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Obama's Responsible Fatherhood Bill--Not Enough Carrot, Too Much Stick

By Mike McCormick and Glenn Sacks

U.S. Senators Barack Obama (D-IL) and Evan Bayh (D-IN) recently introduced the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2007, which they say will address our "national epidemic of absentee fathers." Obama and Bayh are correct that fatherless children are dramatically more likely to commit crimes, drop out of school, use drugs, or get pregnant than children who have fathers in their homes. The Responsible Fatherhood Act is explicitly a carrot and stick approach. The problem is that the carrot is too small and the stick is already too big.

Currently many noncustodial fathers—particularly African-American and Latino fathers, upon whom Obama often focuses—are required to pay their child support to the state to reimburse the cost of public assistance, instead of to the children's mothers. This is demoralizing for low-income men struggling to make a difference in their kids' lives.

The Responsible Fathers Act will make this money go directly to the mothers, instead of the state, a policy which research shows helps bring fathers closer to their children. The bill will also expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and provide fathers with job training services.

All of these are good things, but the bill's stick—increasing federal reimbursements for child support enforcement—is damaging and misguided. Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement data shows that two-thirds of those behind on child support nationwide earn poverty-level wages; less than four percent of the national child support debt is owed by those earning \$40,000 or more a year.

Most "deadbeat dads" are low-income men who are unable to meet the demands of the child support system because of their employment problems. Stepping up already draconian enforcement only makes it more difficult for them to play a meaningful role in their children's lives.

Bayh himself endorses such wrongheaded efforts, boasting without a trace of irony that when he was the governor of Indiana, "We used 'most wanted' posters to track down deadbeat parents and intercepted their tax refunds, lottery winnings and *unemployment benefits*" (emphasis added).

The biggest problem with the Responsible Fatherhood Act, however, is that it reflects its authors' misunderstanding of fatherlessness. Obama says he seeks to "make it easier" for men who choose to be responsible fathers, but his bill ignores the biggest roadblock fathers face—a family law system which does little to protect the loving bonds these dads share with their children.

While some fathers voluntarily remove themselves from their children's lives, many seek a greater role. Yet most child custody arrangements provide fathers only a few days a month to spend with their children, and fighting for shared parenting is expensive and difficult. Custodial mothers frequently fail to honor visitation orders, and while the United States spends nearly \$5 billion a year enforcing child support, there is no system in place to help enforce visitation orders. In such cases, fathers must scrape together money for an attorney so they can go to court, and even then courts enforce visitation orders indifferently.

According to the Children's Rights Council, a Washington, DC-based

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advocacy group, more than five million American children each year have their access to their noncustodial parents interfered with or blocked by custodial parents.

The benefits these fathers could provide their children are incalculable. For example, a study recently released by Boston College found that when nonresident fathers are involved in their adolescent children's lives, the incidence of substance abuse, violence, crime, and truancy decreases markedly. Most of the families in the study, which was published in the journal *Child Development*, are low-income African-American and Hispanic families. The study's lead author, professor Rebekah Levine Coley, says the study found involved nonresident fathers to be "an important protective factor for adolescents."

Obama is correct when he notes that it would be naïve to think "government alone can solve this problem." Yet while the text of the Responsible Fatherhood Act mentions "child support" 65 times, "custody," "visitation," "parenting time," and "access denial" do not appear even once. Lawmakers can't turn a disinterested father into a caring one, but they can do much to break down the many barriers separating devoted fathers from their children. That's where the focus of the Responsible Fatherhood Act should be.

This column first appeared in the Wisconsin State Journal and the Buffalo News, 6/30/07.

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