

**THE ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD
2020 ANNUAL REPORT**

December 31, 2020

www.responsiblefatherhood.com
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MEMBERS

Name	Date appointed	County of residence
Jeffery M. Leving, chairman	3/11/2004	Cook
Phoenix Barnes	12/12/2014	St. Clair
Rodney Byrd	8/22/2005	St. Clair
Diana Durham-McLoud	6/21/2005	Cook
Merri Ex	12/12/2014	Cook
Kirk Harris	1/10/2005	Cook
David Hirsch	1/17/2005	Cook
Faustino Hurtado	12/12/2014	Cook
Leon Intrader	8/22/2005	Lake
Madelyn James	12/12/2014	Cook
Lekevie Johnson	12/12/2014	Champaign
Howard Lathan	7/22/2004	Cook
Gregory Lawrence	12/12/2014	Cook
Mark McConell	12/12/2014	Peoria
Tim O'Grady	4/28/2005	Cook
Jorge Ortiz	12/12/2014	Lake
Yolanda Peppers	9/2/2005	Cook
Lois Rakov	1/24/2005	Cook
Cathy Reed	6/6/2005	Union
Norris Stevenson	6/13/2005	Cook
David Velez Carillo	12/12/2014	Cook

<https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/bac/SitePages/AppointmentsDetail.aspx?BCID=965>

INTRODUCTION

The Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood is a state commission established by the Illinois State Legislature to promote the positive involvement of both parents in the lives of their children. Countless study findings demonstrate how children who grow up in father-absent homes are much more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior. This information indicates that these challenging social problems are symptoms of father absence.

The deterioration of responsible fatherhood over the last half-century has had a devastating effect on American families, and 24 million children live absent from their biological dads in America. In Illinois, it is estimated that 1.1 million children grow up without their fathers present at home. Yet the Fragile Families study found that 80% of the fathers of children born out of wedlock were involved at the birth of their child. The need is great to help those fathers stay involved with their children as they grow, so that the children don't lose their fathers.

There is substantial evidence of the great benefits of appropriate and effective male “father figures/mentors” in the lives of children whose biological fathers are not available to them for various reasons. We have a responsibility to help children who have been born into harsh circumstances and fractured families. To confront this great social challenge in Illinois, the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood (the “Council”) has continued working toward one clear and measurable goal: to significantly increase the proportion of children growing up with an involved and responsible father or a responsible “father figure/mentor” in the state of Illinois. Efforts of the Council are geared to fulfill the mission of the Council: to promote the positive involvement of both parents in the lives of their children.

2020 ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD ACTIVITIES

This was a challenging year in many ways, with the coronavirus pandemic appearing in mid-March, causing schools to close, and prompting the governor to issue a stay-home order. Sports and public events were cancelled, houses of worship were closed and eventually reopened with limited attendance, and some schools reopened but under strict public health protocols.

As unpleasant as this was, it presented an opportunity for fathers who in an ordinary year might have been undervalued. Single and divorced fathers were called upon to take responsibility for their children's education – academic, social and religious – and they largely answered the call. Fathers kept their children focused on their online lessons, and, in the absence of the socialization that school normally provides, fathers imparted to their children the lessons from their lived experience.

In addition to the annual statewide symposium, details on which are below, the Council completed the following activities in 2020:

- The Council prepared a brochure, “Information for Unmarried Fathers,” to be distributed to fathers who are present in their child's life from birth, but who are not married to the mother. The brochure details how such a father can legally establish paternity, and then petition for parenting time if his relationship with the mother should end. The brochure also provides tips on being a responsible father. In 2021, assuming the pandemic wanes, this brochure will be distributed to organizations that work with new unmarried fathers, and possibly to hospitals.
- The Council posted on social media in support of the annual symposium, both before and after, and also recognized fathers on Father's Day and Labor Day, and offered some affirmations and positive thoughts for fathers. The Council's social media also took note of Parental Alienation Awareness Month. Parental alienation is when one parent badmouths the other parent to the children. It's harmful to the children – many experts consider it child abuse – and it's harmful to the subject parent. We must stop parental alienation.
- At the outset of the pandemic, Chairman Leving distributed a press release and recorded a public service announcement for radio and TV providing fathers with information on how to handle court-ordered parenting time under the changed circumstances brought about by the coronavirus.
- Chairman Leving spoke at a press conference in Chicago on Sept. 27 in support of the census, urging fathers to make sure they and their children are counted. The Council then issued a press release on the subject, distributed by Illinois Information Service.

