

WHITE PAPER:

Elevating Father Inclusion and Engagement with the Father-Readiness Network Assessment™

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fathers play a pivotal role in the safety, well-being, and healthy development of children. Their involvement is linked to improved emotional, social, and educational outcomes, as well as reduced behavioral challenges. Yet, despite decades of evidence underscoring these benefits, fathers remain underrepresented in many human service programs. This “fatherhood gap” persists due to systemic barriers, implicit biases, and organizational practices that inadvertently exclude or overlook fathers.

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) developed the Father-Readiness Network Assessment™ (FRNA) to address this challenge. The FRNA provides human service networks with a data-driven, system-level evaluation of their readiness to include and engage fathers effectively. Leveraging NFI’s Father Friendly Check-Up™, the FRNA identifies strengths, gaps, and actionable strategies across leadership, organizational culture, program design, and community engagement.

An analysis of 13 FRNAs conducted nationwide found that every network assessed had room to improve. The assessments consistently revealed significant gaps in organizations’ ability to include and engage fathers effectively. They also illuminated where networks could develop customized solutions.

This white paper explores the need for organizational capacity assessments for father engagement, outlines the FRNA’s approach, and presents insights from these 13 assessments.¹

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¹ Kansas Department for Children and Families, Ounce Of Prevention Fund of Florida, Maryland Department of Health, Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, Georgia Department of Public Health, Family Support Organization of Essex County (NY), Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County (FL), Commonwealth Center for Fathers & Families (KY), Care Net, Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP) and National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), Ohio Commission on Fatherhood, and Summit County Public Health.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over the last several decades, research has made one conclusion clear: engaged fathers matter. Fathers who are actively involved in their children's lives contribute to better academic performance, fewer behavioral problems, greater emotional well-being, and stronger family relationships. Father engagement also supports maternal well-being, promotes healthy behaviors, and reduces parenting stress.

However, these benefits are often unrealized within the human service sector. Many child welfare, early childhood, and family support programs still operate with a service model that is primarily mother-oriented. Fathers frequently encounter policies, procedures, and environments that signal—intentionally or not—that they are peripheral rather than essential to their children's development and overall well-being.

To address these systemic issues, several formal organizational assessment tools have been developed outside of National Fatherhood Initiative®'s work, including:

- **Serving Young Fathers: An Assessment and Checklist for Organizations (Office of Population Affairs, HHS)** – a self-assessment tool for agencies working specifically with young fathers.
- **Organizational Self-Assessment of Father Friendly Services (First 5 Alameda County, CA)** – designed for agencies aligning with Alameda County's Father-Friendly Principles.
- **Assessment Guide on Father-Inclusive Practices (Connecticut Department of Social Services)** – a self-assessment and discussion guide for organizations evaluating their capacity to welcome and serve fathers.
- **The Dakota Father Friendly Assessment (DFFA)** – a survey tool for early childhood programs such as Head Start.
- **Toolkit for Building System Capacity to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare (Mathematica for ACF)** – a team-based self-assessment focused on child welfare systems.

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While valuable in their respective domains, these tools are generally limited to specific populations or service areas—such as child welfare, early childhood education, or programs for young fathers. This narrow scope makes it difficult to apply their insights across diverse human service networks. Their design often reflects the policies, terminology, and operational realities of a single field, meaning that organizations outside that sector may find them irrelevant, difficult to adapt to, or incompatible with their own structures.

This lack of a universally applicable, cross-sector tool for measuring and improving father engagement capacity was a driving force behind the FRNA's creation. The FRNA can be applied across program types, sectors, and geographic regions, enabling a standardized yet customizable approach that captures the full picture of father readiness across an entire network.

Organizational capacity—the combination of resources, infrastructure, staff knowledge and skills, culture, climate, and partnerships—determines whether a program can meaningfully and consistently include and engage fathers. Formal assessments of this capacity are an essential first step toward systemic improvement, providing a roadmap for targeted changes in leadership priorities, staff training, program content, and community partnerships.

