

**THE ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD
2023 ANNUAL REPORT**

December 31, 2023

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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
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

INTRODUCTION

The Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood is a state commission established by the Illinois State Legislature, and extended indefinitely by executive order, 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 75 years 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 the child grows, so that the children don't become fatherless.

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 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.

2023 ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD ACTIVITIES

The Council in 2023 took stock of the landscape regarding father involvement in the successful upbringing of their children. Chairman Jeffery M. Leving had several articles published addressing these concerns:

- “Congress steps up to help children and families in need,” Chicago Sun-Times, Jan. 2.
- “A federal ban on so-called conversion therapy is past due,” Chicago Tribune, Jan. 16.
- “Helping parents cover high cost of child care benefits families and our economy,” Chicago Sun-Times, Feb. 20.
- “Older men like Robert De Niro should consider more than finances when it comes to having kids,” Chicago Tribune, June 22.
- “Florida gave unmarried fathers equal parental rights. Other states should do it, too,” Miami Herald, June 27.
- “Illinois needs to put children first and give fathers equal rights,” Chicago Tribune, Aug. 15.
- “Deion Sanders is a much-needed hero right now,” Boulder, Colo. Daily Camera, Sept. 14.

Also, Chairman Leving, along with attorney Arthur S. Kallow, a board member of the Fatherhood Educational Institute, spoke on WCIU-TV around Father’s Day on the subject of equal shared parenting. Many studies support the premise that when parents are separated or divorced, often the best option for raising children is shared parenting.

In one study, the American Psychological Association found children in joint custody arrangements reported fewer behavioral and emotional problems. They also had higher self-esteem and school performance when compared with children in sole custody arrangements.

In another report, a clinical psychiatrist reviewed over 50 studies on joint physical custody and found that children who spent a minimum of 35% of their time with each parent did better socially, academically and psychologically.

However, according to another recent study, children with divorced parents in Illinois spend just 23% of their time each year with their fathers – fourth from the bottom in the nation. The study looked at situations that did not have extenuating circumstances – in other words, these were cases where parenting time could have been closer to equal.

In recent years, legislation has been introduced in the Illinois House of Representatives that would instruct judges to begin custody disputes with the presumption that equal shared parenting is in the best interests of the children. Litigants would be allowed to present evidence to the contrary, if there is any, but the case would start at 50-50. Fathers would not have to fight to get to this point; they’d be starting there.

“I support this legislation, and in my public speaking appearances, nothing I say gets more support than the idea that custody should be 50-50, unless there’s a significant reason to

deviate,” Leving said on television. “Parenting should not be a competition. When it comes to children whose parents are divorced or separated, I believe the best parent is both parents.”

In addition to the annual statewide symposium, 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. The Council marked Black History Month, and offered affirmations and positive thoughts for fathers.

Statewide Symposium

The ICRF annual symposium is the Council’s main activity for the year. It brings together individuals and organizations that work to make Illinois a better place for fathers to raise children.



Photo at the ICRF annual symposium held Sept. 30, 2023 in Galesburg, Illinois

The 2023 symposium was presented from 12 p.m. -2 p.m. Sept. 30, 2023 at the Galesburg Public Library in Galesburg, Illinois. The Council was pleased to involve the Galesburg community. The Council gathered an excellent lineup of speakers who were knowledgeable about the needs of fathers in Illinois, and the obstacles they can face.

Chairman Leving, in his opening remarks, made the overarching case for fathers: “Good fathers are proper parents who deserve time with their children, and their children NEED their fathers in their lives,” he said. “Tangibly, it helps them educationally, with their health and with their life outcomes. Intangibly, you can’t put a number on the benefits of a loving and protecting relationship between a father and his children. Children with involved fathers, as a group, grow up with better health, better academic performance and are less likely to be involved in crime, either as offenders, victims or both.”

The symposium included an all-star roster of community leaders:

- Mayor **Peter Schwartzman** talked about how the birth of his two daughters caused him to care about his adopted hometown, and eventually enter politics. From his vantage



Mayor Peter Schwartzman

point as mayor, he said he recognizes the need for all of us to help children – by volunteering more, and even just by conversing with kids, to hear and understand their concerns, and to let them know what’s expected of them.

“I want all of us to try to do a bit more,” the mayor said. “All the children in Galesburg are our children.”

- Knox College men’s basketball coach **Ben Davis** gave a deeply informative presentation to help parents whose children are in the process of selecting a college to attend, particularly if they’re student-athletes. Knox College is classified in NCAA Division III, so it does not offer athletic scholarships. However, athletes who are recruited to Knox, and other Division III schools, can access financial aid based on need.

