

The Virgin Islands Consortium

D.O.J. And Human Services Launch 'Fatherhood Bond,' Initiative Aimed At Helping Men Become Responsible Dads

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Justice and the Department of Human Services have joined forces to launch a program aimed at helping men become better fathers, many of whom have been delinquent on child support payments.

Dubbed, "Fatherhood Bond", and subtitled, "Quenching the Father's Thirst", the effort is an 8-week pilot program currently ongoing here, with plans to launch in St. Croix in the near future.

The central reason for the effort, officials from both D.O.J. and D.H.S. said during a conference call today, is to help combat some daunting child statistics stemming from the absence of a father, including the following, provided by [Kids Counts, USVI](#):

- Almost half of the fathers who do not live with their children have no contact with their children.
- Children under age 5 living with single mothers are 20 times more likely to live below the poverty level than those where a father or husband is present.
- There is ample evidence of the negative effects of lack of father involvement, ranging from increased risk of negative physical, cognitive, behavioral and academic outcomes, to an increased risk of abuse.
- Children who grow up without their fathers consistently score lower on measures of well-being.
- Eighty percent of children in DHS custody lives in "female heads of household" with no husband present. Out of that number, those living in poverty totals 33 percent.
- When father involvement is examined separately from mother involvement, fathers demonstrate an independent effect on the child's well-being.
- Further, financial support plus the positive involvement of a father, including cooperation between parents, increases positive outcomes for children who do not live with both parents.

"The goal is to promote responsible fatherhood, and the objective is for men to become more responsible father figures in the lives of their children," Attorney General Claude Walker said.

A 12-session national curriculum that D.H.S. says has seen a lot of success is being used locally. It delves into discussion including how a father was raised, what kind of woman that he chose to be his partner, what is the father's responsibilities as they relate to caring for his children, and how does he see his role as a father.

D.H.S. has mobilized its facilitator Carlton Stevens to walk the participating fathers -- six of them so far -- through a series of sessions for eight weeks at D.H.S., two days weekly from 6:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. There, the men discuss the aforementioned and other topics related to the curriculum, according to D.H.S. Assistant Commissioner Janet Turnbull-Krigger.

Mr. Stevens said that the men attend willingly and have wondered why there wasn't such a program before. He said they see the effort as a place where they could gather and speak freely while not being ridiculed, and ultimately getting the help they need. And while Mr. Walker stated that the effort is an extension of D.O.J.'s "No Child Left Behind" initiative, it includes both men who have been current on child support payments, as well as those who remain delinquent. Mr. Walker said the program was not designed to necessarily collect monies; instead, officials are hoping to gather helpful data from the pilot program and extend out from there to make it better. They are also hoping to get clergy's involvement, with Mr. Stevens stating that church leaders have "gladly" offered their help.

Those who are interested could contact Mrs. Turnbull-Krigger at 774-0930- ext. 4393 or ext. 4116.

