups was the experience of being both inspired and supported by other struggling fathers. “Every father,” said one “has a father story he can share that might help another father.” Being around other men and bonding as fathers was clearly important to several participants. One participant spoke of how the summit helped him to deal with emotional struggles related to his own father. “I don’t feel so helpless that I can’t change my own ways,” he said, adding, “sometimes all you need is to know that being a father is something to be proud of and not be embarrassed to ask for help.”

The majority of the participants noted that after they attended the summit they felt more positively about being fathers. Key contributors to their growing positive view of fatherhood were the father-son presentation and the summit’s inspirational messages about fathering. Notably, while some of the participants described their relationships with their children as “important” and even “close” before attending the summit, they believed that their attendance at the event further reinforced those ties and strengthened their commitment to greater involvement with their children. Not uncommon was an experience shared by one participant who related that he and his son “are working more on being close ... I spend a lot more time with him and I’m trying to teach him not to be mad at his mother for keeping us apart.”

Other participants felt that the summit gave them a chance to take responsibility for where they have failed to be good fathers, but to do so without self-judgment. As one man put it, to the agreement of several other participants: “I never had a father figure in the house – my mother wasn’t married. By not having a father, I never learned how to be a father to my kids. The summit,” he said, “helped me to see that I can still learn to be a good father, no matter what’s happened in the past.”

Continuing Fatherhood Challenges

Most of the focus group participants reported having experienced ongoing challenges in their lives in the months following the 2008 summit. Participants identified three broad categories of fatherhood challenges that they were continuing to experience: family law issues, child support issues, and employment.

Many of the participants expressed continued frustration and confusion concerning the court system, especially family court as it relates to family law. One man said that family court “is the biggest problem facing men, all men – black or white or whoever.” For the focus group participants, involvement in the courts was invariably experienced as negative. Some expressed the belief that family laws are more favorable to mothers than to fathers. “I get treated like I don’t have rights as a father, but they expect you to pay that child support without question.” A few reported experiencing unfair treatment by the courts regarding their visitation rights. For example, one man said, “One time, the police was looking for me and my son, because his mama was mad at me and called them!”

Several participants reported that the child support payments, arrears, and processing fees from the courts continued to plague them, including what they described as excessive arrears. For example, “Paying all the fees [processing fees] and then paying the child support and on top of that, the interest – some of us are trying – but we can’t get ahead like this.” Serious financial problems weighed heavily on many of the focus group participants. One, for example, described his struggles as a single father and providing for his children: “I’ve been trying to apply for food stamps – it’s been hard trying to just get money for food.”

The other major challenge voiced by the men was unemployment. While one participant was “satisfied and had no problems” in this regard, nearly all the others were struggling with current job loss or were trying to find “better” employment. One participant reported being employed at the time of the summit, but then losing his job a few months after the summit. Similar to child support payments, employment issues were a major and daily worry for the men. While two participants stated that the summit had led to new jobs, and one participant had subsequently enrolled in school, most of the men were actively struggling with finding work at the time of the focus group.

Areas for Improvement for Future Summits

When asked to identify the ways in which future summits could be improved, participants had both specific and general suggestions. The suggestions for summit improvements fell into five general topic areas: improving logistics and organization, increased advertising, more professional assistance, more services offered, and additional opportunities to share and discuss fatherhood experiences with other men.

The major specific suggestion for improvement concerned what several participants said was a need for improved organization and logistics, from better placed signage to more volunteers to help direct people to workshops and other activities. Several thought the summit could be more conveniently located near bus lines to better accommodate attendees with transportation challenges. One indicated that the workshop rooms were too small, so that noise from other sessions was audible. Several men reported that child support registration seemed unorganized, with “people standing around not knowing what to do.”

Several participants felt that future summits should be marketed better. Some suggested that social networking, such as Facebook and Twitter, should be actively utilized by MFI. Others felt that a more traditional marketing approach might increase attendance, such as handing out flyers door to door in the community. One wondered if a more “catchy slogan” might help capture men’s attention. Several participants suggested that organizers could make greater use of information technology, such as a webcast, for those who could not attend the summit in person.

Another area of suggested improvement was having greater availability of legal and mental health professionals at the summit. Several participants wanted more legal experts available to assist them in understanding and managing problems related to family law and child support. One suggested having a panel or speakers on family law, perhaps including former judges and attorneys. Another felt having more legal advisors on-site would help.

Other participants wanted more opportunities to access therapists and counselors. “A lot of men are hurting,” said one man, “and [they] have a lot of feelings about their children and their children’s mothers that need to be talked about.” Expert advice in other areas was also suggested: “You have to help men learn how to deal with the County and all the stuff you have to go through that’s stressful.”