THE FATHER INCLUSION & ENGAGEMENT GAP

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of father involvement, many human service organizations lack the policies, procedures, training, and cultural readiness needed to include and engage fathers effectively. This gap between intention and implementation manifests in several ways:

- **Structural Barriers:** Intake forms, communication practices, and program schedules are often designed with mothers in mind, making father inclusion and engagement more difficult.
- **Implicit Bias:** Staff attitudes—sometimes subconscious—can influence how fathers are perceived and engaged.
- **Program Design Limitations:** Services may not reflect fathers' needs, interests, or schedules, reducing both accessibility and impact.
- **Limited Community Integration:** Partnerships that could connect fathers to employment, parenting support, and other resources are often underdeveloped.
- **Lack of Measurement:** Without formal, system-level assessments, organizations struggle to identify where gaps exist or how progress can be measured over time.

The nearly complete absence of any structured assessment approaches means missed opportunities to strengthen family systems, improve outcomes for children, and address disparities in service access for fathers. The Father-Readiness Network Assessment™ (FRNA) addresses these challenges by providing a standardized yet adaptable framework for assessing and improving father engagement capacity across an entire network, regardless of sector. By moving from good intentions to measurable action, organizations can close the fatherhood gap and build stronger, more resilient communities.

Bridging the Gap in Father Inclusion and Engagement

For decades, National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) has been at the forefront of strengthening families by building human service organizations' capacity to include and engage fathers. We understand that doing this within human service organizations is not just a best practice; it's essential for the well-being of children, families, and communities. Yet, many organizations and networks face challenges in implementing consistent and effective father-inclusive efforts.

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To address this critical need, NFI developed the FRNA, a comprehensive approach to evaluating and enhancing the capacity of human service organizations to include and engage fathers in their programs and services.

Our work with numerous government agencies and non-profits reveals a common truth: while the intention to include and engage fathers is often high, the actual implementation of father-inclusive efforts frequently lags. Across diverse networks, from state health departments to home visiting programs and social service agencies, a consistent pattern emerges: there is significant *room to improve* father friendliness.

This gap between intention and action can manifest in various ways, from program designs that inadvertently exclude fathers to organizational cultures that do not fully support father-inclusive approaches. Without a clear understanding of specific strengths and challenges, organizations struggle to implement effective, sustainable improvements.

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INTRODUCING THE FATHER-READINESS NETWORK ASSESSMENT™ (FRNA)

The **Father-Readiness Network Assessment™ (FRNA)** is NFI's collaborative service that provides a data-driven assessment of a network's readiness to include and engage fathers. It leverages the online **Father Friendly Check-Up™ (FFCU)**, a reliability- and validity-supported tool completed by staff from participating organizations, to gather insights into how well each location (e.g., office or site) engages fathers and whether its culture, policies, and procedures foster a supportive environment.²

The FFCU evaluates organizations' cultures across four assessment categories:



Leadership Development

Attitudes, beliefs, and values of employees and their impact on program and service delivery.



Organizational Development

The “nuts and bolts” of an organization, including policies, procedures, processes, and physical environment.



Program Development

The services and programs offered, staff engagement in delivery, and promotion.



Community Engagement

The ability of an organization to engage its community and partners in father-friendly efforts.

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How the FRNA Works: A Tailored Approach

NFI collaborates closely with the lead agency of a network to customize each FRNA. This includes identifying specific variables for analysis that are most relevant to the network's structure and goals. Common variables chosen by lead agencies include:

- **Staff Roles and Types:** Understanding perspectives across management, frontline staff, home visitors, etc.
- **Staff tenure and experience:** Understanding the perspective of staff, depending on their length of service, relates to the organization or program they represent.
- **Program Models and Types:** Assessing effectiveness within specific program designs (e.g., home visiting, parenting education, and fatherhood-specific programs).
- **Organizational Structure:** Analyzing differences across regions, jurisdictions, or agency types (e.g., non-profit, government, and faith-based).
- **Program Maturity:** Examining how father inclusion and engagement evolves in programs of varying ages.

² Evidence (2025 item-level, human service organizations in New York): $\alpha=.977$; $KMO=.773$; known-groups by staff role, $\Delta=+0.54$ (higher among direct staff; $p=.00089$, $\delta=.496$); exploratory four-factor structure aligned to FFCU categories.

