

InsideOut Dads' Program for Incarcerated Men Receives \$10M from US Department of Health and Human Services

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Kelly Kendall, program coordinator for the InsideOut Dad program teaches incarcerated dads at the Beaver Correctional Facility.

Brian Higginbotham, professor in the Human Development and Family Studies Department of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, has devoted years of his research and studies to bringing the InsideOut Dad program to jails and state correctional facilities throughout Utah. The program is a collaboration with the Utah State Board of Corrections.

Higginbotham, who is also the Associate Vice President of USU Extension Services, believes that despite the mistakes these men have made, they can learn how to be a better fathers, partners, and overall human beings.

“We do a lot of work with families, single parents, youth, couples, but being in the jails is super rewarding because the vast majority of men want to be better dads. Not only do they know that they have let their kids down, but they have also let down their communities and extended families,” he says. “Much of the work we do is in county jails; so these are not hardened criminals. They are guys who have made mistakes and will be released. We help them recognize that while they are incarcerated, they can make changes in their lives that will help them to move forward.”

[Healthy Relationships Utah](#) is an initiative that began in 2006 under Higginbotham’s tutelage. The foundation of the

initiative was to provide free, research-based relationship education courses for couples, singles, parents, and stepfamilies. In 2016, Healthy Relationship Utah also began offering fatherhood-specific programming, called InsideOut Dad, to serve fathers and father-like figures.

InsideOut Dad began as a pilot program in 2013, when a Healthy Relationships Utah educator in Juab County, Natasha Dansie, suggested the fatherhood training idea to the local jail commander. The program was piloted, and within a few months, other jails were requesting it. Higginbotham then made a request to present at a statewide conference to jail commanders, which ultimately led to a five-year grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. The grant, referred to as Fathers Incarcerated Re-entry Education (FIRE), was renewed in 2020 for another \$5 million over the course of five years. In total, the program has received 10M in federal grant money.

“At the end of the day, what matters most is to get research into the hands of the people who need it,” Higginbotham says. “My job is to help parents be better parents and give them resources. Everywhere I go, it’s all about making connections. Constantly, we are looking for ways to extend USU Extension services. Our team is strategic in finding the right people. Where there is a need, there is a way to find an opportunity.”

As the InsideOut Dad program continued to grow, Higginbotham enlisted the help of Kay Bradford — also a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies — to be the co-principal investigator. In this role, Bradford is the evaluator on the grant, analyzing program data and supervising evaluations.

One of the key points of the data that Bradford has studied over the years with InsideOut Dad is incarcerated men have many choices of programs they can become involved with during their time at the jail. However, a large percentage of the men choose to take part in the InsideOut Dad program because they want to become overall better men. Several of the dads who have taken the course while being incarcerated have expressed gratitude for being able to find purpose in their lives again.

“A couple of dads have told me that this program helped them to not take their life when they felt hopeless over the choices they have made,” Bradford says. “Many have often expressed that the InsideOut Dad course helped them to want to be a better dad to their children. It changed their lives and, consequently, changed the lives of their children.”

As Bradford and Higginbotham have continued to study the data on incarcerated men, they are discovering a strong correlation between making poor choices that lead to incarceration and several possible variables such as being an at-risk youth, living in foster care, attending an alternative high school, and/or living in a youth correctional facility or other unstable environments. Based on these findings, in 2023, another five-year grant was awarded to the duo for the study of Adolescent and Community Empowerments (ACE), for ages 15 – 19. The goal is to provide education focused on healthy relationship skills, sexual and mental health, and creating better foundations for life.



Dr. Brian Higginbotham outside of the Cache County Sheriff's Complex.

“In serving youth, I am finally coming to the nexus of where healthy relationships begin in the home and they are nurtured and practiced in adolescent relationships,” Bradford says. “If I am delivering relationship skills to the hardest-to-reach adolescents, then I am finally building the right fences at the top of the cliff to prevent them from falling.”

The goal is to target youth while in high school, enabling them to learn valuable skills, such as developing positive relationships and making better choices, in order to stay out of the jail. Serving youth of the State of Utah has been needed for a long time.

“We are embarking in a direction that will bear fruit. The data will tell the tale as we expand youth services and relationship education in the future,” Bradford says.

Kelly Kendall, program coordinator for the past nine years with the InsideOut Dad program, is in the jails every week teaching. He also oversees educators for the Healthy Relations Utah team that teach statewide in the jails and correctional facilities. Most of the instruction is done in person, however, there are some smaller jails where the course is taught remotely. The evidence-based curriculum that is implemented is from the National Fatherhood Initiative and is a voluntary 12-week course.

The curriculum is designed to help incarcerated fathers break the cycle of recidivism by developing pro-fathering attitudes, knowledge, and skills, along with strategies to prepare fathers for re-entry into their communities. Topics covered include what it means to be a father, grief, loss, stress, anger, communication, discipline, and how to co-parent with a child's mother. The goal is to provide participants with the tools they need to become more involved, responsible, and committed in the lives of their children — providing increased motivation for these men to get out of jail and stay out.

“I am so passionate about this program. I feel like I am on a mission, not doing a job,” Kendall says. “We call our educators ‘hopemongers.’ We bring hope. Kids are brokenhearted. When a dad is sentenced to prison, so are their children — it's a shared sentence.”

Kendall explains the reason this program is unique is because Utah State University is a land-grant university and has the infrastructure to facilitate courses statewide through Statewide Campuses and USU Extension Services.

“The credit for the FIRE grant is because of Dr. Higginbotham's outstanding work. He is a visionary; he sees the big picture,” Kendall says. “In order for this program to be successful, Dr. Higginbotham hires the right team and trusts them to make good things happen in the jails with the incarcerated men. He is the orchestra conductor.”

In a recent letter, an incarcerated man who completed the program wrote:

“I was locked up in jail at 18 years old, still in high school, and have served six years in the Uintah County Jail. I didn't have the chance to become a father. I wondered if I could become a dad. I found immense hope in imagining a future home filled with a loving wife and children, who I can support and inspire. I learned that fatherhood, while having a lot to do with raising children, is more about being the best man that I can be in every aspect of my life.”

Other messages offered similar feelings of purpose, learning, and hope.

“This class has given me hope that I can be the dad I never had. My mom was great, but I needed my dad in my life. I now want to be there for my kids and protect them and provide for them.”

"If I would have had this class 20 years ago, I wouldn't be in jail today. I would have made so many different decisions."

"I've probably taken 150 classes at the prison since I have been here. This class was the best of all."

Higginbotham feels that working in the jails is the most rewarding family life education that his team does.

"It's not about notoriety or money, it's about improving people's lives because it's the right thing to do," he says. "The research that is being done here at USU and what's being taught in the classroom is awesome."

Recently, Higginbotham was awarded the Strong Service Award from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services for his embodiment of service throughout the State of Utah. His work continues to be recognized not just a university level, but also across Utah, nationally, and internationally. Currently, Higginbotham is working at the state governmental level with the Office of the Courts, Workforce Services, and Health and Human Services to make healthy relationships resources more accessible to the residents of Utah.

"The model of a land grant university is outreach to everyone, not just for those who come to Logan. We have a broad mission to give the best research-based information to everybody statewide, so that all boats rise," he says. "The work that we do is not just for alumni or for tuition paying students. It is for all of Utah because we are all Utahns. When Utahns have healthy relationships, it's a ripple effect for other Utahns."