The following executive summary serves to provide our partners at The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) with an update on First 5 LA’s “Engaging Fathers” investment in Los Angeles County. Inclusive of policy and system level changes, First 5 LA, its grantees and partners are producing Service Delivery Systems improvements to help reentry fathers engage in the lives of their children prenatal to age 5.

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On November 14, 2013, the First 5 LA Board of Commissioners approved $600,000 to study and align services essential to the successful reintegration of L.A. County fathers with their children and families after incarceration. The agency's investment emphasizes collaborations, partnerships, decision making and service access to inform and advance the field's advocacy of system and policy changes.

Findings from a two-year study of best practices and strategies, input from focus group sessions, and the determination for complementary systems changes to support OFA’s *New Pathways for Fathers and Families* led to the September 2016 issuance of First 5 LA’s Engaging Fathers Request for Proposals (RFP). Eligible respondents — L.A. County agencies currently receiving New Pathways funding — were invited to cite their qualifications to mitigate barriers, impact policy and change systems for fathers who are previously, currently, or at risk of being placed on probation or in foster care. The intent is to help them further their education, obtain stable employment, or become more positively engaged as parents and caregivers.

Three selected grantees form the *Engaging Fathers* collective: Children’s Institute, Inc., Friends Outside in Los Angeles County (FOLA), and the City of Long Beach; with technical assistance provided by the National Compadres Network (NCN). Their key drivers are to infuse existing systems with father-friendly approaches and change policy and practices, and to provide support for men as they address life challenges and initiate/adopt parenting approaches in a healthy, strength-based manner.
**IMPACTING SYSTEMS**

**Children’s Institute, Inc. (CII)** is a current grantee of First 5 LA and recipient of the *New Pathways for Fathers and Families* funding from OFA. As part of our local endeavors, CII has utilized the collective efforts of community collaborators, systems administrators, and environmental support activities to hone service access and delivery. Their advancements are setting new stages for increased father engagement in family strengthening, and improvements in child outcomes for families with children age 0-5 who have past, present, or future involvement with L.A. County child welfare and other systems.

Among recent developments, CII offered advanced father engagement training for 348 social workers and administrators within the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). CII successfully negotiated with DCFS to better prepare all new staff members on how to elevate a father’s presence and reduce negative outcomes for at-risk children. For the county’s most vulnerable children, this significant milestone will improve service delivery from social workers better prepared to properly and respectfully work with men. For father engagement and inclusion, this formal training establishes the foundation for social work practices in assessing risk, safety, family strengthening, and achieving permanency and well-being for children throughout L.A. County.

**Friends Outside in Los Angeles County (FOLA),** through its partnership with *Engaging Fathers,* is seeking to better understand the needs of fathers reentering the community from prison or jail who are attempting to engage with and parent their children prenatal to age 5.

FOLA seeks to support these relationships in two ways: 1) build knowledge to better inform policies that directly impact previously incarcerated fathers and their children; and 2) increase collaboration between key stakeholders of both groups so that collective efforts yield better support, policies and practices.

Toward both objectives FOLA is researching issues of vulnerability; institutional and systemic policies and practices that support or impede effective parenting; and the true potential for sustained positive community impact. FOLA has participated in Office of Family Assistance fatherhood grants and collaborative meetings with L.A. County Department of Health and Human Services recipients. Further, they have held discussions with affected fathers and diverse groups of stakeholders across a range of professions and sectors to better understand the needs and current practices used to help facilitate the father-child relationship.

It is a process allowing FOLA to gather unique perspectives on barriers and positive relationship builders, and steer their contributions toward developing a common vision and plan for an overarching advisory council focused on the needs of fathers.

The National Compadres Network (NCN), a technical assistance provider to the *Engaging Fathers* project, facilitates dialogue, planning and decision-making among the three grantees. NCN helps to achieve *Engaging Fathers’* stated purpose of building cohesion, leveraging the collective network’s expertise and coalescing common concerns. Collectively, these serve to improve fatherhood services and organizational practices, and build capacity to create systems change within L.A. County.

Central to their role in ongoing capacity building and technical assistance support, NCN works with each grantee to refine their work plan and outline the objectives and action steps of their organization’s goal for father engagement and local community systems change. For example, NCN has participated in developing and initiating guidelines of the Long Beach Father Friendly Advisory Committee social media campaign. Its purpose is to promote father inclusiveness in business and public communities.

