

THE BRIGHTER FUTURES PROGRAM

**AT HOMELESS CHILDREN'S NETWORK:
Evaluation Findings from July 2024 to December 2024**

REPORT PREPARED BY INDIGO CULTURAL CENTER



FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN'S NETWORK



Suggested Citation:

Matriano, R., Abidog, C., Janssen, J. A., Shivers, E.M., Byars, N., Parker, A. (2025). The Brighter Futures Program at Homeless Children's Network: Evaluation Findings from July 2024 to December 2024. Prepared by Indigo Cultural Center for Homeless Children's Network. With funding from the San Francisco Human Rights Commission and Dream Keeper Initiative

GRATITUDE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To our Ancestors...



TO OUR ANCESTORS...

"We honor the gifts, resilience, and sacrifices of our Black ancestors, particularly those who toiled the land and built the institutions that established the City of San Francisco's wealth and freedom, despite never being compensated nor fully realizing their own sovereignty. We acknowledge this exploitation of not only labor, but of our humanity and through this process are working to repair some of the harms done by public and private actors. Because of their work, we are here and will invest in the descendants of their legacy."

~ San Francisco's Reparations Plan Report, 2023

MORE GRATITUDE

Thank you to the entire Homeless Children's Network community who contributed to making our Brighter Futures program a success. This has taken a collective effort, and everyone has come together seamlessly to bring it full circle.

Thank you to the HCN Brighter Futures program partners and community members who contributed to this evaluation. Your experiences are the valued knowledge we seek to uplift. Thank you for so graciously sharing your expertise, time, energy, vulnerability, and wisdom. You helped us truly see the sense of community and cohesion within and among the Black community(ies) of San Francisco.

Thank you to our amazing Indigo Cultural Center team for your thoughtful analysis and soulful attention to the stories, vision, voice,

and data of this program. We are grateful.

Thank you to HCN staff for their invaluable contributions to the drafting and editing of this report, as well as their ongoing support in the implementation of the evaluation. Your thoughtful insights, dedication to the process, and genuine belief in our approach have been deeply appreciated.



HCN staff at the Amani cohort graduation



HCN's Black History Month Celebration



Black Community in San Francisco



San Francisco was once considered the “Harlem of the West”, attracting Black Americans from the South during WWII in search of new labor opportunities. However, the lack of housing opportunities across the City during this time funneled Black Americans into what are now considered historically Black neighborhoods (e.g., Fillmore District, the Western Addition, Bayview-Hunters Point). Subsequent discrimination, racial tensions, and competitive job markets fostered high unemployment rates and low housing attainment – a combination that prompted an exodus of Black-owned businesses and Black residents from San Francisco. Bay Area cultural shifts, such as the tech boom from the 1990s-2010s, sparked increased gentrification rates within historically Black San Francisco neighborhoods, further displacing Black San Francisco residents and contributing to high costs of housing.

Historically, notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges, Black fathers in San Francisco have played significant roles in the development and progression of San Francisco’s Black community, holding positions within local political office, serving as pioneers of entrepreneurship, and contributing to the local art and music

scene. Through multitudinous avenues, Black fathers in San Francisco have reclaimed healing for themselves, their families, and their community.

In San Francisco’s present-day landscape, **Black/African American individuals comprise approximately five percent of San Francisco’s general population – an eight percent decrease from San Francisco’s Black population in the 1970s.** In comparison to the general San Francisco public, Black San Franciscans are consistently disproportionately affected by systemic inequalities that exacerbate socioeconomic disparities such as homelessness, chronic illness, substance use disorder, domestic violence, systemic violence, and poverty within this population.

Despite the current reality, we may look to a future where Black fathers and families can live and continue to nurture their legacies in San Francisco through continued, intentional support. Community organizations like Homeless Children’s Network exist to uplift and preserve the rich history of Black San Francisco by attending to the holistic well-being of its residents.

