



# DHS News

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## **CYF training department helps caseworkers engage fathers**

Two members of the training department in the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) have started an initiative that is working hard to put father engagement on the radar.

The Father Engagement Training Initiative, led by Alan Butera and Curtis Miller, has a vision of "a workforce that values father involvement and provides equitable engagement and quality servicing for fathers involved with Allegheny County CYF." Work on the initiative began in 2019 with a literature review. After reading scholarly articles about child welfare and father engagement, the pair discovered several key takeaways: there is a need to continuously address staff bias and challenges in working with fathers; the system needs to improve inclusion, communication and responsiveness with fathers; child welfare staff needs to better understand the barriers to father engagement; and, most importantly, children experience social, emotional and physical health benefits when their fathers are involved in their lives.

To see how these concepts come into play locally, Alan and Curtis held two caseworker focus groups. While all participants agreed that children need their fathers, the caseworkers said there are many barriers to father engagement, including time constraints and large caseloads, concerns about staff and family safety, an inability to locate the father, and larger system issues like a lack of available programming for fathers.

In April 2020, Alan and Curtis collaborated with CYF's father engagement specialists, the Health Department, youth engagement learning specialists and Allegheny Family Network to deliver a three-part training series for all new caseworker hires. The trainings provide background information on the importance of father engagement, and cover strategies to address bias and build positive engagements between caseworkers and fathers. One of the most important parts of the training is the final session where caseworkers participate in a simulation with an actor. The actors – many are local men who have lived experience with child welfare – portray a standardized client who is based on a real, de-identified father that was served by CYF. During the simulation, caseworkers have hands-on experience implementing the skills and tools they have learned through the training. Caseworkers then participate in a debrief with father

engagement experts to learn opportunities for improvement. More than 100 caseworkers have been trained over the last year.

“Father engagement hasn’t historically been a priority within the child welfare system, but literature reveals that healthy father involvement is linked to better outcomes for children on key measures of child wellbeing, including cognitive development, educational achievement, self-esteem, and pro-social behavior,” said Alan. “It’s critical for child welfare systems to value father engagement and equip staff with the tools and skills to improve their engagement efforts and relationships with fathers. These trainings are an important first step.”

Moving forward, Alan and Curtis have several goals for the initiative, including ongoing education, building and strengthening community partnerships, advocating for more services for fathers, working on a father-focused partnership with a local university, and developing a Fatherhood Leadership Engagement and Education Team (FLEET) that will create stronger messaging about fathers to influence practice.

To learn more about this work, contact Curtis Miller and/or Alan Butera at [Curtis.Miller@AlleghenyCounty.US](mailto:Curtis.Miller@AlleghenyCounty.US) and [Alan.Butera@AlleghenyCounty.US](mailto:Alan.Butera@AlleghenyCounty.US).