In addition to convening quarterly meetings and monthly conference calls, NCN’s role extends to the grantees’ learning and development. Social policy experts were brought in for a Policy and System Change webinar to address levers of change, including policy, practice, contracting and licensing procedures; training and supervision; organizational culture; programming; systems for data collection; stakeholder engagement; and continuous quality improvement. NCN also guided the group in producing collaborative mission and value statements and defining the collective fatherhood partnerships’ operational and participation agreements. In association with the collaborative partners, NCN is continuing to engage and identify key stakeholders to broaden representation and leverage resources.

**The City of Long Beach,** a partner in First 5 LA’s *Engaging Fathers* investment, is well on its way to achieving its goals of greater access to services for all fathers. Through the *Father-Friendly Long Beach* (FFLB) network, key institutions, service providers and fathers are encouraging local businesses, government, and non-profit operations to adopt guidelines and institutional changes to welcome fathers into their establishments. At FFLB’s core are family protective factors — particularly helping fathers create a safe, secure, and stable environment for their children and families, and increasing the connection between social and health services.

In April 2017 the City of Long Beach established the FFLB Advisory Board. Among their first initiatives was developing core values and principles that can be posted within businesses and establishments as declarations of support, and launching a social media awareness campaign to change perceptions and attitudes on the importance of fathers in the lives of their children.
ADVANCING STRUCTURE

The impact of the three grantees, technical assistance provider and First 5 LA is punctuating the value of a father-focused alliance dedicated to engaging men in dialogue and service delivery, who, in turn, strengthen parenting and family.

As an extension of their progress, the partners have established the Engaging Fathers Collaborative Network. Its purpose is to expand their learning and to respond to local mutual concerns, act as a resource to supporting teams, provide guidance and generate recommendations. The network’s goal is to expand and diversify stakeholder participation; to strategically and effectively change policies and systems to be more inclusive and supportive of fathers and families; to discuss fatherhood engagement and involvement; and to commit to a process of sharing, learning, and understanding policies, guidelines and regulations.

While developing the network’s operational framework, NCN determined that several service systems need to strengthen their father engagement initiatives — among them, county child protective services, juvenile justice, probation, education, Head Start and the Los Angeles County Unified School District.

ROLE IN STATE POLICY

On July 10, 2017, First 5 LA learned that California Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. approved Assembly Bill No. AB 683 that calls for the creation of strategies and services that support pre- and post-incarceration families and fathers. While indirect to the emphasis of First 5 LA’s work, this is a ripe opportunity for the agency to engage in state policy addressing reentry fathers.

The bill, authored by Assembly member Eduardo Garcia (D), received bipartisan support. It cites research, calls for culturally competent initiatives, and invites seven California counties, including Los Angeles, to implement a family- and father-focused pilot program to provide reentry services and support to persons who are, or who are scheduled to be, released from a county jail. The National Compadres Network (NCN) has been mentioned specifically to develop a mentorship program to support reentry of men.

Given First 5 LA’s efforts in parent and family engagement, it is prudent to elevate opportunities to partner with local experts in fatherhood to create cohesion between the roles and influences of men and the healthy development of children and families. First 5 LA offers the capacity to further engage, collaborate and partner with an array of systems that support fatherhood involvement, family reunification, and family strengthening strategies — all tied to the promotion of the Five Protective Factors Framework.

As First 5 LA’s fatherhood engagement initiative moves forward, next generation success indicators are currently populating one of three categories. The first is the need for a strong L.A. County cooperative where all stakeholders advance from agency-centric goals to a collective strategy. The second emphasizes a cultural shift where perceptions of men as parents are no longer rooted in traditional roles of men and women.

The third, and expectedly not last, consists of justice and probation systems helping to drive healthier next-generation dynamics for children and their reentry fathers.

First 5 LA is a leading early childhood advocate organization created by California voters to invest Proposition 10 tobacco tax revenues in Los Angeles County. In partnership with others, First 5 LA strengthens families, communities and systems of services and supports so that all children in L.A. County enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life. Please visit First5LA.org for more information.

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