

Male Caregivers Engaged as Parents

Resources, Supports, and Practical Guidance

Why This Matters: The Special Healthcare Needs and Caregiver Landscape

There has been a steady increase in the number of children diagnosed with special healthcare needs. Children with special healthcare needs are those who present unique and sometimes complex, physical, developmental, intellectual or behavioral challenges.¹ Currently, 13%–20% of all children in the United States are diagnosed with a special health care need.² As these numbers grow, the need for caregiving is also on the rise. An estimated 91 million Americans care for children under 18. Of those caregivers, 47% are parents, with 38% being a father.³

More than 1 million Washingtonians provide care to a family member with special health care needs. Of that number, 10% are children under 18, with fathers defined as primary caregiver 47% of the time.⁴ Based on the data, the role of male caregivers cannot be understated.

Fathers are a vital part of families of children with special health care needs

Fathers play a vital and important role in the health, development, and well-being of children with special healthcare needs or disabilities. Research shows that father involvement is linked to improved communication, emotional regulation, and developmental outcomes for children.⁵ Fathers play an important role in strengthening family support systems by caring for both their partners and children. However, they may also face significant challenges in their caregiving role, including social isolation and limited peer support. Many fathers experience increased pressure as they balance

¹ Ahmad, M. H., Ali, M., Hassan, M., Ahmad, R. N., Yasin, M. U., Fatima, H., Tayyab, M., Jamil, A., Qaiser, A., Zaheer, A., & Sajjad, M. (2026). The Emotional and Psychological Impact on Families Raising Children With Special Needs: A Primary Care Perspective. *Health science reports*, 9(3), e71928.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/hsr2.71928>

² Bethell C. D., Read D., Blumberg S. J., and Newacheck P. W., “What is the Prevalence of Children With Special Health Care Needs? Toward an Understanding of Variations in Findings and Methods Across Three National Surveys,” *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 12, no. 1 (2008): 1–14, 10.1007/s10995-007-0220-5.

³ AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving. (2025, July 24). *Caregiving in the United States 2025*.

<https://doi.org/10.26419/ppi.00373.001>

⁴ AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving. (2025). *Caregiving in the United States 2025: Washington*. AARP.

<https://doi.org/10.26419/ppi.00383.032>

⁵ National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. (n.d.). *Providing emotional support and resources specific to fathers*. Fatherhood.gov. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/for-programs/dads-children-special-needs/providing-emotional-support-and-resources-specific-fathers>

caregiving responsibilities with work and other aspects of life, all while navigating a shortage of resources and services specifically designed for men.

This bulletin highlights supports, services, and strategies to help fathers stay connected, informed, and supported.

Connecting with Other Male Caregivers

Connection is essential, especially for male caregivers raising children with special healthcare needs or disabilities. Relationships with other fathers provide critical emotional validation, reduce isolation, and strengthen overall family well-being. Through open communication, fathers expand their knowledge, access practical resources, develop effective advocacy skills, and share unique perspectives, ultimately building stronger support networks for themselves and their families.⁶

In Washington, there are several options for male caregivers to connect with others who are raising children with special healthcare needs:

[Washington State Fathers Network \(WSFN\)](#)

WSFN fulfills its mission by building meaningful connections among fathers and linking them to essential resources and information. We equip dads with tools to share their stories and advocate for change, while advancing inclusion in every community we serve.

- WSN is a connective hub of support for male caregivers raising children with special health needs or disabilities. This is achieved through:
 - Developing and promoting chapters
 - Sharing resources and support
 - Developing partnerships throughout the state
 - Creating resources that support fathers and their families
 - Building connections and promoting inclusivity
 - Advocacy for male caregivers
 - Events and activities that bring fathers together

[Washington Fatherhood Council](#)

The Washington Fatherhood Council is a collaborative group focused on reducing poverty and inequality through increased fatherhood access and belonging. The council provides

⁶ National Fatherhood Initiative. (2018, January 18). *How to help dads who have children with special needs*. Fatherhood.org. <https://www.fatherhood.org/championing-fatherhood/how-to-help-dads-who-have-children-with-special-needs>

support to improve state services, connects dads to resources, and makes sure that fathers with lived experience are part of everything they do.