Statewide Symposium

The annual ICRF symposium could not be stopped by the coronavirus. For the first time, the symposium was presented via Zoom, 2-4 p.m. Oct. 24.

Whereas the 2019 symposium in Belleville afforded an opportunity to highlight the important work in support of fatherhood that's happening in the Metro East area, this symposium on Zoom allowed the Council to offer speakers from around the state.

Gov. JB Pritzker provided a letter welcoming the speakers and attendees, which read, in part, as follows:

"I congratulate the Council for your hard work thus far on behalf of your community. This symposium serves as an excellent opportunity for everyone in attendance to come together to promote education, reflect on the past year of achievements, and plan for the future.

"Further, I would like to recognize Jeffery Leving for his dynamic leadership and commitment to promoting responsible fatherhood. Under his leadership, the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood has worked to improve the lives of children and families throughout the state."

Chairman Leving opened the symposium by reminding the audience that the need that the Council serves is a vital one.

"We're here today because we all agree on the importance of fatherhood, and the grim consequences of father absence. Look at the statistics: Children without their father in their lives are twice as likely to drop out of school, and they consistently score lower than the norm on reading and math tests. Children with absent fathers have more accidents and higher rates of asthma, headaches and speech defects, and they're more likely to be crime victims. The most troubling statistic of all is this: Father absence increases by nine times a daughter's vulnerability to rape and sexual abuse. The most reliable predictor of crime in America is father absence," he said. "Those problems are why we do what we do. This is a difficult time. This'll be the one important day where we can focus on the good work that everybody is doing, and the fathers who have found success even under difficult circumstances."

The chairman then introduced State Rep. LaShawn K. Ford, who has initiated legislation to make Illinois a better place for children. Ford talked about the importance of state lawmakers and state agencies seeing the need to promote responsible fatherhood, and the benefit to the state when we achieve it.

The celebrity speaker was Che Smith, the rapper, Grammy Award-winning songwriter, philanthropist, humanitarian and dedicated father known by his stage name Rhymefest.

Rhymefest spoke about forgiveness, relating his personal experience in which the mother of his child didn't allow him to see his daughter because he didn't pay enough child support. He said in response, he withheld money because he felt his daughter was unfairly being held for ransom and consequently, he saw her less. "When I forgave myself for treating the mother the way I did, I was able to just pay what needed to be paid for the child, whether I saw the child or not," he said. "Forgiveness comes in increments of our efforts. The more I didn't ask for anything and did

what I was supposed to do for the child; the less I fought, the less I resisted, the more access I began to have because there was no argument.”

The next speaker was the Hon. George W. Timberlake, a retired judge from the Second Judicial Circuit who went on to serve nine years as chairman of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission. He said many children today are harmed by an unstable relationship between their parents. “The best thing you can do for your child is to love his mother – not necessarily romantically, not for something or in exchange for something, but to provide a path where your child can respect you and learn a lesson to follow good behavior,” the judge said.

Other speakers included Council member Lois Rakov, who provided information on resources for divorced and single fathers; Detective Wayne Halick, who educated listeners on keeping children safe on social media; attorney James M. Hagler, a board member of the Fatherhood Educational Institute, who made the case for video visitation between incarcerated fathers and their children; and Rabbi Rebecca Lesser Dubowe of Moses Montefiore Temple in Bloomington, who spoke on the role of fathers in education.

Chairman Leving concluded by saying that fathers stepped up in the difficult times presented by the pandemic and were essential in helping their children with schooling, as well as keeping them safe.

“In these difficult days, in this difficult year, I hope we stay positive about fathers and the value of fatherhood. Strong, smart, caring, helpful, dedicated dads are needed now as much as ever – and we’re seeing that we have them. Our children depend on them. I think our work to strengthen fatherhood – to make sure everyone who’s in a position to make a difference recognizes the importance of fathers in the upbringing of children – is paying off,” he said.

