

Opening Statement of the Honorable Nancy L. Johnson
Hearing on Fatherhood Programs
April 27, 1999

I begin by welcoming all our witnesses. We are fortunate to have such an exceptional group of witnesses on the topic of programs for poor fathers. I am looking forward to learning from them.

We know a few things already. The first and foremost is that one-third of our nation's children are born outside marriage. Tragically, the hard fact is that these babies are more likely to be abused, to fail in school, to be delinquent, to be on welfare, to have nonmarital births themselves, and to be unemployed and on welfare as adults.

But there are strengths within these families that we now ignore. As we will see today, at the time these babies are born, their parents have a close relationship. Indeed, in many cases they are cohabiting at the time of the birth. So these babies are not the result of one-night stands or promiscuous relationships.

But while the parents are in close or even loving relationships at the time of birth, research shows that within 2 years after birth, only 7 percent of these children are living in a household with their father. Less than 1/3rd of these fathers see their children at least weekly, and fully half have no contact with their children at all. This is a national tragedy for both parents and children.

Last year, Clay Shaw did the nation a great service by introducing his Fathers Count legislation. Mr. Cardin and I are now working on similar legislation and we have every intent of marking it up before the August recess.

We are focusing this legislation on two goals. First, we want to help these young, poor fathers improve their economic status, whether that means helping them find employment or whether it means helping them improve their skills so they can qualify for better jobs. As a result of welfare reform, most states are conducting effective employment programs that help young mothers improve their economic status; now we must find effective ways to help young fathers improve theirs.

The second goal of these programs must be to strengthen the bonds between these young fathers and both their child and the child's mother. Why does the positive relationship between the mothers and fathers at the time of their child's birth dissipate so quickly? What can be done to strengthen these bonds and to prevent them from disappearing? We want to help these fathers meet both their economic and emotional obligations to their children. But we also want to support the development of the strong adult ties a child's world depends on and help these young couples stay together as friends, as a family unit, or to form lasting, secure marriages. As we reach out to strengthen these relationships, the nation's churches and other community-based organizations can and should play a major role.

Since assuming the chairmanship of this Subcommittee, I have had occasion to meet and talk with several people who are conducting programs specifically designed to help these young fathers and to achieve the goals of work and marriage I have just outlined. Several of these people will testify today.

Although the early evaluations of these programs have not shown that we can achieve easy victories, we should not be discouraged. It will take many years, substantial resources, and tons of blood, sweat, and tears before we develop truly successful programs to help these young fathers and their incipient families. But imagine that public policy, working through both government and community-based organizations, could reconnect poor fathers with their children, and even bring fathers, mothers, and children together into real families. Does anyone doubt that this would represent the greatest policy achievement of our generation?

Our hearing this morning is simply one more step along that path. And it signals my own and Mr. Cardin's bipartisan commitment, as well as that of the Ways and Means Committee, to boldly attacking this problem. Helping poor fathers fully contribute to and participate in family life is truly the next step in welfare reform.