- The council is made up of a diverse group of fathers, organizations, academics, and advocates. They work collaboratively to raise awareness around the unique role of fathers and create foster a father-inclusive culture in communities, agencies, and policies.
 - Increase awareness of the essential role father’s play in child and family well-being.
 - Promote father-friendly policies and practices to increase child and family well-being.
 - Promote equitable resources for fathers and families.

Washington Parent to Parent

Washington State Parent to Parent (P2P) is a network of 26 Local County Programs that provide outreach and support to all counties in the state.

Activities include:

- Free, confidential services
- Matching parents in one-to-one relationships with skilled, experienced parents called Helping Parents. Matches are based on diagnoses and family issues.
- Follow-up by local County Coordinators on each P2P referral who also help with systems navigation and resource identification
- Culturally relevant services
- Support and social groups for the family
- Information/Educational Trainings
- Leadership trainings for parents who want to become volunteer Helping Parent (H/P)
- Newsletters, Facebook & E-group

Understanding Services and Supports

Fathers’ involvement in all stages of their children’s lives cannot be understated. As of recent, fathers’ contributions are on the rise, specifically when supporting their partners and children with medical assistance. That being said, studies show that fathers raising children with special healthcare needs report feeling excluded by healthcare providers.⁷

⁷ Ogourtsova, T., O'Donnell, M. E., Chung, D., Gavin, F., Bogossian, A., & Majnemer, A. (2021). Fathers Matter: Enhancing Healthcare Experiences Among Fathers of Children With Developmental Disabilities. *Frontiers in rehabilitation sciences*, 2, 709262. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fresc.2021.709262>

One way to alleviate this challenge is to reduce barriers to access and understanding of the resources available to fathers and their families. Below is list of some navigation resources:

[Developmental Disabilities Administration \(DDA\)](#)

- Learn about resources, eligibility, case management, and service coordination.

[DCCS - Home and Community-Based Waivers](#)

- Learn about services such as respite, community inclusion, and therapies.

[Washington Assistive Technology Act Program \(WATAP\) - Assistive Technology \(AT\)](#)

- WATAP provides resources and services to persons who face challenges related to disability and aging to help in the selection and use of assistive technology, also known as AT.

[Informing Families](#)

- They offer trusted news and information to individuals and families that empowers them to be active participants in planning and building a network of support and opportunities.

[PAVE](#)

- Provides support, training, information and resources to empower and give voice to individuals, youth and families impacted by disabilities in Washington.

[The Arc of Washington State](#)

- Offers services and programs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities of all ages and in providing support to their families.

These services are part of a broader system that helps families access care, supports, and long-term planning tools for their loved ones.

Respite and Caregiver Support

Navigating caregiving systems can be overwhelming, especially when fathers are working to support their loved ones. Sometimes, balancing caregiving responsibilities with work can cause conflict.⁸ Respite support can help reduce burnout and improve overall family well-being.

⁸ Uribe-Morales, B. M., Cantero-Garrito, P. A., & Cipriano-Crespo, C. (2021). Fathers in the Care of Children with Disabilities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study. *Healthcare (Basel, Switzerland)*, 10(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare10010014>

DSHS - Respite Care

- The Family Caregiver Support Program is a service available to unpaid caregivers of adults needing care and living in Washington State. There are local Family Caregiver Support Program offices throughout the state staffed with caring and knowledgeable people who can help you:
 - Find local resources/services.
 - Find caregiver support groups and counseling.
 - Get training on specific caregiving topics.
 - Get respite care if you need a break.
 - Talk through specific issues you are having and offer practical information and caregiving suggestions.

DCYF - Kinship Care

- "Kinship care" is the full-time care of a child by extended family or suitable others. "Suitable others" are unrelated kin, like close family friends, or "chosen family." In Washington, grandparents often provide kinship care. But it can also be provided by others like adult siblings, aunts and uncles, neighbors, and more. Federally recognized Tribes determine who is a relative to children or youth who are enrolled members or eligible for membership.

Lifespan Respite Washington

- Administered by [PAVE](#), this program offers mini-grants (up to \$1,000 per qualifying household) to unpaid caregivers supporting a family member or friend with special needs who do not receive respite from any other program.