Media coverage

The symposium was promoted via a press release distributed by IIS and a public announcement distributed through a private email list. Members of the Council also promoted the event to their contact lists.

The symposium was brought to the attention of the public through WGN-TV (Chicago), WIFR-TV (Rockford), the Cromwell Radio Group (Mattoon, Charleston, Effingham), the Chicago *Daily Law Bulletin*, and amplified by the national news aggregators MSN and Newsbreak.

An example of post-symposium coverage comes from WGLT-FM Radio in Normal:
<https://tinyurl.com/y2uyfgt>.

Council Areas of Concern

The areas of concern identified many major issues facing fathers which are in line with the Council's continued work on its mandated mission:

- Health and Wellness
- Funds and Resources
- Employment
- Public Policies
- Legal Obstacles
- Parenting/Parent Education

Identification of Partners

Illinois Council members reached out to numerous community groups to build partnerships to fulfill the mission of the Council and to build awareness and support for fathers and families. Particular efforts were made to identify and work with partners in the identified key areas of concern.

Council Committee Work

Legislation

The Council continued in 2020 to give attention to needed reforms and legislation to ensure that state programs' procedures and government policies are reviewed. For example, interest was high on the need to reduce the negative outcomes experienced by children affected by numerous custody issues, and Council members advocated legislation that would begin child custody proceedings with the presumption that shared parenting is in the best interest of the child.

Fatherhood Resources

One of the primary functions of the Council, as mandated in the Responsible Fatherhood Act, is to generate public awareness of the impact of father absence on children and to assess the needs of fathers in a particular geographic area. The annual symposium, a success from a public policy standpoint, generated significant public relations. The Council has received recognition from the president of the United States and the governor of Illinois.

Council Website

The development and refinement of the Council's website continued throughout 2020. The Council's website at www.responsiblefatherhood.com is a vehicle for generating public awareness of the need for father involvement and the resources available to aid fathers and families. The goal of the website is to be a community resource for responsible fatherhood programs.

Resource Guide

Copies of a summary resource guide were made available by the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood. Selected information from this resource guide can be found in this report and is available on the Council's website's direct link:

<http://responsiblefatherhood.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/ICRF-Datasheet.pdf>

2021 Plans

The Council plans to continue implementing activities and sponsoring outreach that address the identified areas of Council concern such as health, wellness, employment, public policies, legal obstacles and parenting/parent education.

A priority for 2021 will be distribution of the new pamphlet educating new single Fathers on establishing paternity, so they can be a part of their children's lives.

The Council intends to assess the benefits and ideas gained in order to plan another statewide symposium. The focus will be identified by community members and Council members in response to the prior identified focus areas. The broad goals remain: to focus on educating fathers, families, practitioners, and community leaders about fatherhood issues and provide them the practical resources needed to promote responsible fatherhood in their homes and in their communities.

The Council also hopes to receive government funding. This is helpful in order for the Council to enhance its efforts in promoting positive fatherhood involvement in the lives of children throughout Illinois.

Appendix A – Government Fatherhood Resources

Department of Children & Family Services

(312) 808-9040 www.state.il.us/dcfs

Department of Human Services

(312) 793-4131 www.dhs.state.il.us

State of Illinois Government Resources

Child Support – (312) 793-7987 www.childsupportillinois.com

United States Dept. of Health & Human Services

(877) 696-6775 www.hhs.gov

United States Dept. Of Education

(800) 872-5327 www.ed.gov

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearing House

(877) 432-3411 – www.fatherhood.gov

APPENDIX B -- Council Mission Statement

The mission of the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood is to significantly increase the number of children in Illinois that grow up with a responsible father in their lives. We hope to accomplish this through:

- Raising public awareness of the impact of father absence on children;
- Assisting state agencies and other service providers in securing the resources they need to promote responsible fatherhood;
- Reforming perceptions within state agencies and other service providers regarding the role of fathers as parents; and
- Advocating for programs, policies and legislation that will encourage the positive involvement of fathers.

Goals

- To promote father-friendly policies statewide in state and community agencies, faith-based organizations and institutions;
- To provide assistance and resources to local fatherhood groups;
- To build partnerships with state agencies fatherhood program staff and with community and faith-based organizations; and
- To enhance public awareness of the important role of biological fathers and other father figures in the children's development and learning.



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