Homeless Children's Network

Homeless Children's Network's trusted provider status among historically marginalized communities in San Francisco is built on 33 years of innovative, relationship-based, and culturally responsive approaches to program development, community outreach and engagement, service delivery, and evaluation. Its culturally responsive programs, citywide partnerships, and visionary leadership deliver services to 2,500+ community members annually at no cost to youth and their families. As a city leader in Afri-centric programming development and delivery, HCN is dedicated to advancing systemic equity and reaching the most underserved youth, families, and communities that remain overlooked and marginalized by many systems of support including mainstream philanthropic agencies. Currently, HCN offers 10+ Afri-centric programs and extensive services providing San Francisco's historically marginalized youth, families, adults, and communities with the tools, resources, and support needed to navigate complex systems and overcome challenges through collaborative efforts.

Three decades ago, leaders from six shelters recognized a critical gap in services for San Francisco families experiencing homelessness. These organizations provided emergency shelter, domestic violence assistance, and transitional housing, but because of their structure, they could only serve families for a short time. This limited period of care created a traumatic cycle of attachment and loss—youth and families would build relationships with staff, only to be uprooted again. This instability made it hard for families to remain open to accessing support. In 1992, the community came together to break this cycle. They founded HCN to provide San Francisco families in crisis with a lasting source of

connection and care. Over the next three decades, in close collaboration and communication with our community members, community stakeholders, and community partners, HCN has evolved into an organization that directly addresses inclusion, community empowerment, and systemic equity.

HOMELESS CHILDREN'S NETWORK'S COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH MODEL: AFRI-CENTRIC APPROACH

Community Mental Health

Over the past several years, there has been a call to decolonize the field of mental health. One important way to achieve this is by expanding the construct of wellness to include a more explicit focus on community mental health in Black and Brown communities. It is increasingly important that we avoid reinforcing mainstream narratives that pathologize our communities by failing to recognize the broader systemic forces affecting the well-being of those who have experienced historical and ongoing marginalization and oppression. Community-based programs designed to promote healing, wellness, and positive mental health do not simply unfold in isolation. Homeless Children's Network's approach embodies emergent work that always reflects the time and space in which it is happening. Indeed, African and Pan-African philosophy teaches us that "all things have an impact on each other, and this interconnectedness and interplay is universal" (Marumo & Chakale, 2018).

The HCN Afri-centric Approach



Homeless Children's Network's programs and organizational culture are heavily influenced by an Afri-centric worldview. "Afri-centricity" refers to both intellectual and sociocultural values, perspectives, and behaviors which can be used to understand the world and moderate the impact of stressful life experiences (Neblett Jr. et al., 2010). HCN's Afri-centric framework is presented below:

- ☀ Affirms Blackness
- ☀ Is trauma-informed
- ☀ Is love-informed
- ☀ Focuses on self-acceptance
- ☀ Focuses on resilience
- ☀ Identifies unique areas of strength
- ☀ Normalizes clients' experiences
- ☀ Reframes the stigma of mental health among the Black community
- ☀ Acknowledges a range of spiritual practices within the Black community
- ☀ Encourages clients to believe in their capability and choice to engage in their own healing
- ☀ Integrates family and community members into services
- ☀ Offers space to process collective grief and fear without judgment
- ☀ Addresses barriers to accessing resources and basic needs
- ☀ Facilitates difficult conversations

INDIGO CULTURAL CENTER



A NOTE ABOUT THE AGENCY AND PEOPLE CONDUCTING THIS EVALUATION

The Institute of Child Development Research and Social Change at Indigo Cultural Center is an action-research firm that specializes in infant and early childhood research and evaluation conducted with an anti-racist lens. Indigo Cultural Center (a predominantly BIPOC-staffed organization) is led by executive director Dr. Eva Marie Shivers, who identifies as a bi-racial African American, cisgender woman. Dr. Shivers led this current evaluation with a small team that consisted of a bi-racial Black and Mexican American woman, a Black multiracial woman, another Black woman, one Filipina woman, and one white woman.