Raising a child with special health care needs may increase overall costs on families. Based on a recent report, almost half of family caregivers in Washington have been impacted financially by their care responsibilities. These impacts can consist of unpaid bills, reducing or stopping savings, or taking on debt.⁹ Some financial support programs are available to assist:

Hospital Bills and Charity Care in Washington State

- Depending on how much individuals and families make a year, Washingtonians can qualify for free or discounted care at hospitals in the state. These protections apply

⁹ AARP & National Alliance for Caregiving. (2025). *Caregiving in the United States 2025: Washington*. AARP. <https://doi.org/10.26419/ppi.00383.032>

to out-of-pocket hospital costs, including co-pays and deductibles. This kind of financial assistance for hospital bills is known as “charity care.”

[DSHS - Individual and Family Services Waiver](#)

- The Individual and Family Services waiver supports individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who live with their family to develop and implement supports and services to successfully maintain individuals in their family homes and communities.

[DCYF - Early Support for Infants and Toddlers \(ESIT\)](#)

- The Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) program gives early help to children from birth to age 3 who have developmental delays or disabilities, as well as their families.

[Apple Health - Program Requirements for Children](#)

- Apple Health for Kids offers free or low-cost comprehensive medical, dental, and vision coverage for children under 19. For children with disabilities or special health care needs, it acts as either primary insurance or as secondary insurance to offset out-of-pocket costs and co-pays.

Supporting Your Child’s Development

Fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives through all stages of life cannot be understated. Fathers support their children through the development of skills, fostering autonomy, providing emotional security, and relationship modeling.

[Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction \(OSPI\)](#) provides an overview and guidance of the IEP.

- [Individualized Education Program \(IEP\)](#)

[Informing Families](#) has a suite of resources based on the life stages of your child:

- [Ages 0-3](#), [Ages 3-6](#), [Ages 6-14](#), [Ages 14-21](#), [Ages 21-40](#), [Age 40+](#)

[Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds](#) offers detailed information on the IEP process and expectations.

- [Individualized Education Programs \(IEP\)](#)

[PAVE](#) offers a resource for where to start when a student with special healthcare needs requires help at school.

- [Where to Start When a Student Needs Special Help at School](#)

DSHS offers the School-to-Work program which supports students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It helps them have a seamless transition from school to a job.

- [School-to-Work](#)

[Wise](#) is dedicated to advancing meaningful employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). They offer trainings, resources, consulting, and other tools across Washington.

- [Transition and School to Work](#)

Mental Health and Well-Being for Parents and Their Families

Male caregivers may face times of anxiety, stress, and burnout. Below are some resources for parents and families.

[The National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. There are many affiliate chapters throughout the country (including here in [Washington](#)) with local chapters present throughout the state. In addition, many chapters offer support groups.

- [Washington Support Groups](#)

[Perinatal Support Washington](#) offers numerous resources for parents and providers. They also offer a [warm line](#) for parents. If you are a new dad, there is a space to talk to another dad about your mental health needs during this period as well as gather information about supporting your partner who might be experiencing their own mood or anxiety disorder. All you need to do is just ask to talk to a dad when you call the line.

If you or someone in your family is feeling overwhelmed or in crisis, support is available. You can call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) or chat online at 988lifeline.org. This service is free, confidential, and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can also find therapists in Washington State by visiting the Psychology Today website at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/washington>.

Conclusion

As a male caregiver, you are not alone. There are ways to connect with other male caregivers. There are places where you and your experiences will be seen, heard, and validated. Understanding services that are available to you and your family helps you become more knowledgeable and advocate for your child's needs effectively. It is essential

to take care of yourself in order to better support your family. It is alright to ask for help. There are people out there to help you in times of need. Lastly and most importantly, your involvement in your child's life truly matters. Engaged fathers make a difference in the lives of those they love.

If you want to connect with other male caregivers raising children with special healthcare needs and disabilities, please join a [Washington State Fathers \(WSFN\)](#) chapter meeting. Chapters are located in throughout the state. The [chapters](#) provide a space for male identifying care givers to come together and share their experiences, resources, provide support, mentorship in a safe, confidential space where your experiences will be seen, heard, and validated. In addition, WSFN offers a robust list of [helpful resources](#) to support male caregivers and their families.