

FOSTERING FATHERS

By ROBERT DOAR

June 16, 2008 -- ANOTHER Father's Day has passed - with New York City, and the nation, still facing a crisis of absentee fathers. As city Human Resources commissioner, I'm particularly aware of how that crisis is preventing further gains in reducing poverty.

For 12 years, our city's welfare policies have focused on work requirements for single mothers. This effort led to big gains in employment and earnings, huge drops in welfare caseloads - and reduced child poverty. But to do more, we need to focus on fathers, too.

A father is vital to his children's emotional and financial stability - and men who father children have a fundamental duty to provide for their children. Their financial support can lift children from poverty, and their advice, love and encouragement can't be replaced by a government program.

Yes, many single moms make heroic - and successful - efforts to raise their kids. But the outcomes for most single-parent families are less bright.

Nationwide, children from single-parent families are more likely than their peers in two-parent families to drop out of school and to rely on public assistance as adults. In New York City, 68 percent of children in poverty are from single-parent families.

Many absent fathers are low-income young men - far too often, not working at all. Since welfare reform began last decade, such men have seen falling rates of employment - even as employment rates for low-income single mothers improved significantly.

Poor mothers and fathers have almost the same rates of work, recent studies show-and the dads don't have the day-to-day responsibility of caring for the children.

Unemployed men are hard-pressed to support their kids; if they stay out of work long, few feel able to serve as positive role models. And they typically encounter the social-service system only when we're chasing them for child-support payments or when they hit bottom - landing in prison or a homeless shelter.

To move ahead on welfare reform, we need to now turn our policies to the men - to encourage and reward work and more constructive involvement with their children.

Last fall, Mayor Bloomberg led this effort by calling on Congress to significantly expand the federal Earned Income Tax Credit for (among others) non-custodial parents.

The mayor insisted that the credit provide the right incentives by proposing three important changes:

* Require a minimum amount of work so that the EITC doesn't morph into the old welfare program - all benefit and little personal responsibility.

* Deny the benefit to dads who don't comply with court-ordered child support.

* Eliminate the benefit's significant marriage penalty.

Here in New York City, we've been working to re-align our services to support these goals. The Department of Corrections, for example, is working to ensure that the fathers it releases to our communities get jobs and connect with their kids.

But, as we learned with single mothers during welfare reform, good work programs should do more. So we're also connecting them to health coverage and other supports to help these low-income workers provide for their families.

HRA has opened up our employment program, which until now focused almost entirely on single mothers on welfare, to poor absent fathers. We'll supplement this service with parenting education, because children need financial and emotional support.

We're also reforming child-support-enforcement to respond appropriately to a non-custodial parent who wants to support his children but faces a court-ordered obligation out of whack with his income.

Other agencies are involved, too. Through its Fatherhood Initiative, the city Division of Youth and Community Development helps more than 2,000 fathers and children connect through community-based programs for young dads.

And last week, the city launched NYC DADS, a citywide public-education campaign celebrating the important role that fathers play in their children's lives.

Too often, the public-policy conversation about noncustodial dads and their children gets bogged down by the question of whether government should promote marriage. It's a mistake to get stuck in that ideological debate when both sides can agree on so much.

By targeting our policies today to bring men more fully into the workforce - and then into the lives of their children - we can take our next big step in combating child poverty and dependency in America. There's no time to waste.

Robert Doar is the commissioner of the city Human Resources Administration.