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UPNEXT

A Model for Increasing Financial and Emotional Support

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To learn more about UPNEXT, visit www.upnext.org.

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UPNEXT

UPNEXT combines intensive fatherhood support and workforce development for low-income fathers, many of whom are involved in the justice system. UPNEXT empowers participants and increases their engagement with their children through job preparation, parenting support, and cognitive behavioral therapy. By supporting both fatherhood and employment, UPNEXT increases the likelihood of success in both areas.

Context

Greg was born and raised in Harlem's Drew Hamilton Houses, his home for many of his 48 years. After graduating from high school, he tried hard to make an honest living but soon found himself making money through drug sales during the crack epidemic in New York City in the 1980's and 1990's. A four year prison sentence followed. Upon his release in 1998, he found short-term, fast food jobs. Limited income led to inconsistent financial support of his children. He saw his six children irregularly and his relationships with their mothers were fragile, to say the least. Greg grew determined to break this cycle. "I couldn't stay stuck in a rut of going from one fast food place to another," he said. "On a fast food salary, there wasn't much to go around."

Like Greg, millions of men have trouble finding employment.¹ Unemployment rates for African-American (8.8%) and Latino (6.2%) men remain well above the national average (4.8%), even as the economy recovers.² Nonresident fathers (defined as fathers not living in the same home as their children³), who are more likely to be men of color and of limited educational attainment, have been hit particularly hard.⁴

Another factor in labor-force participation for African-American and Latino men is incarceration.⁵ African-Americans and Latinos are overrepresented in jail and prison populations,⁶ a fact that has long-term impacts on employment prospects.

Unemployment can impact the stability of families and entire communities.⁷ It also contributes to poverty and helps to explain why African-American and Latino poverty rates far exceed the national average of 14.5%.⁸

Unemployment also complicates child support. In 2011, \$37.9 million was due in support payments to custodial parents.⁹ These payments have become ever more crucial to low-income families in the wake of cuts to social programs.¹⁰ The failure to pay support has wide-reaching impacts not only on the custodial parents and children, but also on the non-paying parents and justice systems attempting to enforce the support orders.¹¹

In spite of robust collection efforts, many low-income parents find themselves in significant debt due to unpaid child support.¹² This is particularly common among incarcerated parents, whose arrears will on average double while they are in custody.¹³ Enforcement strategies have often relied exclusively on punitive measures, without consideration of the underlying factors that contribute to missed payments or nonpayment.¹⁴ Non-paying parents, most of whom are

fathers, are subject to driver and professional license suspensions, high interest rates, property and income tax liens, and even incarceration as they accrue support debt.¹⁵ Despite the severity of these sanctions, they often do not result in payments to either the state or the custodial parent.¹⁶ Situations in which support goes unpaid or not fully paid are associated with a host of negative outcomes related to effective co-parenting, father engagement, and child success.¹⁷ Inability to pay child support can result in a “stay away” effect that has been associated with short- and long-term impact on children’s school performance, substance use, and cognitive and psychosocial development, among a host of other indicators of wellness.¹⁸

UPNEXT is part of an emerging group of programs that combine workforce development and fatherhood services. Since 2011, the program has served over 1,000 fathers, helping more than 300 of them connect with permanent employment and nearly 450 make measured increases in their emotional engagement with their children. Free family activities and trips around New York City have provided noncustodial parents and their children with opportunities to connect. This monograph describes how the UPNEXT model was developed, explains how it works, and describes in greater detail the impact it has had.

How It Works

Since his release from prison, Greg had stayed out of trouble. He was not making enough to take care of his children the way that he wanted to, but he was making money honestly. In late 2010, he caught a break: his wife connected him with a job at a hotel through her union contacts. He felt like he had finally found a way off of the low-wage treadmill and onto a career pathway. This new job would allow him to get health benefits and begin saving for retirement. He would be able to buy his

children the things that he had not previously been able to afford. But he was fired within two weeks. Then he got another hotel job. This one lasted a week. Both terminations resulted from arguments that were not really about anything serious but had gotten out of control. Two blown opportunities later, Greg found himself wondering if he needed a different kind of help if he hoped to get out of fast food jobs and into a career.

