

Helping men become better fathers

by



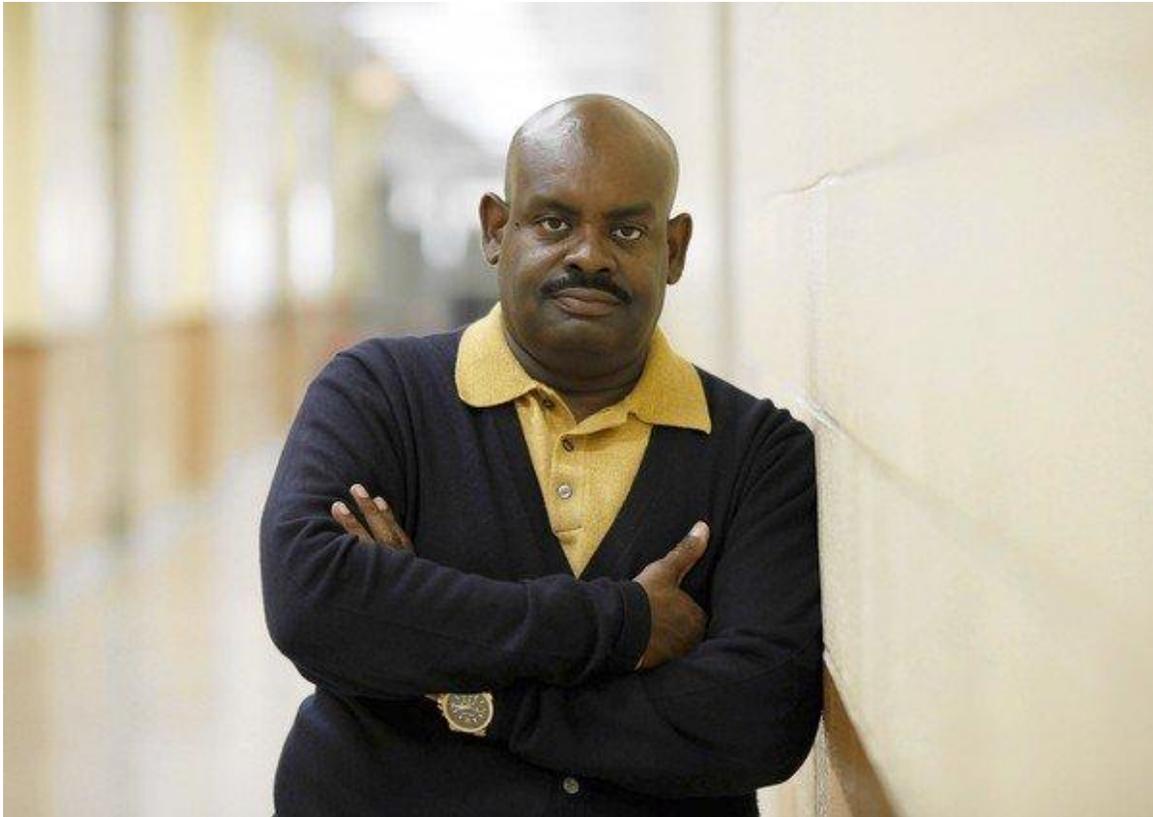
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South Side program's goal: Getting absentee dads to engage with their children



G. Sequane Lawrence directs a program that aims to help noncustodial fathers become better parents. (Terrence Antonio James, Chicago Tribune / October 11, 2012)

Many of the men in the Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities Demonstration Project have at one time been the type of people they wouldn't have wanted their own children associating with.

But now, on Monday nights, they come to a conference room in the Dawson Technical Institute on the South Side to learn the least technical of things: how to be better men, better fathers and better nurturers — so they can have a relationship with their children.

G. Sequane (pronounced SAY-kwan) Lawrence is the director of the project, which opened the doors to its first class in October 2011. The men who participate are considered "members" and are noncustodial fathers. Lawrence said it's important to note that they come of their own free will.

"The stereotype is that low-income fathers don't care and they're recalcitrant," Lawrence said. "But that's not what we're finding. They haven't been coerced to be here, and they're not here by court order."

He said some were gang-affiliated and have done time in prison.

"I don't want to suggest a pathology, or that these men were just overly sexed and irresponsible," he said. "We know that many of them didn't grow up with dads. They have seen the effect that's had on their lives and they don't want to keep making the same mistakes."

A version of the project started about 10 years ago as a university effort to help young men without many resources become better parents.

The university assembled a group of academics, social worker types and community members (of which Lawrence was one) who examined the men's incarceration rates along with their access to jobs, education, housing and health care.

But after a few years of hard work, Lawrence, who has a master's degree in community economic development, said he began to feel pulled more toward the trenches. So he started the Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities project on his own in 2010 and brought in as a senior adviser Kirk Harris, a University of Wisconsin professor and expert on how to help men become more responsible fathers.

Lawrence, 54, has been married for 32 years and has a son and daughter. He said his mission stems from years of watching lives unravel as a result of absentee dads — and from growing up in the former Robert Taylor Homes housing complex without his own father.

Although Lawrence and his three brothers had a stepfather who was a good provider, he never understood how a man could leave his children.

"This is a problem across the country with divorce, and white men have kids out of wedlock too," Lawrence said. "It's just more acute in our community, and it just burns me up inside."

There are currently about 100 men in the Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities project, and the average age is 30. The men are referred from other agencies, including those that offer job training and placement and educational development.

The project helps men with legal issues regarding paternity, custody, visitation and child support. The organization also assists them in getting their "memo of understanding" from the Illinois Department of Child Support Services. The memo explicitly lays out the father's financial responsibilities.

Lawrence said that in the past some of the members have been loath to go to court, fearing they might be cuffed and hauled to jail. The project has worked to improve the relationship between the fathers and the court system.

Another function of the project is to help these fathers define what it means to be men, while deconstructing their ideas of hypermasculinity. On Monday nights, peer group sessions are facilitated by men who teach co-parenting skills and male responsibility and let the members know that it's OK to be nurturers.

Lawrence said many of the members still define manhood in terms of being a provider and protector, which he calls "a 1950s construct."

"If you just got out of the joint and can't find a job and you do this internal audit and you ask yourself, 'Who am I protecting and who am I providing for?' it's a severe loss of self-esteem," Lawrence said.

"We tell them they have to have a very candid conversation with themselves to understand what they can and cannot do. It's also a discussion they have to have with their child's mother."

Having a job is a necessary part of being able to provide, and one of the challenges for a lot of the fathers is that having a record makes finding employment extremely tough.

Lawrence has been studying ways for these men to start their own businesses. Last year, he traveled to Spain, Morocco and Cleveland (yes, Cleveland) to learn more about worker-owned co-ops, in which a group of men start a business and become co-owners.

"This is just one possible route out of poverty," Lawrence said. "They want to engage with their children and take care of their financial responsibilities. In the end, we know the kids will do better and have better outcomes."

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