



**TESTIMONY OF MAGISTRATE JUDGE MILTON LEE,  
FAMILY COURT OF THE SUPERIOR COURT OF  
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
ON THE *FATHERING COURT INITIATIVE***

**BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INCOME SECURITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT  
OF THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE**

**JUNE 17, 2010**

Chairman McDermott, Subcommittee members, I am Milton Lee, Magistrate Judge in the Family Court of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. I have been a magistrate judge for 12 years, and in the Family Court for 5 years. For the past three years, I have presided over the Fathering Court Calendar, which has been a challenging assignment, but an incredibly rewarding one. I appreciate being asked to share my experiences and observations with you today. I am here today with the Presiding Judge of the Family Court, William Jackson.

We developed the D.C. Fathering Court Initiative based on a model developed in Kansas City to address the issue of fathers returning from a period of incarceration who were not just financially unsupportive of their children, but emotionally unengaged as well. If there is one thing I have learned in my two plus years working with the men in this program, it is that the majority of men *want* to be good fathers, to provide for their children, to support them not just financially but also emotionally....they just don't necessarily have the tools.

The D.C. Fathering Court Initiative is not rocket science and it is not magic. Being a father is neither of the above. I have teenaged son. I personally can tell you that being a father can be hard work, it can test your patience, your understanding, your wallet! But I can also tell you that it is by far the most rewarding thing I have ever done. And by no means is that unique to me and my son.

The Fathering Court program gives men the opportunity to be good dads: through our partnerships with the D.C. government and local non-profits, we make sure that men are employed soon after they begin the Fathering Court program. That gives them the funds to pay child support and it gives them the self-respect that they need to start interacting with their children in a positive way. Next we get them enrolled in the Quenching the Fathering Thirst course. This is a thirteen-week course that teaches men the essentials of the father-child relationship and develops their emotional skills to enable them to be good dads. And I can tell you that once these men have a job, start paying child support, get reacquainted with their children, they feel that they *can't* re-offend....they've got too much to lose!

Here's how our program works. We get referrals from probation and parole officers, from judges, and from the D.C. Office of Attorney General's Child Support outreach section. Most of the men are on some type of supervision after being in prison.. We contact the men, and the mothers of their children as well. This program is entirely voluntary and everyone must *want* to be in the program. If the children's mother doesn't want the father to be in the Fathering Court

Initiative, the family cannot participate: the mother's willingness to forgive, if not forget, is essential for the program to work. And I realize that in some cases that is asking a lot of the mother. Dad may have disappointed them - and their children - many a time; he may be a disappointment *today*. But what we have in this program is an opportunity to change what dad is going to be *tomorrow*.

The Fathering Court program involves four key components: 1) the court and its partners provide employment opportunities for the father, 2) the father then pays child support, 3) the father does not re-offend, and 4) the father attends class and begins building a relationship with his children. While providing employment opportunities is a real benefit to the recently-incarcerated father, the program requires so much more. We aim for them to be in my courtroom within two weeks of being released. From then on I see most respondents about once a month, about three times more often than other child support respondents. They must enroll in the fathering class and will be monitored closely by case managers who develop a specific plan designed to link the participant to whatever services might be necessary. Most participants are enrolled in basic financial management classes while others are enrolled in educational and vocational programs. Through intensive case management services we strive to match a participant's need with existing services in the District of Columbia.

The Fathering Court program is a partnership - between the Court and several D.C. agencies and local non-profits. We work with the D.C. Office of Attorney General Child Support Services Division, which represents the custodial parents and the children; we work with the D.C. Department of Employment Services (DOES), specifically with their Project Empowerment program, which provides subsidized employment for participants. We work with EDSI - Educational Data Systems, Inc. - a private job counseling and placement firm that also finds jobs for the men in the program. The Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative provides case management services for us and is responsible for the Quenching the Fathering Thirst course that the fathers are required to take. The D.C. Department of Human Services' Fathering Initiative helps us with services for families in the program. And there are other private sector partners too numerous to mention - private firms and banks that help with financial management, Concerned Black Men provides mentoring...I could go on and on. This isn't rocket science and it isn't magic, but it is by no means a 'one man band.'

Thirty-seven men are currently participating in the Fathering Court Initiative program. I expect that ten will graduate at the end of this year. Let me underscore

that I do not expect that the remaining participants will fail to complete the program, it's just that the program takes about a year to complete and only those who have completed the program in its entirety can graduate. Some will drop out; as I said, it is a rigorous program. But interestingly, we have had only one participant recidivate. There have been some who have not wanted to keep up with the program, didn't want to attend class once a week, or have gotten involved in substance abuse again, but only one has been re-arrested.

What I find most encouraging about this program is how well it works for those who "buy in" to it. Those who are committed to the program and to their kids are usually employed within 30 to 60 days. The jobs aren't glamorous and they aren't high paying. But the men make decent salaries and several have been promoted. And as most parents will acknowledge, being a parent isn't glamorous and it certainly isn't easy. But those men who are committed to re-establishing or creating a good relationship with their kids, who are willing to put in the time for that, find it incredibly rewarding. Our experience has demonstrated that the vast majority of participants want to be part to be part of the program.

If I have one message for this Subcommittee, for Congress, it is this: we can help men become the responsible fathers that most of them want to be. They need a job in order to pay their court-ordered child support. And many of them need to learn some key parenting skills and come to understand what it means to be a dad. If you give men those two things, you change their lives and the lives of their children. I can tell you that they are different: they feel good about themselves, they have something - or rather, *someone* - to live for. In short, they are invested in their jobs, their communities, their families. This type of program can help us develop good fathers and reduce recidivism. How can we afford *not* to do it?

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Subcommittee members, for the opportunity to testify about DC's Fathering Court Initiative. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.