



California National Organization for Women

926 J Street, Suite 424 Sacramento, CA 95814

916-442-3414 Fax: 916-442-4765 www.canow.org

California Member of Congress,

8/02/06

California National Organization for Women (CA NOW) is respectfully requesting that you join the call for a federal investigation, by the U.S. Government Reform Committee, into the operations of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration of Children and Families' Access/Visitation and "Responsible Fatherhood" programs, including those operating in California.

CA NOW believes that these fatherhood programs misuse funds, do not account for their spending nor evaluation of their programming, and encourage illegal court practices that result in harm to women's safety and well-being. We believe that fathers' child support arrears are frequently abated by these groups, in violation of the Bradley amendment. We also believe that Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration of Children and Families, has a conflict of interest serving in this capacity, and operates from a dangerous political ideology that actively favors fathers' rights and seeks to minimize mothers'.

CA NOW believes an investigation would expose serious system failure and fraud in these fatherhood programs. They are funded with federal money intended for resolving parental disputes, but instead give legal representation to fathers, which often results in high conflict litigation against perfectly fit mothers. CA NOW believes many fathers use these resources in order to avoid paying child support, and that many batterers do so in order to continue to abuse and manipulate their spouses and children through financially draining and emotionally devastating litigation, that often stretches on for years and years.

Fatherhood programs operate on the false premise that there is a "crisis in fatherlessness," which is contradicted by Census data. CA NOW asked HHS, and the National Fatherhood Initiative (the most cited program on the HHS website) to justify this claim of crisis, and to date have not received an answer from them. We believe the entire premise for the programming is erroneous, and that mothers and their children are suffering harm from the consequences of such a focus.

Through political connection, legal trainings, and funding diversions, these fatherhood programs emphasize false syndromes, such as Parental Alienation Syndrome as a technique to remove children from their mothers. Fatherhood groups train court appointed minors' attorneys, mediators and evaluators to discriminate against mothers, and create a vacuous draining of mothers of funding, faith in the system, and ability to fight to protect their children. These are primary caregiving mothers. Single mothers whose children's fathers come back after years without contact, and demand and receive full or partial custody. Mothers are losing custody to their abusers, to men who have abused or neglected their children, and men with criminal backgrounds. Often fathers are awarded custody based on frivolous justifications, such as insufficient cooperation with the father, while documented evidence of domestic violence and abuse, even sexual abuse, goes ignored.

In 2002 California NOW analyzed 300 complaints from California mothers who believed family courts ignored laws, procedures and evidence in their cases. We used this analysis as the basis of our report, the *CA NOW Family Court Report 2002*. The report shows that in these particular cases, where women had lost custody of their children, there was a high correlation between grounded evidence of child abuse by the father and the mother losing custody. 86% could prove that their children's father had a history of domestic violence, child abuse, or a criminal record. In many cases, illegal maneuvers, such as the labeling of mothers with false syndromes, as well as the use of *ex parte* hearings, and biased and unqualified extra-judicial personnel, were used to remove children from their primary care-giving mothers, thus violating the woman's parental rights and injuring the child(ren) by loss of contact with their non-offending mother. Other professional comprehensive studies show similar results, including the *Wellesley Women's Center Battered Women's Testimony Project*, and sociologist Amy Neustein, PhD and attorney Michael Leshner's book, *Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers Are Running from the Family Courts—and What Can Be Done About It*.

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Kimberly Salter President ♦ Helen Grieco Executive Director ♦ Elena Perez Program Director
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In addition, CA NOW believes that Wade Horn, current Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, has a major conflict of interest in his role overseeing such programs, given his past affiliation as president of the National Fatherhood Initiative. Horn, as President of National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), promoted (in collaboration with fathers rights groups) during 1999 and 2000, "Fathers Count" legislation, which would have mandated \$10,000,000 in total annual funding to fathers organizations. According to the legislative language, only NFI and the leading fathers' rights group, Children's Rights Council, would have qualified for the grants. The bill passed the Congress, but was stalled by the Senate Finance Committee.

In March 2001, NFI received a \$500,000 non-competitive grant, shortly after Horn became "Acting" HHS Assistant Secretary (February 2001), while he was still NFI President (not resigning until July 2001). This grant was authorized by a December 2000 Congressional "ear-mark" inserted in an appropriations bill after the "Fathers Count" bill failed to pass the Senate Finance Committee. NFI refuses to disclose how this money was used. Also, Horn conceals he has on-going conflicts-of-interest with NFI and the implementation of the fatherhood programs.

California NOW has HHS evaluation reports that show that the "Responsible Fatherhood" program is used for unauthorized practices such as soliciting fathers through the child support system with offers of abatements on their child support arrears (in violation of the Bradley Amendment) and free attorneys for their custody litigation. Some litigating mothers have provided us with county payment records that show the attorney of the litigating father was paid from these programs. These unauthorized practices are so common that flyers soliciting fathers into 'litigation assistance' groups have been found displayed in county court buildings, while some state court web sites display links to their fatherhood programs. This practice violates the mission of the judicial system, as it provides special litigation assistance to one-side of a legal dispute.

While being funded by federal money, these court-based fatherhood services do not admit non-custodial mothers into their programs. (In fact, a search of the HHS website includes 286 references to "motherhood" and 824 references to "fatherhood.") California NOW has copies of internal HHS e-mail showing Wade Horn's staff have obstructed investigations of mothers' complaints about the Responsible Fatherhood and related programs

California NOW is asking for you to join the call for a thorough investigation by the Government Reform Committee into the fatherhood programs—including those in California-- and HHS Assistant Secretary, Wade Horn's conflict of interest in these programs. We implore you to support the Government Reform Committee's investigations--already now underway--by contacting the staff investigator and urging that California be included in the investigation. The staff director is David Marin, phone number 202-225-5074, address c/o Government Reform Committee, 2157 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515.

Thank you for your time and immediate attention to this matter.

For Justice,

Helen Grieco

Helen Grieco
Executive Director
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