Coach Davis said parents and children should take into account affordability early in the process: Assess their own family resources, the willingness of the student to incur debt, and the availability of scholarships and other financial aid to gain an estimate of cost before establishing a short list.

- Next was a presentation on an excellent program operated by Regional Office of Education No. 33 in Henderson, Knox, Mercer and Warren counties. The program is the Early Childhood Family Literacy Program, which provides home visits to families of newborns to teach them how to raise a child to be physically and mentally prepared for school when they reach school age.



Chairman Leving, Coach Ben Davis

Tara Case, the director of the program, told the audience that instructors give new parents exercises that will develop their young child’s motor skills, listening ability, eyesight, ability to stand and walk, and to start to read.

Clients are often referred to the program via doctors, courts or other service providers who may believe help is needed in a specific home. However, the program is open to any family that requests it.

- One of the Council's ongoing concerns is fathers who struggle economically. If they're married, this can strain their marriage to the point of breaking. It can make it hard to meet their children's needs, in terms of education, extracurricular activity, medical and dental care, not to mention the basics of food, clothing and shelter.

The Council believes we must help fathers who are just a step away from doing better economically. Maybe they need one course at a community college or a trade school, or a few hours of training to get the certification needed to get a better job. But they don't know how or where to access that, or maybe they don't have the few hundred or maybe \$1,000 to pay for it.

Emily Collins and **Lucas Robison** of Carl Sandberg College gave a presentation on that very help being available in Galesburg. They spoke about how to enroll, how to apply for financial aid, and they detailed the type of training that's available that correlates directly with jobs that need filling in Galesburg – particularly welding, and nursing at all levels.

- **Maureen Gorman**, president of the Fatherhood Educational Institute, spoke about the Kids Online Safety Act, a piece of federal legislation that, if enacted, would set a new legal standard for the Federal Trade Commission and state attorneys general, allowing them to police social media companies that fail to prevent kids from seeing harmful content on their platforms, such as content that glamorizes eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse and gambling. It would also ban kids 13 and under from using social media at all, and require companies to acquire parental consent before allowing children under 17 to use their platforms.

The measure has advanced out of a U.S. Senate committee, but faces an uncertain future based on First Amendment concerns. Gorman argued that the law wouldn't interfere with free speech. It would instead limit the ability of those under a certain age to see it.

- We also heard from the **Rev. James Hailey III**, who runs a 10-year-old program in Galesburg schools called Streak Dads, where volunteers serve as father figures during the school day to offer students advice, break up fights and keep them on the right track.

In his concluding remarks, Chairman Leving made note of the need to help children, through the positive involvement of both parents.

"The percentage of children born out of wedlock in this country is 40%," he said. "Here in Illinois, it's a tiny bit lower, at 39.5%. As a result, many children start out without parents who are supported by traditional marriage - and over time, marriages break up. We can't let this be a bad thing for children – and we don't have to."

“Numerous studies have shown that emotional stability means more to children than the marital status of their parents. In a large study published in 2012, Michael Lamb, a psychology professor and child development expert at Cambridge University, examined thousands of studies on childhood adjustment after divorce. After analyzing four decades of research, Professor Lamb concluded that:

- Children do better with both parents active in their lives, whether those parents are married or not.
- Emotional stability is the most important aspect of parenting post-divorce.
- Children do not need the most expensive toys or parents who compete to buy the best gifts. They just need food, shelter and a safe and loving home.

“This is why we’re promoting paternal involvement – because the best parent is both parents.”

– Chairman Jeffery M. Leving

Media coverage

The symposium was promoted on WCBU-FM, public radio in Peoria, as well as WQAD-TV, Ch. 8 in Moline.

Information also was provided to WGIL Radio on Galesburg, the Galesburg Register-Star, The Burg, a local weekly newspaper, and radio and TV stations in Peoria and the Quad Cities.

In addition, members of the Council promoted the event to their contact lists, notice of the symposium was distributed by the Knox County Human Services Council, and it was announced at the Galesburg City Council Meeting on Sept. 25.

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 2023 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 2023. 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>

2024 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.

The 2024 symposium is tentatively being planned for the Chicago suburbs, with a date and exact location to be determined.

A priority for 2024 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 plans to seek funding and identify person(s) from the Council, partners and the community who are able to collaborate to pursue grant opportunities. 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 plan 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.
- 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.
- To enhance public awareness of the important role of biological fathers and other father figures in the children's development and learning.

Jeffery M. Leving, Chairman
Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood

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