



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER *for*
HEALTHY MARRIAGE *and* FAMILIES

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned from the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families Peer-to- Peer Networking Forum

Report
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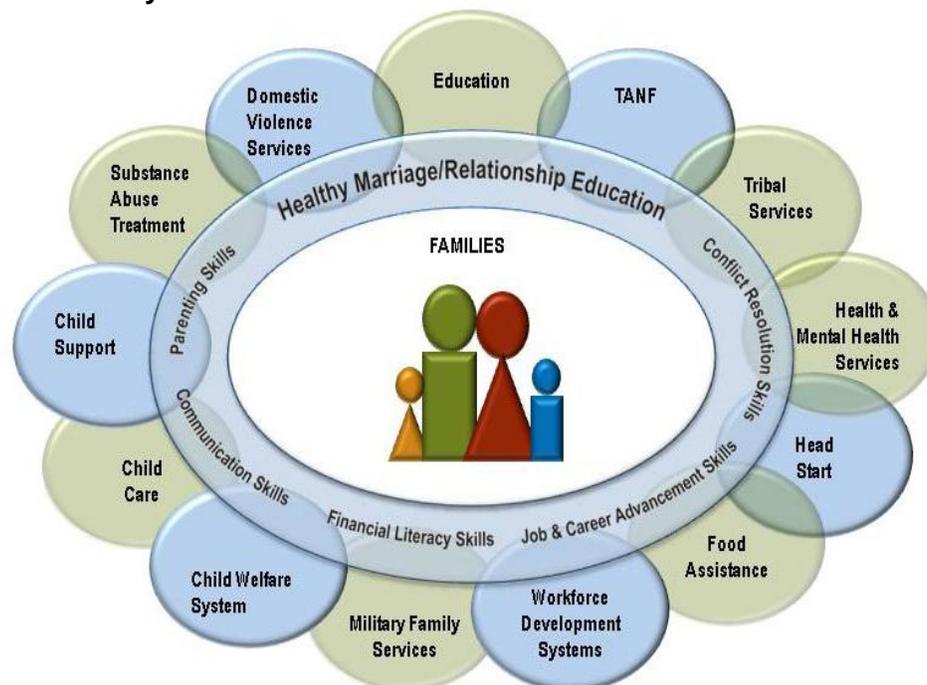
Promising Practices and Lessons Learned from the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum

Overview of the Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum and Its Purpose

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned synthesizes the facilitated discussions from the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum, held in Washington, DC, on July 18 - 19, 2012. Federal, State, Tribal, and County safety-net stakeholders from across the United States – all with interest or experience in planning and integrating healthy marriage and relationship education programming – gathered to share their experiences and lessons learned. The stakeholders represented a diverse range of safety-net services, including workforce services, Head Start, child support enforcement, military family services, and Tribal TANF agencies. These safety-net stakeholders described challenges they experienced and successful strategies employed to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into existing service provision.

As you can see in Figure 1 safety-net service stakeholders are Federal, State, Local, and Tribal government entities and their community partners, such as workforce services, child welfare, domestic violence prevention, Head Start, child support enforcement, housing and urban development, and education. Safety-net service providers offer an array of important services that promote family resiliency, safety, stability, and self-sufficiency. Because of their resources and community presence, integration with healthy marriage and relationship education skills matches well with agency mandates for efficient and effective service provision and is one means of promoting prevention, intervention, and family stabilizing effects on the populations they serve.

Figure 1: Safety Net Service Stakeholders



This *Promising Practices and Lessons Learned* report is for any safety-net stakeholder who is exploring, planning, or already integrating healthy marriage or relationship education skills into their services. It shares the lessons learned from Forum participants' experiences in a wide range of settings. The report includes background information on healthy marriage and relationship education and summarizes Forum discussions around implementation, challenges to integration, and opportunities for collaboration and partnership. It also highlights tools and products available through the Resource Center to support integration efforts. It is important to note that given the varied funding sources associated with these stakeholders and the activities described, some of the ideas discussed may or may not be allowable activities under every funding stream or within every stakeholder agency.