Indigo Cultural Center’s mission is to conduct rigorous policy-relevant research on mental health, education, and development by partnering with community agencies and public agencies that are dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and families in BIPOC communities. Since its inception, Indigo Cultural Center has employed the use of community-based participatory research in all our evaluations. What this means is that we use a collaborative model and working style that involves our clients – who we prefer to call ‘partners’ – in the planning, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination processes of

evaluation. We recognize the strengths that our partners bring to each evaluation project, and we build on those assets by consulting with our partners initially and at key milestones throughout the project, integrating their input and knowledge into all aspects of the project, asking for feedback on a regular basis, and seeking consensus on key issues and outcomes.



Indigo Cultural Center “Flower” representing Indigo staff members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	
Centering Culture & Strength in Black Fatherhood Research	1
The HCN Brighter Futures Program	2
Brighter Futures in Afri-centric Context.....	3
The Present Study	3
Methods	
Participatory Process	4
Analytic Approach	4
Findings	
Research Question 1: Who did Brighter Futures serve?	5
Research Question 2: What was the experience of participating in the HCN Brighter Futures program?	6
Program Feedback.....	6
Research Question 3: What was the impact of participating in HCN’s Brighter Futures program on fathers and their families?	7
Skill Building & Personal Development.....	8
Research Question 4: What did HCN’s Brighter Futures program bring to the San Francisco community?	9
Discussion	10
Implications & Future Directions	11
References	13

VOICE & TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS REPORT

The authors of this report employ the use of feminist methodology and the use of first-person voice (e.g., ‘we’, ‘us’) (Leggat-Cook, 2010; Mitchel, 2017).

- Throughout this report we use the terms Black and African American interchangeably.
- We do not capitalize white but capitalize Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to challenge the power of whiteness, decenter it, and elevate Black and BIPOC perspectives.
- We use LGBTQIA+ as an acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual” with a “+” sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of our community.
- We use queer to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities.
- We use gender rather than sex as an inclusive term that acknowledges that gender is socially and contextually constructed and is a multidimensional facet of identity.

INTRODUCTION

Through partnership with the San Francisco Human Rights Commission (HRC) and Dream Keeper Initiative, the Homeless Children's Network's (HCN's) Brighter Futures Program has supported Black fathers in San Francisco for 3 years by providing therapy, case management, and group healing circles. This report covers the period from July 1, 2024 - December 31, 2024. Together with HCN, the Indigo Cultural Center evaluated the impact of the HCN Brighter Futures Program with the following objectives:

The main objectives of this report are to:

- Contextualize the HCN Brighter Futures services as an aspect of Black community mental health,
- Demonstrate whether key service goals and objectives were met,
- Share feedback about experiences and impact from the HCN Brighter Futures participants, and
- Explore the factors and conditions necessary to deliver this service to the Black community in San Francisco

CENTERING CULTURE & STRENGTHENING BLACK FATHERHOOD RESEARCH

Contemporary perspectives of Black fathers heavily emphasize socioeconomic worth and ability to "provide" and often deprioritize the nurturing aspects of parenting, devaluing and disempowering the merits of paternal involvement (Datchi & Simon, 2022). It is worth acknowledging that Black fatherhood is uniquely compromised by sociopolitical, environmental, historical, and cultural influences, which are marred by systems of oppression that disproportionately affect people of color, and have a positive correlation to socioeconomic status and subsequent predicted behaviors such as educational or career attainment,

incarceration, and perpetuated norms (Datchi & Simon, 2022). The aforementioned behaviors can be co-occurring and cyclical in nature, further straining economic, familial, and mental health. Moreover, minimal research that elevates Black fatherhood through a culturally-appropriate, strengths-based lens exists; prevailing research restricts the dominant representation of Black fatherhood to Eurocentric standards of "good fatherhood" without considering the heterogeneous experiences of Black fathers in America (Wallace, 2023). This report aims to contribute to literature elevating Black fatherhood through a culturally-sensitive and strengths-based lens.

