

OPINION



People involved in the Hennepin County's Co-Parent Court, which sought to improve and reinforce parental skills, listen to anger management ideas from class navigator Maisha Giles, right, at North Point Health and Wellness Center in Minneapolis in 2010. **MARLIN LEVISON/STAR TRIBUNE**

Cook County should consider creating co-parenting court to help at-risk families

By **Jeffery M. Leving**

As crime increases across the country, especially crimes such as carjackings in which the offenders are often juveniles, our court systems have largely failed to help families most at risk — children of unmarried parents.

It is indisputable that children without fathers are more likely to find themselves in trouble with the law. The Fatherhood Educational Institute has shared statistics showing that nearly three-quarters of all teenagers involved in homicide grew up without fathers; 60% of rapists were raised in fatherless homes; 70% of kids now incarcerated in juvenile corrections facilities grew up in a single-parent environment.

Additionally, a growing body of evidence shows a high correlation between fatherlessness and violence among young men, especially violence against women. The bottom line is, growing up without a father is a huge factor in America's violence problem and one that needs to be addressed — both by fathers and society.

One program that did that was a pilot program that ran in Hennepin County, Minnesota, from 2010 to 2013. Hennepin County includes Minneapolis, a city that shares many challenges with Cook County when it comes to youths in urban areas.

The pilot program, Co-Parent Court, was initiated by Judge Bruce Peterson, and it helped unmarried

parents establish not only a child support plan, but also a parenting plan. It was what is commonly referred to as a “therapeutic court” or “problem-solving court,” and many counties, including Cook County, have veterans courts, mental health courts and drug courts that follow the therapeutic model. However, the Hennepin County Co-Parent Court was and remains the only therapeutic court focused on unmarried parents.

It is important to realize that for unmarried fathers, while child support is usually demanded, custody or visitation rights are not a given.

Kathryn Edin, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University who is an expert on the subject, explained how most courts in the United States work (or don't work) for parents.

“We have a two-tiered child support system in the country. If you're married and go through a divorce proceeding, custody and child support are adjudicated together,” Edin said. “If you're unmarried, you usually go through an administrative procedure where you are assigned child support without any corresponding custody or visiting rights.”

Currently, only two states — Texas and Michigan — adjudicate custody with child support, Edin said.

After years of being frustrated at the lack of working relationships between unmarried parents, Judge Peterson pulled together child support officers,

social service workers and domestic violence professionals and devised what would become a three-year pilot program to help certain unmarried parents — those in which the mother was getting public aid — create a working relationship to help all involved.

Parents that participated had to take part in conflict resolution and co-parenting workshops and then complete a 24-page plan that included whether both needed to sign off on a child's sports activities, who takes the child to the doctor, whether to limit TV or computer time, and how and when parents would communicate. Then that plan would be entered into a court order as their formal parenting plan, Peterson said.

In the three years it ran, 709 parents took part in Hennepin County's Co-Parent Court, and the results were good. When both parents completed the program, 87% of child support was paid. For the control group — parents who didn't participate — that number was 69%, according to the University of Minnesota. Additionally, 63% of mothers reported a “positive change” in the parenting bond, compared to 36% who reported improving after going through traditional legal avenues, and mothers who completed the program said fathers saw their children more often, compared with mothers not in the program.

Sadly, after the pilot ended in 2013, it was not renewed, so there are no

long-term studies to see the impact on children or whether the fathers stayed involved after the program ended.

However, most child experts believe father involvement is key to raising children who do well in society.

Kelly Gallivan-Illaraza, Cook County's specialty court supervisor, said there currently is no discussion about creating a similar program in Chicago and added that it would be a challenge.

“It's really challenging in Illinois because of the (Department of Children and Family Services) part. You need so many partners to come to the table and with juveniles, the laws are different,” Gallivan-Illaraza said.

However, she did not close the door to the possibility.

Surely, Cook County has many challenges and problems — but Hennepin County, with 1.2 million people, is not exactly Mayberry. There should be no reason why it could not be duplicated here.

After all, as Edin said, “It's extremely positive for kids, especially in the teen years. Having child support, that's good. But having an involved dad, that's really good.”

And what's good for families is good for the courts and good for society.

Jeffery M. Leving is founder and president of the Law Offices of Jeffery M. Leving and is an advocate for the rights of fathers. He is the author of “Fathers Rights,” “Divorce Wars” and “How to be a Good Divorced Dad.”