

# Executive Summary: A Randomized Controlled Trial to Examine the Impact of Cell Phone Technology on Engagement and Retention of Fathers in a Fatherhood Program

**Dr. R. Anna Hayward, PhD, MSW**, *Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare*  
**Ms. Romarie McCue**, *Retreat, Inc., Suffolk County Fatherhood Initiative*  
**Dr. Wei Hou, PhD**, *Stony Brook Medicine, Biostats Core*  
**Alexander Jack McKillop, MSW**, *Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare*  
**Seung Ju Lee, MSW**, *Stony Brook University School of Social Welfare*

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The Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grants have resulted in the development of a number of programs serving low-income fathers in the past 10 years. Ongoing research and evaluation suggests that these programs may have a positive impact on fathers' relationship with children. Questions remain, however, about how best to recruit, engage, and retain fathers in these services. The Suffolk County Fatherhood Initiative (SCFI) is an HMRF-funded program (funded by the Office of Family Assistance through the 2015 cohort of grants) that serves low-income fathers and addresses responsible fatherhood, healthy relationships, and economic stability services. SCFI has successfully developed community relationships and recruited fathers into the program but faces challenges similar to other HMRF programs in terms of retention in both program services and the evaluation protocol.

One area of emerging research is the use of cell phone technology for health social service programs. This study

explored the use of two interventions: (1) providing cell phones and sending text messages to participants in the SCFI program, with the goal of increasing participants engagement, participation, and retention; and (2) increasing the incentive for research interviews, with the goal of increasing retention in the program and research protocol. Using an experimental design, 212 participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups (1) control group (services as usual); (2) cell phone intervention, including twice-weekly text messages; and (3) increased incentive intervention, receiving extra incentives for engaging in the program and completing research interviews.

There were no (statistically significant) group differences in engagement, participation, or retention between the intervention (cell phone, increased incentive) and control groups. In other words, we did not see any effect of either the texting or increased incentive on our measure of father's engagement, participation, or retention in the program. To explore the impact of the intervention on the broader programmatic outcomes of responsible fatherhood, healthy

relationships, and economic stability, we also compared scores between the three groups. Similarly, we did not find any group differences across these outcomes.

This study does not provide sufficient empirical evidence that provision of cell phone and ongoing text-messaging contact was associated with increased engagement, participation, or program retention for fathers. However, we found considerable support of the interventions from fathers in a simultaneous qualitative study.

The texting intervention can easily be replicated with other father-serving programs. Despite the lack of definitive findings in terms of key outcomes, fathers expressed positive views about texting and the research team believes that utilization of modern technology has potential to help fathers stay connected to responsible fatherhood programs. Clients reported that the texts were helpful in encouraging motivation, for reminders about program services and contact information, for potential referrals to job opportunities, and in building connections with their caseworker. Text messaging may provide a useful connection between clients and their caseworkers and may supplement, or substitute the need for, in-person contacts.

