

LESSONS LEARNED

Since the inception of the HMI in 2002, ACF and its partners have learned valuable lessons on how to support healthy marriages in different settings and with different groups. The following points summarize some lessons learned through two primary sources. One source is a qualitative analysis of a project focusing on low-income unmarried parents, supported by the Office of child Support Enforcement.ⁱ The second source is written progress reports and oral reports from grantees working with the Office of Refugee Resettlement. While the findings below stem from these specific projects, the lessons highlight issues that are likely to be useful in other programs or settings.

Desire by Clients for These Services

- Program experience indicates that couples who participate in these programs are very receptive to the content in marriage education services. Many report that they wish the program was longer.
- Program staff are sometimes unaware that romantic, viable relationships exist among low-income unmarried parents or that couples are interested in marriage

Marketing and Recruitment

- Although clients often have positive responses once they begin participating, they are often initially unaware of what marriage education services are and how they might benefit from participation. Therefore, outreach, advertising, and marketing are necessary.
- It may be necessary to employ a variety of advertising and recruitment approaches. It is also important to take the community and cultural context into consideration in developing strategies and materials.
- Posting notice in multiple settings is important. Some programs have found that postings on community bulletin boards and at barber shops and beauty salons have been fruitful methods for recruiting participants.
- Past program “graduates” who have participated and benefited from the programs may be good recruiters and the best source of new referrals.

Staff Composition

- Identify and retain a qualified and enthusiastic project director. The overall success of any particular program will depend on many factors, but one of the most important factors is the skill and zeal of the local project director. The local leader should have an entrepreneurial personality, since starting a healthy marriage program is akin to starting a new business.
- Provide adequate staff training to address serious issues that may face some participants and develop appropriate mechanisms to link participants to needed services. For example, some participants may be dealing with current or past domestic violence or mental health problems that need to be addressed immediately.
- Utilizing male staff, in addition to female staff, is important in encouraging participation by men and both partners within couples. Male staff might

function as co-facilitators with females to provide alternative perspectives and relationship role modeling. they may also serve as recruitment/outreach workers with a special focus on increasing participation by men.

- Use married couples. married couples can be used as program staff or play other roles such as mentors. In any case, they can serve as healthy marriage role models. For some target populations, participants may not have seen many couples working through long-term healthy marriages.
- Look for staff and other support from varied sources. Help may be available through interns, volunteers, Americorp*VISTA workers, and clergy. Many local colleges have intern and volunteer programs already in place. Local clergy are often very willing to assist with classes and with recruitment.

Refugees tend to keep their problems inside the family. Assure participants these are skill-building courses, not therapy. The purpose of the sessions is to produce a frank and open communication within the family, not outside the family.

-ORR Lessons Learned, see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/lessons.pdf>

Formatting Classes

- Utilize group settings. Couples tend to prefer marriage education services delivered in small classes or group settings, rather than one-on-one.
- Serve participants in groups based on their characteristics. In order to be most meaningful, the choice of curriculum content should be tailored to the circumstances of participants. For example, there are disadvantages to combining unattached single parents and romantically involved or married couples in the same group sessions.
- Adapt curricula to engage persons with different backgrounds. The Healthy Marriage Initiative is being translated and extended to many different communities and cultures. some curricula content must be adapted to reflect and address communities with different expectations or norms. Important difference may exist regarding gender roles, religion, culture or traditions.
- Make classes lively and entertaining. In order to promote continued participation, healthy marriage staff should have excellent presentation techniques that engage clients. such staff must receive appropriate training and feedback from program management.
- Offer classes in a variety of settings. Because participation is voluntary, services must be offered within organizational settings that are comfortable and acceptable to the target population. Comfort levels may vary depending on the location; some participants may be comfortable attending sessions in faith-based settings and others may not.

- Variety in approach creates interest. Some programs have held special “couples nights,” where couples sit at romantic candlelit tables for class. Other programs have had outdoor outings for their couples
- Offer classes at a variety of times. Often, both members of a couple are busy with work or other obligations. Scheduling classes at night or on the weekend may better facilitate participation.
- Offer classes in a variety of locations. Not all participants have the transportation necessary to reach in a single designated location. In response, some programs have shifted the location of classes from one place to another at different times and others offer the same services in multiple locations.
- Provide activities for children at the same time as the adult activities in order to facilitate parental participation. Some programs have volunteers who care for young children and computer rooms for older children. During the summer, some sites have offered classes to teens on healthy dating.
- Some programs have offered modest incentives, such as “baby bucks” (money toward baby clothes and toys) or door prizes, to encourage regular and ongoing attendance.

For more lessons learned, see: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/news.htm>

ⁱ Dion, Robin M., & Debra A. Strong. (May 14, 2004). *Implementing Programs to Strengthen Unwed Parents' Relationships: Lessons from Family Connections in Alabama*. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.