Current research legitimizes the importance of culturally sensitive fatherhood initiatives that incorporate fathers into the design and planning of the initiative (Datchi & Simon, 2022). The creation of a "safe space" in combination with a group dynamic and therapeutic elements has proven integral to many fathers' respective journeys (Voith et al., 2024). Studies also emphasize the positive impact of case management as a form of support to navigate structural barriers and support skill development in fatherhood initiatives (Voith et al., 2024). HCN's 2024-2025 Brighter Futures Evaluation Report supports this existing research.



A Brighter Futures program participant with his grandchildren.

The HCN Brighter Futures Program



From January 2022 to June 2024, the HCN Brighter Futures program was a collective of organizations funded by the Dream Keeper Initiative (DKI) to provide culturally relevant economic, academic, housing, and health services for families within underserved communities in San Francisco. HCN's Brighter Futures program was one of the only programs in the HCN Brighter Futures City-Wide Collaborative in San Francisco using a revolutionary Afri-centric framework to provide Black fathers with a free and accessible mental health service with fathers as the primary clientele. By design, the HCN Brighter Futures program is built on HCN's Ma'at model¹ to mitigate, and where possible, eliminate barriers to care for underserved and marginalized fathers and families, including mental health stigma, illness, distrust of the healthcare system, absence of culturally competent providers, and lack of insurance or underinsurance. HCN was funded under this program to support fathers and their families through group healing circles, individual therapy sessions, and case management. HCN extended the program through December 2024.

The HCN Brighter Futures program addressed the urgent need for support and healing within Black/African American youth and families in San Francisco. Black San Franciscans contend with multiple compounding systemic and intergenerational traumas such as homelessness, displacement, community violence, the impacts of the opioid crisis, and disparities in health, wealth, and education. Through involvement with the HCN Brighter Futures program, Black fathers, and their families, received unconditional

support for healing and growth. The HCN therapists acted as guides and allies, maintaining a posture of openness and collaboration with each client participating in individual and group therapy. Staff regarded the HCN Brighter Futures participants as capable of healing and possessing the wisdom needed for healing to manifest. Participants of the HCN Brighter Futures had the freedom to elect the services they received; fathers could choose to participate in as many or as few HCN Brighter Futures services offered. Afri-centric, culturally responsive assessment models guided the treatment planning and ongoing feedback ensured that the relationship to therapy remains supportive, caring, trusting, and respectful. This relationship-based strategy affirmed a positive Black/African American identity and reinforced an intergenerational collective and collaborative approach to healing.

The HCN Brighter Futures Program Men's Groups also accounted for individual and group interests, needs, and lived experiences, facilitating a space for reflection, connection, and discussion. **Topics explored by the HCN Brighter Futures cohort included:**

- Identifying and addressing generational "curses"
- Resilience
- Family traditions and dynamics
- Experiences in being raised without a father
- Communication skills

¹For additional information about HCN's Ma'at model, see HCN's 2023-2024 Ma'at Program Evaluation Findings. HCN's 2024-2025 Ma'at Evaluation Findings will be made available in Fall 2025 at <https://www.hcnkids.org/impact>.

The Men's Groups were also an opportunity for HCN's case manager to connect interested fathers to individual therapeutic services, share critical resources to address the needs of themselves and their families and assist the fathers in navigating complex systems of support for families.

Further, HCN championed a mobile model for program offerings, providing services at both HCN office locations and per the comfortability and needs of participants.

THE HCN BRIGHTER FUTURES PROGRAM IN AFRI-CENTRIC CONTEXT

The Afri-centric framework adopted by HCN champions the exploration of mental health services beyond the lens of Western methods of healing. Racial trauma, as a result of historical systems of oppression, has contributed to detrimental physical, psychosocial, and psychological impacts on individuals that are part of the Black community (Chioneso et al., 2020). Black community mental health, which is the culmination of HCN's Afri-centric framework, is a step towards decolonizing the Western mental health field and honors the validity of cultural, holistic methods of healing.