UPNEXT is located in the heart of Manhattan inside the Midtown Community Court. The Midtown Community Court seeks to test a new and more effective response to low-level crime, including community restitution projects and social services.

“Unemployment is one of the toughest nuts to crack when you think of the problems experienced by justice-involved populations,” said Julius Lang, who formerly directed the Midtown Court. “The court always knew this would need to be addressed sooner or later. After discussions with its advisory board, the Midtown Community Court made the decision to provide this service directly rather than through a partner agency.”

The initial approach was a social enterprise, Times Square Ink. The program was a fully operational copy and print shop in which trainees filled orders for neighborhood businesses and nonprofits, which also provided internships and jobs for program graduates.

Over time, Times Square Ink moved from a social enterprise model to a more standard employment readiness program in which participants were given assistance with resume preparation and interviewing, trained in “soft” workplace skills, and connected with employers open to hiring candidates with convictions. The program took on a more customer service-oriented approach, preparing participants for employment in New York City’s vast retail sector with a National

Retail Foundation certification in customer service. A job developer worked to generate opportunities for job seekers with various levels of criminal justice involvement. These criminal histories increasingly included more than just low-level crimes as the program began to rely more heavily on referrals from probation. The program found itself beginning to work with individuals who had dropped out of transitional work offered by other programs or who were unable to move into permanent employment.

This population presented a different challenge than Times Square Ink's initial clients. "We were seeing people who needed help in understanding how their attitudes, beliefs, and ways of interacting with people impacted their abilities to connect with and retain meaningful employment. These were job seekers who needed more than a new resume and a couple of mock interviews," said Genna Marku, clinical manager. The program turned to the National Institute on Corrections' *Thinking for a Change* cognitive behavioral therapy curriculum. The curriculum's emphasis on preventing negative outcomes like job loss, re-arrest, or interpersonal conflict was a good fit for a program looking to improve interpersonal skills.

Along with cognitive behavioral therapy, services for fathers became an established component of the program. A new group, Dads United for Parenting, had been conceived as a safe space for fathers to come together to share their struggles while receiving services to empower them to increase their financial and emotional engagement with their children. "We started it so that men would have a place to get together to get support, vent, connect with opportunities ... and to learn from each other. It was also a place to heal," recalled the program's founder, Jeff Hobbs.

The program centered around the fathers “breaking bread” as a group and learning about topics like effective discipline, managing child support, and navigating the family court system. Dads United for Parenting also fostered connections between the participants and their children through shared events, including trips to Coney Island, holiday celebrations, and graduation ceremonies at which the families of the participants were welcome.

As Dads United for Parenting staff members worked with the fathers to increase their financial contributions to their children and the children’s custodial parents, they found themselves helping the men secure employment.

There were additional synergies that brought Times Square Ink and Dads United for Parenting together. The participants in both programs were facing the same barriers to employment: criminal justice involvement, gaps in employment history, and limited educational attainment. “It was a ‘eureka’ moment!” said Courtney Bryan, then the project director of the Midtown Community Court. “We realized there was this huge overlap in who needed the services of the two programs. It registered as an opportunity to do something special.” Participants who became actively engaged in both programs were more successful—retaining employment through Times Square Ink and increasing their parental engagement through Dads United for Parenting. Fathers were more committed to their search for employment when they knew they were working toward providing for their children; they were able to more readily reach family engagement goals when they got help finding work. In 2011, Times Square Ink and Dads United for Parenting merged. UPNEXT was born.

Program Overview

UPNEXT delivers intensive fatherhood, employment, and cognitive behavioral therapy programming over a six-week period. Participants come to the program from probation, parole, family court, substance abuse treatment facilities, and through the word of mouth of alumni. Staff works with each participant who comes in to identify needs and begin working on them immediately. Many participants arrive at UPNEXT overwhelmed by mounting child support arrears and distressed that they cannot see their children. Those who need (and are motivated enough) to engage in comprehensive services attend pre-programming sessions and then join the next six-week cycle.

The chart below describes how these program elements are delivered from initial engagement with participants through program participation and post-graduation.



