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### **Court Initiative Helps Strengthen Paternal Bonds, Financial Support**

by Valencia Mohammed  
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Fathering Court graduates celebrated with their family and friends at the closing ceremony on Jan. 28. (Courtesy Photo)

It was a big celebration for handful of fathers who completed one year of rigorous scrutiny by a dozen agencies working together under one program to help them get back on their feet. Unlike traditional court monitoring agencies, this program centered on fathers and their children. Some willingly sought help, others were forced by the courts to participate yet, ultimately, all seemed thankful someone intervened in their lives.

Beaming with a sense of accomplishment, Anthony Best, 36, sat proudly waiting for the festivities to begin on Jan. 28. Best spent time in Rivers Correctional Facility for a drug distribution charge. He signed up to participate in the program before his release via teleconference. "There's no doubt about

it; this program has helped me become a better dad," Best said. Best found jobs with several businesses until he landed one in the District government with the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs for over a year. He has been working there under contract due to the hiring freeze.

"The program gave me the contacts and support that I needed to address my concerns and achieve each goal that I set. It gave me the tools to deal with my son. Now it's up to me to set all the tools into action," said Best.

Theresa A. Johnson, 53, Best's aunt, came by to cheer her nephew while on lunch break. "We can definitely tell a difference in Anthony. Now he spends more time with his son. Thanks to this program and the fact that he did what he had to do to change his ways, Anthony's going to be a great father," said Johnson.

The Fathering Court is an innovative program that helps support and connects fathers to their families. The initiative combines needs-assessment, skill development opportunities, case management, peer support, completion of a mandatory curriculum and putting non-custodial parents in contact with community resources with an emphasis on employment to give those returning from prison the ability to meet the needs of their children. Other services include housing assistance and referrals, substance abuse treatment and counseling, mediation services, and legal assistance.

Kevin Ross, 34, now has a job at Giant Food Stores. He also embraced the changes he decided to make in his life.

"Now I believe in learning how to live to provide for my daughter in the right way. I will never allow anybody to rent space in my head and lead me into a life of crime that will take me from my daughter ever again," said Ross.

Judge Zoe Bush, presiding judge of the District's Family Court, smiled as she listened to the many accomplishments of the graduates. "Just knowing what these fathers have accomplished to ensure the next generation of kids will have a secure future and live in homes where both parents are involved in their lives, makes it all worthwhile," said Bush.

According to the DC Superior Court, one in four D.C. prisoners owes court-ordered child support. Ex-offenders return to the community having had limited contact with their children, owing money and facing the challenge of finding employment in order to provide for themselves and their children. This program works to help these fathers reconnect with their children, not just financially, but emotionally.

To make sure all entities that have a direct effect on the lives of ex-offenders were involved, the Fathering Court partnered with The Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division, The Department of Human Services fathering Initiative, the Department of Employment Services Project Empowerment, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), Mayor Services Liaison Office, Justice Grants Administration, University of the District of Columbia, Educational Data Systems Inc., Capital Area Asset Builders, Addiction, Prevention and Recovery Administration, U.S. Attorney's Office, U.S. Department of Justice, and the U.S. Department of Labor.

CSOSA provided referrals to the Fathering Court and applied for grants to sponsor the program. "We are been very proud of the graduates and the success of the court," said Nancy Ware, 60, management analyst for CSOSA.

Looking toward the future, Best and his colleagues agreed the one thing that is needed is "access to career-type jobs."

"In order for this program to work effectively for the long term, we need career-type jobs with full benefits, retirement and longevity," Best said as the other graduates shook their heads in agreement.