During these unprecedented times, it is important to acknowledge that Black community mental health is not just liberation for Black-identifying individuals, but also promotes the collective liberation of other marginalized groups while shedding the sterile, rigid infrastructure of Western medicine which historically ignores the experiences and implications for marginalized populations.

Homeless Children's Network's Brighter Futures program committed to the emotional, physical, and spiritual healing of Black fathers while accepting fathers where they are at, "free of definitions subjected to them by racist, deficient narratives", paving a way for fathers to

remedy the generational traumas caused by structural racism. By embracing the interconnectedness and power of community storytelling and collective memory, healing begins to unfold.

The Present Study

The current study continues our exploration of the impact of the HCN Brighter Futures program on historically marginalized and underserved fathers and families in San Francisco from July 2024 to December 2024. Specifically, this study sought to address the following questions:

1. Who did the HCN Brighter Futures program serve?
2. What was the experience of participating in the HCN Brighter Futures program?
3. What was the impact of participating in the HCN Brighter Futures program on fathers and their families?
4. What did the HCN Brighter Futures program bring to the San Francisco community?



HCN's Brighter Futures Therapist.

METHODS

PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

Indigo Cultural Center is committed to engaging in Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) rooted in equity. Our evaluation design, implementation, and dissemination activities are aligned with our partners' goals of establishing and maintaining continuous quality improvement across their programs.

The HCN leadership and the HCN Brighter Futures team collaborated with us on evaluation design, survey development, data collection, community and participant outreach (e.g., phone calls, texts, emails) to invite feedback, and interpretation of findings, and the drafting of this report. Surveys with multiple-choice and open-ended responses were our primary method of gathering feedback from past participants. In January 2025, the HCN Brighter Futures staff distributed the survey link to fathers who participated in the program from July 2024 to December 2024. The survey was distributed via email and text. To supplement our approach, we utilized client testimonials recorded in the Spring of 2024 and conducted thematic analyses to understand the program's impact on individual participants and families as well as the community-wide impact.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

Together with the HCN team, we analyzed participant feedback survey data and analyzed participant testimonials. We analyzed quantitative numeric data using SPSS. In addition, we engaged in thematic analysis to find themes in qualitative narrative data.

Thematic analysis included the Indigo Cultural Center team, HCN leadership, as well as the HCN Brighter Futures team, which included HCN's Director of Afri-centric Services, the HCN Brighter Futures Program Therapist, and the HCN Brighter Futures Program Case Manager.



HCN's Brighter Futures Therapist and Case Manager.

FINDINGS



Research Question 1: Who did the HCN Brighter Futures program serve?

Clients served through this program were diverse in lived experiences and included:

- Fathers, individuals, and families who were homeless, previously homeless, or at-risk for homelessness
- Chronically homeless families, including parents and youth who have experienced homelessness for multiple generations
- Black/African American individuals and families
- LGBTQIA+ adults and youth
- Systems involved individuals and their families
- Families affected by trauma

During the period of July-December 2024, the **HCN Brighter Futures therapists and case managers served nine fathers and their families** in San Francisco. Participant ages ranged from 18-56 years. A number of participants were grandparents and two were caregivers of their grandchildren. The

fathers who participated in the program identified as African American.

Three of the nine participants responded to the feedback survey regarding their experience from July 2024-December 2024. Survey responsiveness was likely limited due to the fact that the program had concluded prior to the implementation of the survey. To supplement survey responses, we reviewed three additional participant testimonials shared by HCN, which were captured by an external videographer and documented participants' experiences, perspectives, and perceived impact of participating in the program.

Research Question 2: What was the experience of participating in the HCN Brighter Futures program?

PROGRAM FEEDBACK

Responses from the Participant Feedback Survey and testimonials unanimously revealed that participants had a positive experience while receiving therapy and case management services with the HCN Brighter Futures Program. We asked participants: "What made you continue coming back to the HCN Brighter Futures program?"