Several participants indicated that greater availability and access to the services already offered would enhance the summit. Once again, child support topped many of the participants’ lists for expanded services. Most felt that making services in this area available for both days of the summit would be extremely helpful because “[child support assistance] is the main reason why a lot of men come to the summit.” Other participants stated that more services related to men’s health would be useful. A few also requested more aggressive job search assistance.

Finally, several participants voiced a desire that the summit provide more opportunities for men to talk with one another, share their stories, and bond. Many indicated that offering support groups both during and after the summit would improve the quality of the summit experience. “Being able to talk is good,” one participant said. “We need more time like this [the focus group] to be able to express ourselves.”

Summary and Conclusions

The Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit is an annual event sponsored by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI). The goal of the annual summit is to bring together the Milwaukee community to generate support for fathers, provide resources for men, and address specific issues of fatherhood in the community. The theme of the 2008 Fatherhood Summit was “Building Fathers of Worth and Greatness.” As a follow-up to the evaluation of the 2008 summit, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. conducted three focus groups with a small convenience sample of summit attendees. The goals of the focus groups were to explore how attendees incorporated the summit experience into their lives and to generate suggestions for future summits.

A total of 12 men participated in three focus groups, with demographic information being available for 11 of the 12 participants. All 11 were fathers over 30 years of age, and all had attended the 2008 summit. Ten of the focus group participants identified themselves as African American, and one identified as Caucasian. At the time the focus groups were held, seven men were searching for jobs and four were employed.

Participants’ reasons for attending the 2008 summit fell into three areas: interest in addressing child support issues and/or arrears, hearing positive things about previous summits from family and friends, and a “sense of unity and coming together” for fathers. However, the opportunity to learn about and address child support issues was of primary importance to participants. The men reported experiencing financial strain, frustration, and despair related to child support payments and accrued interest. They hoped that the summit would provide them with a concrete means to address these and other financial difficulties.

Participants identified a number of concrete outcomes that they attributed directly to their attendance at the event and indicated that many of their expectations for the summit had been met. Specifically, several participants reported that they had received a reduction or cancellation of their accrued child support interest. Other participants had obtained jobs, enrolled in school, or participated in volunteer work after attending the summit. Finally, other participants reported that they had succeeded in getting their driver’s licenses reinstated as a result of the summit.

Beyond the concrete outcomes identified, most of the participants also described having a greater appreciation for the importance of fatherhood after attending the summit. They reported feeling inspired to be better fathers and finding ways to strengthen their relationships and involvement with their children in the months after the summit. In addition, some participants

spoke poignantly about how the summit allowed them to take stock of themselves as fathers, identify areas in which they may have fallen short in their fathering, and look positively towards their future relationship with their children.

Despite the positive outcomes attributed to attending the summit, participants continued to experience challenges related to child support, family law, and employment. Nearly all of the participants reported continuing to struggle with one or more of these areas. To address these continuing challenges, participants provided several suggestions for improving future summits. For example, participants felt that future summits could include greater availability of and access to the services offered, especially with respect to having child support debt reduction assistance available on both days of the summit. In addition, participants suggested that the summit could include opportunities for participants to access legal and mental health professionals in order to receive expert advice and assistance in these areas. Finally, the participants indicated that there is a need for men to have a place to talk with and support one another as fathers, both during the summit and as a follow-up to the summit. As one man stated, "When [else] do we get a chance to talk about these things?"

Overall, focus group participants' experiences of the 2008 Fatherhood Summit suggest that it was an important and powerful event in their lives. Although the participant follow-up was limited to a small number of men who may have been motivated by their positive summit experiences to attend the focus groups, these men had clearly used the summit as a springboard. They reported having made concrete changes in their lives and having connected more strongly with their roles as fathers. The summit, through its inspirational messages about fatherhood and its opportunities for connection, had clearly motivated these individuals to strive towards being better parents. In the words of one participant, "sometimes all you need is to know that being a father is something to be proud of."

The approach of engaging summit attendees in follow-up focus groups yielded rich information, complementing the more quantitative and immediate feedback received from participants during the summit. However, this information was limited by a small number of focus group participants. A number of lessons learned from this first effort at conducting follow-up focus groups can be applied to future efforts. Looking towards the future, it will be helpful to bolster participant recruitment efforts and to document the process for selecting attendees who receive invitations. In addition, it may be useful to re-examine the best day and time for holding focus groups and to schedule a larger number of participants for each group in anticipation of cancellations or no-shows. By building on the successes of and the lessons learned from the initial groups, future focus groups can give more summit attendees an opportunity to share the ways in which they utilized and integrated their summit experiences into their lives.