

Forgotten Fathers: Special Clinics Designed to Re-connect Omaha Fathers with their Children



- **Who is Involved**
 - The Fathers for a Lifetime Program run through the Omaha Charles Drew Health Center in partnership with the Legal Aid of Nebraska

- **Process**
 - 1st Step: Attend a 12-week parenting program through Fathers for a Lifetime
 - 2nd Step: Attend Access to Justice (A2J) hours at Legal Aid of Omaha
 - Open Monday – Friday from 1:00 – 5:00pm, except the last Friday of the month
 - 3rd Step: Wait to be contacted by Legal Aid (Murnie Heaney) about session times and dates

- **Contact Information**
 - Legal Aid of Nebraska
Access to Justice (A2J)
209 S. 19th Street, Ste. 200
Omaha NE 68102
Phone: 402-348-1069
A2J Hours: 1-5pm (M-F)
legalaidofnebraska.com

 - Fathers for a Lifetime Program
Charles Drew Health Center
2912 Manderson Street
Omaha, NE 68111
Phone: 402-453-5300
Office hours: 8am – 5pm
fathersforalifetime.org

Fathers in Douglas County facing problems with access to parenting time, back-due child support and child custody can be discouraged by problems that seem impossible to solve. They love their children and want to spend time with them, but issues of unpaid child support or payments that are too high become road blocks to involvement. Fathers for a Lifetime is a 12-week program directed by Paul Burnett that offers parenting classes for fathers in Douglas County who are hoping for more involvement with their children. Each father completes the 12-week program on parenting including sessions on responsible fathering, male/female relationships, communications, fathers' rights, and anger management. Successful completion of the program emotionally empowers fathers through instruction on proper parenting and improved skills. But, the program initially lacked the necessary legal structure to help these fathers navigate a case through the court system.

Fathers for a Lifetime saw a need for a program partner to handle the legal issues involved in parenting, visitation, and modification of child support payments for these low-income fathers. Murnie Heaney, an attorney from Legal Aid of Nebraska in Omaha now fills that void.

A few years back, Heaney began working with the Fathers for a Lifetime program by providing classes for fathers who would be representing themselves in court. One of the biggest issues Heaney observed is the lack of ability of these fathers to pay their court-ordered level of child support and arrearages. Heaney holds regular classes for fathers who can no longer afford child support payments because of a change in circumstances. This could be anything from the loss of a job to time spent in jail or an injury that has prevented them from working. These dads become overwhelmed from falling behind on payments and don't see a way out. Heaney offers legal guidance to income-qualified fathers before they represent themselves in the courtroom. Her referrals come from individuals or agencies who identify motivated, low-income fathers such as the Fathers for a Lifetime program and the Public Defender's office. After a referral, fathers attend the Access to Justice (A2J) center at the Legal Aid office in Omaha where fathers with child support concerns are sent directly to Heaney. Heaney gathers the files and information on the clients and sets up sessions for small groups of fathers to attend her clinic. During each session, Heaney explains the process of child support modification and guides the fathers through the court forms. The fathers attend several sessions, depending on where they are in the court process. She helps them understand what to expect in the courtroom and improves their confidence by encouraging them to practice what they plan to say at their hearing. Heaney is a sounding board for fathers who often have many questions and concerns. She offers straightforward advice and a listening ear.

Since the beginning of this partnership, Heaney says that she has had great success with these cases. She has seen the pride and confidence these fathers have gained in their ability to parent and a corresponding increase in the time they spend with their children. The fathers who come through Heaney's program are looking for help because they want to be more involved but did not have the resources or understanding to fix their problems on their own.

Fathers who are successful in the process see great results and gain confidence in the court system. They are more self-reliant in their abilities as a father and encouraged to stay involved in their children's lives. Correspondingly, mothers are happy to be receiving some level of child support and understand that fathers have a stronger incentive to work when they are able to contribute financially to their children without becoming overwhelmed. This partnership provides a successful program that gives fathers the opportunity to re-connect with their children while putting these children back in touch with an important figure in their life.

For more information, contact Murnie Heaney of Legal Aid at 402-348-1069 or Paul Burnett of Fathers for a Lifetime at 402-453-5300.

Fathers have their day in court, Legal Aid of Nebraska

Fathers for a Lifetime is an Omaha Healthy Start Initiative created for men by men. The program is designed to promote the need for responsible fathering.