A prevalent theme that arose across participants' responses was that Brighter Futures staff were **empathetic** and got to know participants on a personal level, often engaging in one-on-one interactions where services were **individualized**² and tailored to each participant's needs.



HCN's Brighter Futures Program participants engaging with a calming exercise.

“

The staff at [HCN's] Brighter Futures were very professional. They had empathy. They helped me out a lot, especially [my HCN Brighter Futures Therapist and Case Manager]. They work with me one-on-one and you know, they helped me out through a couple of things that I was going through. I'm still going through, but they, you know, with the tools that, you know, I'm able to, that I've gained dealing with them, it's been able to help...I'm very appreciative of their help.

- Survey Participant

”

This participant's response highlights the significant impact of how the HCN Brighter Futures staff engage with their clients. The HCN Brighter Futures team's commitment to providing individualized, quality care is what makes clients **want to continue coming back**. Their engagement with program participants builds **trust**, supporting clients' growth and healing.

²Use of the word "individualized" in this context references the HCN Brighter Futures Program team addressing a person's specific and unique needs in the context of family and community.

Research Question 3: What was the impact of participating in the HCN Brighter Futures program on fathers and their families?

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

Findings from this study emphasized the importance of intergenerational healing. Not only did the HCN Brighter Futures participants express improved relationships with their children, some participants shared improved relationships with their own parents and other generations within their families.

“[The HCN Brighter Futures program] Helped me rebuild the bond with my mom.”

- Survey Participant

I thought I was a good parent or a decent parent when raising my two children. And I learned more and more and I'm still learning...I took guardianship over [my grandchildren]...I had to learn how to parent all over again and become a better parent. This program, just in general, has given me a lot of tools that I didn't have when raising my two children. For example, my body language

when I'm talking to my grandson, my voice tone, have I given him a hug or said “I love you”. I've matured instead of just laying down the laws and the rules. My therapist now, he says, when I'm talking to my grandson, Sit down and hear his side of the story. and I've been using that for the last month. And now I've got the greatest results ever.

- Participant Testimony

Not only was individual therapy effective in improving participants' relationships within their families, but participants also received tangible resources that allowed them to access their basic needs and care for their children (and grandchildren). The HCN Brighter Futures program was a **reliable and consistent safe space** that often served as a lifeline for some participants who were navigating the challenges of single parenthood and limited access to important resources such as stable housing, legal services, and necessities for their children.

“ I received different resources, information from [case manager] for housing, late rent, legal services that I needed to look into, clothing, toy drives during Christmas, which was very hard for me. I don't have no help, I'm a single father, so that was very helpful during the time when I needed it. [My case manager] has always made it a point to help me with pointing me in the direction of referrals and resources

-Survey Participant

SKILL BUILDING & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The HCN Brighter Futures program promoted **lasting impacts** on San Francisco fathers, guiding them toward the development of skills for **building, maintaining, and even rebuilding relationships** with others. Participants shared how Brighter Futures helped them establish **better communication skills** and **reflective capacities** for **breaking cycles** of behavior which were harmful to their relationships in the past. Findings from our study evidenced that participation in the HCN Brighter Futures program helped fathers become more mindful of how their past experiences may impact the way they engage with their children. By doing so, Brighter Futures fathers not only learned valuable skills for maintaining their own relationships, but are able to **pass down these valuable skills to their children and loved ones.**

“I’m more patient and understanding towards my kids”

- Survey Participant

“Being in this program calmed me down, it made me look at life differently... I was raising my child how I was raised, which I know now was the wrong thing to do. My thing is now to change that and not treat my daughter like that or raise my daughter like that. I learned how to talk and not just sulk about stuff and not just keep stuff in. Learn how to express myself. So I had to teach my daughter to express herself...I've decided that I'm going to come back...and better myself [and] my community and the people

around me. Some of my friends that are in jail, some of my friends that are dead, I help them with their kids and their families. I'm trying to teach other people that it's cool to go to therapy cuz the therapist isn't judging you. They're just listening to you. So I tell all my friends to try, try therapy. It could change a whole lot. Just try, that's all you can do.”