After staff complete the FFCU, NFI analyzes the aggregated data, providing the lead agency with a comprehensive report that highlights:

- **Overall Father-Readiness Scores:** A clear picture of the network's current state.
- **Performance within Each Assessment Category:** Detailed insights into specific strengths and areas needing improvement across Leadership, Organizational, Program, and Community Development.
- **Insights by Chosen Variables:** How father-readiness varies across different staff roles, program types, regions, etc.
- **Customized Recommendations:** Actionable steps tailored to the network's unique findings.

Key Insights from 13 FRNA Assessments: A Pattern of Progress

An analysis of 13 FRNAs conducted for diverse networks nationwide reveals consistent patterns and critical areas for improvement:



Universal Opportunity for Growth

All 13 assessments concluded that there is room to improve the father readiness of the participating organizations. This consistent finding underscores the universal need for targeted strategies to enhance father inclusion and engagement.



Program Development

A consistent challenge across multiple networks, Program Development consistently emerged as the lowest-scoring assessment category. This indicates a widespread need to refine the actual services, curricula, and resources offered to fathers to make them more accessible and impactful.



Community Engagement

A downstream focus, while crucial, Community Engagement often scored lower than internal assessment areas. Our recommendations frequently emphasize strengthening internal capacities (Leadership, Organizational, and Program Development) before extensive external community engagement efforts, suggesting a natural progression in building father-friendly networks.



Uncovering Internal Dynamics

The FRNA consistently illuminates critical differences in perception and practice among staff. For example, management sometimes assesses their organization as being more father-friendly than the frontline staff does. As is the case for longer tenured staff, they score their organizations as being more father-friendly than newer staff. These insights are vital for developing targeted training and support.

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Actionable, Tailored Recommendations

Based on these findings, NFI provides customized, practical recommendations that frequently include:

Areas for Improvement

1. **Targeted Training:** Leveraging NFI's Father Engagement Certificate™ and other resources to equip staff with the knowledge and skills to effectively include and engage fathers.
2. **Strategic Action Planning:** Guiding networks in developing concrete action plans with short-term and long-term goals.
3. **Identifying “Bright Spots”:** Highlighting successful strategies within the network that can be replicated and scaled.
4. **Measuring Progress:** Recommending follow-up assessments (typically within 6-12 months) to quantitatively track improvement and demonstrate impact.

Benefits for Your Organization and Network

By undertaking an FRNA, your organization and network can:

1. **Gain a Clear Baseline:** Understand your current level of father-readiness across key operational areas.
2. **Identify Specific Gaps:** Pinpoint exactly where improvements are most needed, moving beyond general assumptions.
3. **Uncover Internal Discrepancies:** Understand how different staff roles or program types impact father inclusion and engagement efforts.
4. **Receive Customized Guidance:** Benefit from actionable, data-driven recommendations tailored to your network's unique context.
5. **Track Progress Over Time:** Use reassessments to measure the effectiveness of implemented strategies and demonstrate tangible improvement in father inclusion and engagement.
6. **Enhance Service Delivery:** Ultimately, improve your capacity to effectively serve fathers, leading to stronger families and better outcomes for children.

Equip staff with the knowledge and skills to effectively include and engage fathers.

CONCLUSION

The evidence is clear: fathers matter, and organizations that effectively engage them strengthen families, improve child outcomes, and build healthier communities. Yet, across sectors, a persistent gap remains between the intention to include and engage fathers and the consistent, effective implementation of father-inclusive practices. Structural barriers, implicit biases, and program limitations continue to hinder progress, and without structured assessment, these issues often remain hidden.

The Father-Readiness Network Assessment™ (FRNA) offers a practical, data-driven solution to set organizations in the right direction toward holistic father inclusion and engagement. By evaluating leadership, organizational culture, program design, and community engagement across entire networks, the FRNA identifies both strengths to build on and critical areas for improvement. Tailored recommendations ensure that change is not just aspirational but actionable—and measurable.

The next step is clear: move from assumption to evidence, from fragmented efforts to coordinated strategies, and from good intentions to measurable results. Partner with National Fatherhood Initiative® to assess your network's readiness, implement targeted improvements, and track your progress over time. Together, we can close the father inclusion and engagement gap to ensure every father has the opportunity, encouragement, and support to be the best parent he can be.

Now is the time to act—because when fathers thrive, families thrive.

Visit: fatherhood.org/collaborate

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