THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY STRENGTHENING GRANTS FOR INCARCERATED AND RE-ENTERING FATHERS AND THEIR PARTNERS

Strengthening the Couple and Family Relationships of Fathers Behind Bars:
The Promise and Perils of Corrections-Based Programming

Despite the fourfold increase in numbers of incarcerated individuals, access to prison-based programming has declined.[1] Because most individuals who are imprisoned eventually return home, understanding how to facilitate the transition back into the family is critical. To address this need, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded grants in 2006 for programs designed to strengthen healthy relationships and families affected by incarceration.[2]

A national evaluation is under way to assess the effective-ness of this programming in fostering healthy relationships, strengthening families, and easing community reentry. The evaluation includes site visits to gather information on program context, collaboration, participants, program elements, recruitment, retention, and barriers to and facilitators for success. Findings from these visits and interviews with program staff, partners, and participants are the main sources for this brief.

Because corrections settings and family-strengthening activities are relatively new to each other, the MFS-IP grantees have faced a number of challenges in their first 2 years. This brief documents the creativity and commitment that the grantees have demonstrated in rising to the challenges they have faced.

About This Research Brief

This brief describes the work of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-entering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) grantees in delivering programming in correctional facilities. The brief documents challenges faced by grantees, including logistical barriers, recruitment problems, and challenges retaining incarcerated fathers in programming.

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[1] Lawrence, S., Mears, D. P., Dubin, G., & Travis, J. (2002). *The practice and promise of prison programming*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Available at: http://www.urban.org/publications/410493.html
[2] Funding was provided under the Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood provisions of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, P.L.109-171)

The chief goals of the correctional system are to ensure public safety and to create a safe working environment for facility staff. From a corrections perspective, the policies and procedures that support this mission are necessary, but they present unintended consequences for service delivery programs. Findings from the MFS-IP implementation study show four main challenges to service delivery of family-strengthening activities within the correctional environment, including: (1) institutional constraints; (2) logistical issues; (3) recruitment and motivation of the target population; and (4) retention of participants. The key findings from this study show how MFS-IP grantees made innovative programmatic adjustments that were respectful and responsive to the safety concerns and standard operating procedures of their host facilities while delivering needed services to their target populations.

Institutional Constraints of the Correctional Environment

Statewide budget cuts resulted in facility staff layoffs, shortages, and prison closures. Because of safety and security issues, MFS-IP grantees were required to rely on facility-level staff to assist with and supervise groups.

Cutbacks in facility staff had mixed results. For some grantees, prison-based programming was significantly scaled back in their states because of either staff layoffs or officer shortages. However, the reduced prison-based programming boosted the perceived need for and reliance on external providers, and this worked to the advantage of several programs. Capitalizing on the increased demand for programming was not always possible, if, for example, a facility required that officers be present in the room and there were not enough staff available for oversight. Prison closures also caused start-up delays or required grantees to revisit their plans.

State policies affected enrollment and participant access. State laws and policies designed to address problems in the corrections system often had the unintended consequence of reducing access to and availability of the programs' target population.

In one state, budget shortfalls led to a new sentencing policy that diverted men with alcohol-related convictions to a community monitoring program. This reduced the pool of prospective enrollees for one grantee.

In another state, laws prohibiting released felons from associating with each other in the community prevented staff from working with formerly incarcerated men in groups once they were released.

Another program reported that, although they did not have eligibility criteria based on the duration of sentences or the nature of the crimes committed, the state correctional institutions restricted entry into program activities based on a person's crime, security status, sentence, and release date. These policies directly affected which men could participate in programming.

Misunderstandings about the goals and processes of the MFS-IP programming hindered initial acceptance in some cases. Achieving institutional support was slow. It took time to effectively convey the intent and potential benefits of the relationship- and family-strengthening programs to administrative and facility staff.

Some correctional facility staff feared that family-strengthening services would reopen old wounds and distress participants. It was helpful to make special efforts to inform staff at the facilities about the programming and provide assurance that the approach did not include support group therapy sessions.

In the more successful partnerships, correctional staff understood that programming was a useful and constructive way for men to spend time and having men productively engaged in programming contributed to a safer, more stable facility. Some staff recognized the potential that family and fatherhood had to reduce recidivism, and having program advocates within corrections was powerful.