- Participant Testimony

Finally, participating in HCN Brighter Futures improved participants’ **perceptions of themselves.** Findings from this study illustrated the ways the HCN Brighter Futures program helped participants become **more confident** in their parenting capacities and their abilities to **continue improving and becoming better versions of themselves over time.**

“The program we’re in here, it’s helped me to become the father I’m supposed to be. The Dad. It’s helped me to realize that I have to be there for my children and now grandchildren. It’s helped me understand what my role is and that’s what I’m working on these days. To all 3 of my children, I’m sorry for not being the dad that you deserved. You are worthy, you are special and you are somebody. We need programs like this to help to break that cycle of the absent fathers. They need to be present in their child’s lives because there is no change unless you learn from the past.”

- Participant Testimony

“ [Participating in the HCN Brighter Futures program is] making me a better father. I’m still working on it. I'm still working everyday. In three words:

I’m getting better daily.
- Participant Testimony

”

Research Question 4: What did the HCN Brighter Futures program bring to the San Francisco community?

While funding for the HCN Brighter Futures program has ended, program participants shared the enduring **importance** of the Brighter Futures program for the San Francisco community. The HCN Brighter Futures Program is one of the **only** programs in San Francisco that offers **free, accessible, and culturally relevant** therapy for Black fathers and families. The HCN Brighter Futures program filled a critical need for Black families in San Francisco who often are unable to trust mental

healthcare providers due to experiences of medical racism and discrimination and high cost of accessing services, contributing to a cycle of unmet mental health needs (Alang, 2019). The loss of the HCN Brighter Futures program is a loss for historically marginalized fathers, families, and communities in San Francisco who are critically needing support and resources.



“ [The HCN Brighter Futures] was very much needed especially when there is no services to help just Black community [other groups] are treated better and have more support than the Black community.

- Survey Participant ”

“ Come back [...] there's Black Fathers and families that need your help and support.

- Survey Participant ”

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study underscore the transformative impact of the HCN Brighter Futures program in fostering healing, growth, and reconnection among fathers from historically marginalized communities—particularly Black fathers. The findings suggest that the HCN Brighter Futures program creates the conditions necessary for meaningful change by grounding its work in a culturally relevant, Afri-centric framework that affirms the identities and lived experiences of Black fathers.

Crucially, the program’s trauma-informed and culturally grounded approach created a safe environment where participants could process intergenerational, historical, and personal trauma. Fathers shared that this supportive space enabled them to better regulate emotions, communicate more effectively, and reflect on their roles as parents and partners. These shifts not only empowered individual participants, but also helped to repair and strengthen family bonds—especially across generations.

The HCN Brighter Futures program also addresses a significant gap in the mental health field: the lack of accessible, affirming therapeutic spaces for Black fathers. Research has long documented how Black men, particularly fathers, are often excluded or stigmatized in therapeutic contexts and, instead, report feeling pressure to navigate emotional challenges alone, without access to mental health support or culturally attuned care (Franklin, 2009; Franklin & Davis, 2001). The HCN Brighter Futures program directly counters this narrative by making therapeutic support approachable, relevant, and desirable. Participants described feeling seen and supported in ways they hadn’t before, which in turn

helped normalize help-seeking and community care.

Further, findings also revealed that the program’s focus on equipping fathers with practical skills—such as emotional processing, parenting strategies, and self-reflection—has the potential for lasting and intergenerational impact. As fathers grow in their own healing journeys, they become role models and transmitters of resilience to their children and communities. This ripple effect contributes to the de-stigmatization of therapy and encourages a broader culture of healing, connection, and mutual support.



HCN’s Brighter Futures Program Director, Therapist and Case Manager.