Staffing Structure

The program model requires high-energy, committed direct service and administrative staff. UPNEXT features six full-time staff members. Three staff members are exclusively dedicated to delivering programming, while one staff member has a dual programming and

administrative role. Each client-facing staff member is trained in motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioral therapy. Fathers can access support and resources from anyone on the team.

Engaging Dads

The UPNEXT model prioritizes client engagement. This engagement is grounded in three principles: immediacy, respect for clients' autonomy, and focus on clients' personal strengths.

Immediacy

Fathers often come to UPNEXT in material or emotional crisis. It is essential that the goals clients feel are most urgent are identified shortly after the first point of contact. Staff members want clients to recognize the program as a place where their needs are valued. These immediate needs are wide-ranging, but often involve connections to resources like food stamps or shelter or addressing unmanaged child support obligations. "Fathers come to UPNEXT with goals and find staff members who are ready to turn them into plans of action. This motivates them to keep coming back," said program associate Darwin Garcia.

Respect for Clients' Autonomy

Staff treats participants as adults coming to the classroom for a service, who are free to exit the program at any time of their choosing, even if they are mandated. In these cases, staff members are transparent about their obligation to report to referral sources about attendance and participation. They also communicate that the choice to attend and follow advice is a participant's alone. The goal is to avoid the adversarial relationship clients may have experienced with law enforcement, community supervision, or court personnel, giving clients an opportunity to grow. Staff members strive to maintain a welcoming environment in which men are encouraged to speak their minds and explore change.

Focus on Clients' Strengths

UPNEXT acknowledges that the journey to participation in the program is one that often involves some combination of poverty, incarceration, long-term unemployment, and separation from loved ones. It also regularly involves negotiation of underground or low-level employment activity. The program recognizes the resilience required to navigate these experiences and staff works actively with fathers to leverage their strengths in working towards future employment and fatherhood goals.

Family Focus and Safety

One of the initial challenges in working with fathers was making sure that their progress translated into improved outcomes for children and families. The team learned that it needed to emphasize the theme of working towards success for the whole family, even in cases where fathers are separated from their children and the children's mothers. This value may seem self-evident, but actually requires a delicate balancing act. Class sessions about positive co-parenting and managing child support can be dominated by the angriest voices in the room if facilitators are not deliberate in setting up a family-focused discussion.

Staff grew adept at providing opportunities for participants to share frustrations while redirecting that energy to create positive momentum towards goal-setting and achievements that benefit the entire family. This focus on family is reinforced by the facilitated opportunities that the program provides for fathers to engage with their children, such as trips to sporting events, attractions, and restaurants.

Initial efforts to provide an environment that made fathers feel comfortable and supported sometimes went too far. Program staff sometimes intervened on behalf

of participants in relationship disputes and found themselves in the middle of conflicts. UPNEXT's clinical manager, Genna Marku, recalled that safety for the rest of the family "wasn't really something that we were focused on. We were listening to the dads, hearing their struggles, their goals, and making the assumption that they would only want what was best for their kids. We learned that this wasn't always the case."

Now, UPNEXT takes a "safety-first" approach to supporting fathers. All participants are screened for domestic violence history and orders of protection. In cases in which previous history of domestic violence or orders of protections exist, fathers must agree not to engage in violent or coercive behavior and to abide by any orders of protection to remain in the program.

'Thinking for a Change'

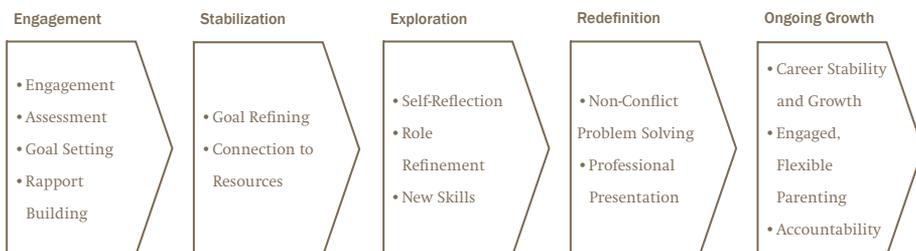
UPNEXT has sought to develop an approach to participants that breaks from the standard approach of institutions such as correctional facilities, substance abuse treatment facilities, and family court. UPNEXT and its staff had to register as different if participants were going to stay, share, and change. In this spirit, staff members engage and motivate clients through inquiry and conversation, using evidence-based motivational interviewing techniques to elicit talk from fathers about changes they hope to make.