Some community-based grantees were starting a new relationship with correctional staff, and the learning curve was steep. However, even the corrections-sponsored programs had challenges working within the corrections environment as well, especially as state budgets have become more constrained.

Lessons Learned for Meeting Institutional Constraints

Be prepared for anything and do your homework:
- Stable facilities are more conducive to programming. Facility changes or closures can affect planning. Identify the facilities that are more likely to be stable.
- Demonstrate the value of the programming in a way that matters to corrections. Show any impact the program has had on safety and the facility operations (e.g., do program participants have fewer disciplinary violations?).
- Develop support and buy-in ahead of time. Implement programming in facilities that support the program.
- Diversify service delivery populations (e.g., parole, state probation, federal probation) to ensure that programming can continue if recruitment of a particular population is threatened.
- Staff programs creatively and flexibly.

More communication is better:
- Schedule formal, regular meetings and communications with upper management.
- Have more frequent and informal communications with facility line staff.
- Use multiple methods to communicate with staff, including e-mail, telephone contact, weekly meetings, and administrative memoranda that program staff can keep on hand.
- Directly and frequently invite administrators to raise operational concerns to program leadership and then systematically address each issue.

Logistical Challenges of Working in a Correctional Environment

Logistical Challenges

Programs operating in correctional facilities faced a host of logistical challenges, including:

- Programs struggled to find the limited private space available.
- Providers vied for the time and space to meet the diverse needs of their residents.
- Participant transfers, particularly when they were unexpected, interrupted programming for some grantees.
- Required prison activities, such as lockdowns and population counts, impeded smooth program facilitation.

Finding private areas for programming was a challenge. Most of the MFS-IP programs used classrooms in the correctional facilities to conduct their programming, but access to space was sometimes competitive and difficult to coordinate because facilities used these spaces for other purposes. One program had to limit the number of participants that could be recruited because the available space could only accommodate small groups.

Also, it was common for facilities to restrict areas where staff and participants could congregate. One grantee reported that its host facility implemented a policy change regarding program staff entering the dormitories. This meant that program staff could not conduct one-on-one makeup sessions with incarcerated participants who missed class.

Service delivery was interrupted when men were transferred to other facilities or to other units within the prison. In order for services to be effective, participants must receive adequate exposure to the program. However, grantees faced a number of challenges in this area.

Grantees found that it was difficult to get timely and accurate information on release dates, which hindered service planning and delivery. Retention was often a problem, not because participants lacked interest but because participants were transferred to other facilities without much or any notice.

Men also missed classes because they were charged with administrative violations. Depending on the severity of the violations, grantees often did not know how long the administrative segregation confinement would last and when the participants would be allowed back into the class, thus hindering program planning.

Restrictive state- and facility-level policies often constrained service delivery options. State departments of correction and facilities often had policies that affected access of program staff to participants. For example, nonlicensed staff members may not be permitted to deliver certain programming within the prison system. In response, one program adjusted its staffing so that licensed relationship and family therapists worked with the incarcerated participants and graduate-level marriage and family therapist trainees worked with the partners in the community.

Some community-based programs found that employing ex-offenders as program facilitators or case managers gave their programs credibility with the target population. However, many state departments of correction had policies that prevented service providers from being able to work in prisons if they had criminal backgrounds or any prior history of being on an incarcerated person's visitor log.

Population counts, lockdowns, other commitments, and facility operations disrupted programming. The grantees reported several corrections-specific issues that made programming difficult. Classes sometimes started late because of delayed meal times, scheduled and random population counts, or lockdowns.

One program reported that each class required about 95 to 100 minutes, so it was difficult to deliver a complete module when the class began late. Attendance was also affected by conflicts with other commitments (e.g., GED courses, medical appointments, or in one facility, a seasonal firefighting program).

Recruitment and Motivation among the Target Population

The target population was often initially reluctant to commit to relationship- and family-strengthening programming. The challenges associated with persuading reluctant fathers to participate in relationship- and family-strengthening programming were both personal and institutional.

Program staff speculated that some prospective participants did not wish to admit they had "relationship problems," while others disliked the idea of someone telling them how to raise their children.

The voluntary nature of participation was a challenge to recruitment. One grantee reported that when potential participants found out that participating was not mandatory, they opted not to enroll.

The point of program entry might be one key to successful recruitment. Pretrial fathers appeared to be more motivated to get involved with fatherhood programming than their sentenced counterparts. Recruitment at prison intake was challenging because the men were often too overwhelmed to consider program enrollment. Offering secondary opportunities for incarcerated males who initially declined to participate increased enrollment.