Taken together, these outcomes illustrate the power of father-centered, culturally responsive programming to facilitate deep transformation. Rather than reinforcing deficit-based narratives about Black fatherhood, the HCN Brighter Futures program celebrates strength, nurtures emotional growth, and creates space for authentic connection. Its success signals the urgent need to invest in and expand similar initiatives that respect the complex realities of Black fathers, address structural barriers, and affirm the essential role they play in family and community life.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The HCN Brighter Futures program was a critical community-based, community-driven, and community-endorsed support program of the San Francisco community. The HCN Brighter Futures program is a unique and one-of-a-kind program serving Black fathers from a culturally relevant, individualized, and accessible perspective, having impacts on not only the participants themselves, but other generations within their families, and on their surrounding communities.

Although the HCN Brighter Futures program is no longer funded, HCN continues to support men of all ages from historically marginalized communities, including Black fathers and young Black men, through HCN's other culturally responsive community-based mental health and well-being programs. For example, HCN's Community Mental Health program offers Young Men's Empowerment Groups, where clinicians meet with young men to discuss topics surrounding mental health

and well-being (report forthcoming). In addition, HCN's new Black Birthing Health Initiative (BBHI) program will be considering the inclusion of services geared toward Black fathers in program offerings for the 2025-2026 fiscal year. These continued and targeted efforts are essential in ensuring that the community of Black men in San Francisco continue to receive what they need in order to thrive.

Findings from this report make a strong case for the continued and expanded funding of the HCN Brighter Futures program and the use of the HCN Brighter Futures program model as a framework to fund new, similar programs within San Francisco. Men, and more specifically, Black men, often do not receive targeted support within the mental health field. While there are a number of programs supporting the mental health of marginalized adults in San Francisco, to our knowledge, there are no programs whose primary population served are Black fathers. While the HCN Brighter Futures program is no longer funded, other therapeutic programs targeting children, parents/caregivers, and families may follow HCN's program model and intentionally include fathers in their programming and work towards training clinicians with expertise in providing therapy to men and fathers. It is critical to ensure that all members of the family receive the support they need in order to promote healing and community mental health.





“

This particular program, the [HCN] Brighter Futures program, is set up to help children but by way of their fathers...The gentlemen that are a part of this program said to themselves there are things I can do differently...There are days when the breakthroughs happen: 'That thing you told me, I've been practicing all week, it's been rocking and rolling.' That stuff is what I show back up for.

We've seen changes in the past five or six years, men buying into therapy, the idea that we can do this together. You don't have to do this by yourself...There are wonderful places to get the information out that you might want to get out because you're feeling sad, frustrated, mad, but what information are you getting back in? [...] When really, it needs to be, 'Hey, here's some self-reflection. Hey, here's some breathing exercises, so you can be calmer when this situation happens.' [...]

It's very rare that we have a program like this, so as I bring it to people, talk to people, everyone's face looks the same way, 'Wow, this is available?'

It is small, but it is something that can very clearly help. It's just that people have to fight to make it happen.

- HCN Brighter Futures Therapist/
Community Mental Health Advocate

”

REFERENCES

- Alang S. M. (2019). Mental health care among blacks in America: Confronting racism and constructing solutions. *Health services research, 54*(2), 346–355. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.13115>
- Datchi, C.C., Jean Simon, P. (2022). Fatherhood and Social Justice: Centering Marginalized Stories. In: Molloy, S., Azzam, P., Isacco, A. (eds) *Handbook of the Psychology of Fatherhood*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14498-1_17
- Voith, L. A., Russell, K. N., Withrow, A., Kearney, J., Xia, T., & Coleman, D. (2024). Elevating Black fathers' experiences in the National Fatherhood Initiative: Strengths and areas for improvement of 24/7 Dad@ curriculum and case management services. *Family process, 63*(4), 1926–1946. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.13036>
- Wallace, B. A. (2022). “That’s How They Label Us:” Gendered-Antiblackness, Black Fathers, and the Parenting of Black Children. *The Journal of Men’s Studies, 31*(1), 69-88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265221098355> (Original work published 2023)