This approach continues in the program's implementation of *Thinking for a Change*. Participants are invited to see the social skills and risk-mitigation processes as tools that they are free to access or discard as they please. Through the course of 25 sessions, participants learn and practice social skills (such as asking a question, giving feedback, or apologizing) and are given strategies for recognizing and reducing risky thinking, feelings, attitudes, and situations. Fathers

get ideas from their peers as they join each other in role playing the different situations that they bring to class. In addition to teaching fathers to recognize risky situations, these activities provide the fathers with an opportunity to process anxiety. The role plays, in particular, provide individuals who exhibit self-control issues with a chance to practice behaving in ways that may be more conducive to success. “It provides the dads with insight into what hasn’t been working and a safe place to practice new behavior that they can use at home and at work,” Marku said.

Participants in UPNEXT meet with employment, fatherhood, and outreach specialists to collaborate on short- and long-term goals. Staff members employ the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound)²⁰ goal format to facilitate realistic goal-setting. They may encourage fathers to set incremental goals. For example, an incremental goal for a father who would like to win custody of his child but who has not seen the child in several months might be to see the child once in the next month.

The chart below illustrates this trajectory of goal-setting and attainment. Basic, stabilizing needs are attended to first, creating the buy-in from clients to engage in further reflection and growth.



Learning Environment

The program operates in a classroom setting designed to emphasize productivity and simulate a work environment. At each morning check-in, staff facilitates a brief sharing of “highs and lows” for the day from each participant. Pastries donated by a local café are served with coffee to create a welcoming environment. Participants are required to arrive before 9:30 a.m. and remove hats, sunglasses, etc. upon entry. Mobile phones must be switched to vibrate and used only in the case of necessity or during breaks. Fathers are also held to a standard of workplace-appropriate language: derogatory terms, even if used jokingly or as slang, are not acceptable. Special emphasis is also placed on respect for women, including female staff members and the participants’ co-parents. Participants come to the classroom with a specific purpose for each visit; it is not a “drop-in center.” This includes attending the current six-week programming cycle, meeting with a specialist for an appointment, participating in post-cycle programming, or taking part in special events. Participants and alumni can access the new computer lab and the program brings in expert guest speakers from organizations ranging from the Office of Child Support Enforcement to the Museum of Modern Art. Programming is developed and executed with a specific emphasis on interactivity and adult learning styles—passive participation is limited.

Job Search

The program equips participants with the skills and tools necessary to successfully navigate their online job searches and begin building their careers. The program’s state-of-the-art computer lab is used to provide fathers of all levels of computer literacy with the skills required to locate employment opportunities, respond to postings, and expand their professional networks. A resume clinic and weekly mock interviewing sessions

prepare participants to market themselves effectively to employers. Program staff members provide continuous feedback to current cycle participants on their job search strategies, working with each father until he finds employment.

Financial Empowerment

Participants often come to UPNEXT with limited income, damaged or non-existent credit, and significant debt. UPNEXT seeks to restore and build financial wellness for each client—and the people he needs to support. “Fathers often join the program with significant apprehension around navigating their finances,” said employment specialist Cara Camacho. “Once they get concrete information and action steps, the anxiety starts to decrease.” Through UPNEXT, participants work to assess their current financial standing, including issues with child support or credit, and receive comprehensive support in rectifying any issues. The goal here is to increase the likelihood of long-term financial health once they are back at work.

Connection to Opportunity

The program has worked to forge connections to private employers and create transitional work opportunities. Creating these relationships includes educating partners on the value of working with individuals with prior criminal justice histories and cultivating a mutual investment in restoring the individuals’ abilities to succeed as men and fathers. Anecdotes and statistics are provided on the strengths of these men as potential employees. Potential partners are also invited to see the program in action. These visits have translated into employment opportunities for UPNEXT fathers on many occasions. Time and time again, guests have seen the program in action and have left wanting to be a part of what is happening. Relationships with employers and opportunities for transitional work have steadily

expanded since 2012. “When guys work with us to set and achieve clear goals, UPNEXT is able to open doors for them,” says Sebastian Bullock, the program’s former outreach specialist.