The Challenges of Recruiting Reluctant Incarcerated Fathers

Some men were resistant to participating in relationship/family programs. The main reasons included:

- not wanting to appear "weak" in front of others,
- not wanting to acknowledge their need for relationship or parenting skills training,
- prioritizing other training needs such as education and employment,
- being suspicious of the program's motivations, and
- having concerns about breaches in confidentiality.

Grantees needed to use multiple recruitment methods and opportunities to increase enrollment. Raising awareness of and marketing the programming to prospective participants was an important first step in program implementation. There were several common methods for recruitment. Case managers distributed brochures and flyers. Program or facility staff posted program sign-up sheets in facility dormitories and recruited incarcerated men by word of mouth.

Expanding recruitment efforts by including graduates of the program who were hired as "clerks" for the programs and served as ambassadors to prospective participants was a helpful strategy. Another program used a popular parenting course as a springboard to promote its marriage- and relationship-strengthening courses. One grantee changed its recruitment strategy so that couples were enrolled on a rolling basis instead of by cohorts.

Program identity was important. Grantees noted that being associated with "social services" or religious groups reduced their ability to recruit participants.

Novel incentives aided in recruitment efforts. Grantees found that it was easier to recruit prospective participants when they were able to offer them more visitation time with their families or partners as a program incentive. During recruitment, staff at several programs highlighted the fact that participants and their partners could spend a weekend together during a program retreat. Another program emphasized to potential recruits the 10 additional hours of family visitation time provided to participants.

Programs that aimed to enroll formerly incarcerated men often used parole and probation offices as recruitment venues, and it was clear that this strategy was more effective when participation counted toward participants' parole and probation commitments. To increase enrollment, two programs persuaded judges and parole boards to look favorably on program participation by giving points toward parole or counting both partners' participation toward a parolee's community service hours.

Lessons Learned for Recruitment Challenges
It's all about trust and credibility:
• Make sure participants understand that all of the information they provide during the intake process is confidential and will not be shared with the facility or the department of corrections.
• Consider ways for the program to separate itself from the prison hierarchy so that prospective participants are not initially turned off by the program being "part of the system."
• Provide additional opportunities for participation if participants appear overwhelmed or if recruitment is done during intake.
• Use program graduates to recruit potential participants.
• Use other popular programs or classes as recruitment opportunities to stimulate interest in programming.
Encouragement doesn't hurt:
• Inquire about the possibility of having the host facility or probation and parole honor completion of the program with institutional credits, community service hours, or other similar motivators.
• Maintain a strengths-based approach to foster interest and show respect toward the participants.
• Be willing to reassess recruitment and incentive strategies to meet the population's needs.

Addressing prospective participants' distrust of corrections-based programming lengthened the amount of time it took to establish a class or group. Men had numerous concerns about participation. Grantees reported that they had to emphasize the confidential nature of the programming during recruitment and promote the short- and long-term benefits of participation.

For one program, trust and willingness to participate were only established after staff made sure prospective participants understood that the instructor and other program staff were outside of

the prison hierarchy. Another grantee underscored the importance of helping participants feel that program participation was a step toward a successful return to their communities and families and that they were respected by the program staff.

Retention of the Target Population

Many grantees had to shorten their programming to better fit the population needs and realities. Several grantees chose to condense the curricula they used, either shortening the overall length and number of sessions or by combining multiple sessions into weekend seminars instead of weekly classes. The reasons for these modifications were varied.

Because many available relationship and family-strengthening curricula were designed for couples and families living together in the community, some of the components (e.g., physical intimacy) were hard to address with couples that were physically separated.

One program found that certain topics, such as forgiveness, were particularly complex with this population and usually took more time than the instructor materials recommended. This required reducing time on other components.

In another program, participants did not value the financial training portion of the program because it wasn't relevant. They either did not have enough money to make it meaningful or felt that they already knew how to manage money.

Cultural relevancy was a factor in retaining participant interest. Some programs found that the curricula they chose were not culturally relevant for their target population. For example, one grantee selected a curriculum specifically targeted to low-income, never-married African American parents aged 18 to 35. While this curriculum targeted a core group of the population being served, staff found that it had language that was so culturally specific that it did not work well with non–African American participants.

