In Ohio, state-led commission helps promote culture of fatherhood

Work includes partnerships with state agencies, aid for community programs

by Ohio Rep. Riordan McClain (rep87@ohiohouse.gov)

In Ohio and around the United States, we are facing a fatherhood crisis. According to 2017 U.S. Census Bureau data, one in four American children are being raised without a father in the home. That ratio translates into 19.7 million children—close to 20 million of the nation’s young people lacking a relationship with not just their father, but any father figure in the home. There is no doubt that many of the societal and criminal issues we deal with at state legislatures stem from this fact.

What can government do?

We can’t mandate fatherhood, so how do we break the cycle of broken relationships and help men to be good fathers when they may not have been shown an example of what that looks like by their father? In Ohio, we are making an attempt. We have a state commission that oversees a limited amount of grant dollars to partner with community-based fatherhood programs.

Back in 1999, Peter Lawson Jones (then an Ohio state representative) and others had the vision and foresight to advocate for including fatherhood initiatives in our state budget.

The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood (OCF) was thus created and funded through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds. Funding fluctuated in the early years, with the program even being put on hold in some years. However, since 2007, the commission has been steadily funded and been able to award grants to community-based fatherhood programs across the state.

OCF’s mission: Enhance the well-being of Ohio’s children by providing opportunities for fathers to become better parents, partners and providers. Its work includes:

• developing policy recommendations,
• funding nonprofit/father-based community organizations,
• training fatherhood practitioners to more effectively deliver programming, and
• bringing public awareness to the important role fathers play in their children’s lives.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my public service in the Ohio legislature has been the opportunity to serve on this commission.

The research is clear and convincing — the presence of a healthy and responsible father supports positive outcomes in children.

More support in new state budget

Until 2019, the OCF lacked sufficient resources to fund prevention and early-intervention programming, however, the current biennial budget increased OCF funds thanks to support from our state’s executive and legislative branches.

As a result, the OCF is focusing on programs that prevent premature fatherhood (through work in our state’s middle and high schools) and that equip low-income fathers with the tools they need to provide a secure foundation (emotionally, spiritually, physically and financially) for their children.

The research is clear and convincing — the presence of a healthy and responsible father supports positive outcomes in children. And now more than ever before, the OCF has the backing of our state political leaders to spread this message and help fathers become better parents, partners and providers.

Many states have been looking to Ohio to determine how they can replicate a state fatherhood commission, coalition or initiative.

Considering the many social ills afflicting society today — the drug epidemic, human trafficking, stressed foster care systems, poverty, out-of-wedlock births, incarceration, youth academic and behavioral challenges, etc. — forming a commission on fatherhood makes sense as part of a state’s broader policy response. Such a commission can bring new funding, research and strategies to efforts that aim to enhance the well-being of children.

As a legislator, I’m focused on improving the culture of fatherhood not only by funding community-based programs, but by improving our statutes regarding custody and other parental rights.

Please feel free to reach out to me or our OCF executive director, Kimberly Dent, with questions you have about supporting fatherhood initiatives in your state.

Rep. Riordan McClain has been a member of the Ohio House since 2018 and was appointed to the Commission on Fatherhood in early 2019. He also is a 2019 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development. He can be reached at rep87@ohiohouse.gov. Kimberly Dent, executive director of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood, can be reached at FATHERS@jfs.ohio.gov.

Submissions welcome

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