The first iteration of transitional work at the program was a six-week internship with the facilities department at the Midtown Community Court. In 2013, another transitional work opportunity was added in the form of a three- to six-month temporary position with the sanitation department of the Times Square Alliance Business Improvement District. More than half of the transitional workers placed at the Times Square Alliance were hired as permanent workers during 2014.

The UPNEXT Community

UPNEXT seeks to create a community even after participants graduate. Alumni engagement is a critical component of this and is made possible through family activities, program events (such as holiday parties), and opportunities for alumni to speak to current participants about how UPNEXT helped them to achieve lasting success. On family outings, such as trips to the zoo or professional baseball games, fathers and their children are provided with travel, food, and admission. These events are made possible through strategic partnerships with organizations like Most Valuable Kids, a group that provides tickets to sporting events. Staff members from UPNEXT are present to provide support and, if necessary, guidance to a father as he interacts with his children. Participants and graduates are also on hand to lend peer support and mentorship. The intention is to form a network of like-minded men who are constantly working to overcome obstacles encountered with family, at work, and throughout life.

The first few days of the program were tough for Greg. He knew that he needed some help, but was not sure that he needed to be in a classroom four days a week. As the program cycle progressed, though, Greg found himself enjoying the discussions and learning a few things, too. He started to see patterns in how he had lost previous jobs. A connection between his employment difficulties and difficulties working with his co-parent started to reveal itself. He realized that his thinking in stressful situations was leading him to react in self-destructive ways. When an opportunity arose with the Times Square Alliance, Greg was invited to interview. He was hired, but he had been down this road before. The real challenge would come when he started the job and had to navigate stressful situations with supervisors and colleagues. This time he was ready: “With Times Square Alliance, I’m working in the street ... dealing with multiple personalities and attitudes. And, of course, there is always that time when one of those attitudes gets you to where you are ready to react without thinking. But, through UPNEXT, I learned to step back and think about what I want to say and think whether it is the proper thing to say at that time.” For Greg, a big part of this was cultivating empathy: “When people start in right away arguing and instead of me arguing right back, I would listen to what she said and I would think, ‘What is it that she wants to come out of this?’” Before responding, he said, he would remind himself, “Ok, let’s work at getting what you want to come out of this.”

Results

Since 2011, UPNEXT has engaged 1,081 nonresident fathers in services. Most of these men were African American (69%) or Latino (25%). Only 25% had higher educational experience than a high school equivalency. Thirty-five percent reported no income at all and nearly all 96% reported income at or below the Federal Poverty Level. The overwhelming majority of these fathers also reported that they were not engaged with their children to the degree that they wanted to be.

Since 2011, almost 450 fathers in the program have shown a documented increase in their emotional engagement with their children. This is measured in time, attitudes, and activities with children. Nearly 50% of enrollees demonstrated increased financial contributions to their families. Hardly a day goes by in the classroom without a father sharing that, were it not for the skills gained through the cognitive behavioral therapy component or the support of staff, he would have found himself in the same arguments (or worse) that have separated him from family and from employment opportunities through much of his life. Dipal Shah, the project director of the Midtown Community Court, explains that “the impact of UPNEXT doesn’t stop at the door of the UPNEXT classroom. It continues into the father’s home, to his children’s school, his workplace, and hopefully, for the many years that follow.”

On a warm day in September, Greg hosted a barbeque at his family's home in Brooklyn. As he worked the grill he shared stories with a rotating cast of listeners. Not all of his children could make it, but those in attendance were happy to spend the time with their father. It was a big change from how things were a few years ago, when Greg's children used to see him as someone who could not be relied upon. Today, Greg is in the union and making more than \$20 an hour. He's even planning for retirement. "Everything is going good. July 30th will make four years on the job. Doors keep opening up for me. My family sees that I'm not a slouch anymore. Good fortune has made its way to me and it just keeps getting better!"

Endnotes

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