To address issues of cultural relevance, one program had a cultural outreach specialist review its course materials to ensure that they were appropriate for the target population. In addition, staff attended cultural competency training.

Grantees changed the class structure to improve participant engagement and retention. A few grantees reported that keeping the class sizes small was critical to maintaining participant engagement because men tended to be more open in small group discussions. A former participant in one program noted that small group work was crucial to transforming attitudes toward family relationships. Within small groups, participants heard themselves and others repeatedly articulate new ways of thinking about their family relationships. They also had the chance to cultivate a social network of men who were trying to create a similar kind of new life.

Other modifications to the class structure included having facilitators of different races and/or genders to enhance classroom dynamics and foster open discussion. Tailoring the breakout activities to fit the personalities and interests of the couples also fostered more engagement in discussion groups.

Sustaining creative incentives throughout the program was necessary for retention. A significant incentive for retention was the opportunity for increased communications with and access to partners and children.

One grantee negotiated with facility staff to allow physical contact visits. Participants could hold hands and hug their partners in an open room with correctional officers present. This program incentive was possible because the grantee established relationships with several correctional officers who were invested enough in the program to help secure approval from the facility administration.

Several programs also provided various forms of support for participants to mail letters to their children. One program recognized its "Super Dads" — those participants who attended all classes without any unexcused absences. The Super Dads became role models to new participants and provided a tangible way for the program to demonstrate respect for and acknowledge the hard work of its participants. Another grantee was exploring the possibility of providing free family photos to participants as a way of encouraging ongoing participation.

> **Lessons Learned for Retention Challenges**
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> **Relevance matters:**
> - Modify curricula to ensure relevance to the target population.
> - Use former participants to increase the credibility of programming.
> - Use smaller discussion groups to foster better discussions and retention.
> - Work with the program developer to understand core elements of the curriculum that are necessary for program effectiveness.
>
> **Practice makes perfect:**
> - When using role-playing exercises, hypothetical situations can help participants try out techniques without them having to face the intensity of real problems.
> - Work with facility staff to make visitation easier; negotiate for contact visits, if possible. These can be opportunities to practice new skills.
> - Meet with participants prior to release to discuss post-release planning. Offer services to help offset employment and other problems so that the participant can focus on his family.

Conclusions

For fathers involved in the criminal justice system, the road to a successful return to families and communities is complicated. In addition to having criminal histories, these fathers often also have complex family structures, employment problems, mental health issues, and substance use histories. Providing services to incarcerated men is challenging and demanding because providers have to balance facility safety and security priorities while meeting the human service needs of this population.

The MFS-IP programs have faced numerous challenges during program implementation. As a result, they had to adapt to the shifting institutional and economic contexts of the correctional facilities. They did this by changing their target facilities, diversifying their target populations, and adapting their program curricula. As grantees examined the success and failures of their initial programming, they found better ways to access, recruit, and retain participants while overcoming numerous and significant challenges.

Findings from the first 2 years of program implementation underscore the importance of correctional staff buy-in and support, program fit with prison life, meaningful and tangible participation incentives, and extensive efforts to motivate and retain incarcerated and reentering men in family-strengthening programs. As more participants are released and programs gain

further experience in implementing post-release components, the ongoing multisite implementation evaluation will continue to document the programmatic challenges and solutions.

National Evaluation of MFS-IP Programs

Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the National Evaluation of Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-entering Fathers and Their Partners is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

Implementation Study: Yearly implementation interviews will be conducted with each grantee through 2010. As programs mature and more incarcerated participants are released, grantees will gain more experience serving couples during and after release. The implementation evaluation will document insights garnered from grantee efforts to provide post-release supports in the community and navigate couples-based service provision during a period of major relationship transition.

Impact Study: Survey data collection with incarcerated men and their partners is currently under way in 5 impact sites selected from among the 12 grantees. Beginning in December 2008, couples participating in MFS-IP programming and a set of similar couples not participating in programming were enrolled in the national impact study and completed the first of three longitudinal surveys designed to collect information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes. Baseline data collection is expected to continue on a rolling basis for a total of 3 years, with follow-up data collection extending another 18 months beyond the final baseline interview.

This brief and other publications related to the MFS-IP evaluation are available from the HHS ASPE website: http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/. A program overview and evaluation summary, as well as links to publications of interest and other web resources, may be found at the national evaluation website: https://mfs.rti.org.

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