Brief Overview of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Integration

How Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Skills Promote Healthy Children and Families

There is mounting research evidence that trends of increasing marital and family instability are negatively impacting children, adults, families, and communities. Nationally, family fragmentation due to divorce and unwed childbearing is costing U.S. taxpayers at least \$112 billion each year in Federal, State, and Local government spending on safety-net services as well as foregone tax revenues (Scafidi, 2008). Healthy marriage and relationship education, which is a proven prevention strategy, encompasses a wide array of workshops, courses, and skill-building sessions designed to help individuals, couples, and families experience healthy relationships. Most healthy marriage and relationship education programs focus on building and supplementing key interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and financial management. Evidence-based benefits to the physical, social, and emotional well-being of adults and children include:

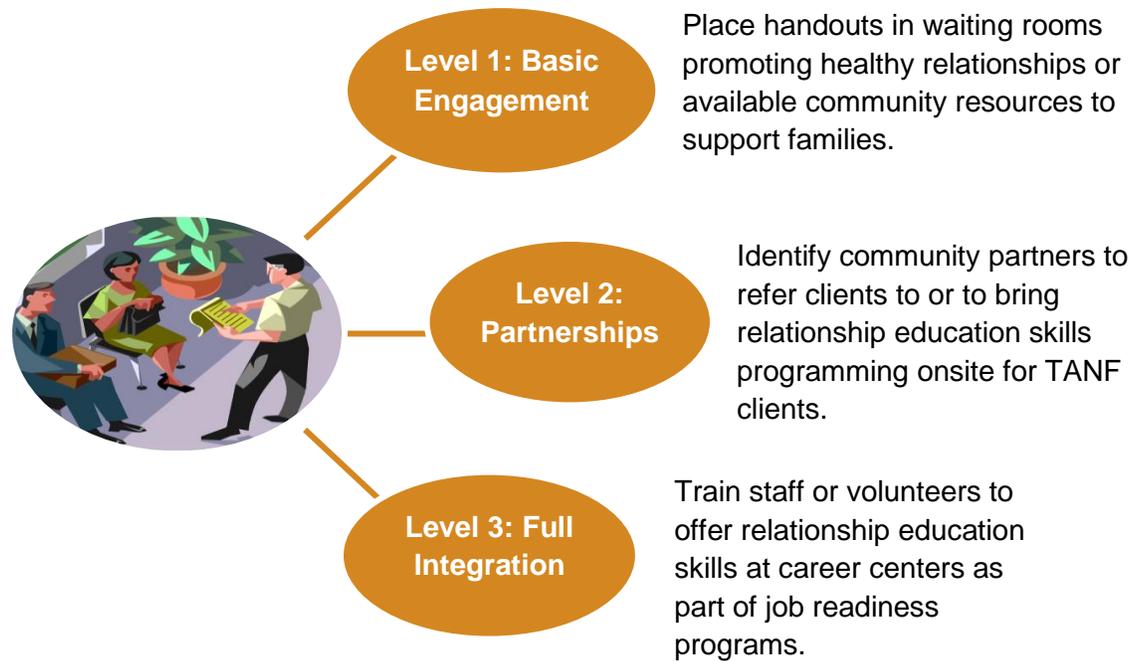
- Adult outcomes: Better physical and emotional health, greater financial well-being, better relationships with their children, and decreased risk of drug and alcohol abuse.
- Child outcomes: Better physical and emotional health, better school performance, fewer behavioral problems in school, better relationship with their mothers and fathers, lower likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse, lower rates of teen pregnancy, and decreased risk of divorcing when they marry (Wilcox, 2011).

Until recently, healthy marriage and relationship education was neither targeted to nor easily accessible to low-income families despite ample evidence that poverty correlates with multiple negative child and family outcomes. Recognizing this gap and the fact that strong families are the foundation of strong communities, several Federal, Tribal, State, and Local agencies have created healthy marriage initiatives to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families, promote healthy relationships, and reduce divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing. These initiatives reach a diverse range of populations, including low-income married couples, single parents, foster parents, step-parents, military service members and their families, incarcerated parents, and individuals who are co-parenting but not married. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families has also administered funding targeted to specific populations such as its African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, and Native American Healthy Marriage Initiative (<http://acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>).

Levels of Integration

Understanding that service delivery systems and priorities vary in different States, Tribes, and communities, integration of healthy marriage and relationship education skills must be tailored to meet needs and interests of the community and its population. The Resource Center uses a *Levels of Integration* concept to help safety-net stakeholders identify their level of readiness to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education.

Figure 2: Examples of Levels of Integration



There are three *Levels of Integration*, roughly correlating with the beginning, mid-range, and full spectrum of what is really a continuum of integration possibilities. Level one is *Basic Engagement*, which involves sharing information about the benefits of healthy marriage and relationship skills with colleagues and with clients. It is a great way to engage other stakeholders and to begin a dialogue. The Resource Center has many tip sheets, fact sheets, and other resources that safety-net stakeholders can use and distribute freely. Tip sheets or fact sheets may be placed in a service agency's waiting area or handed out during client meetings or consultation. They may also be handed out to colleagues at in-service training, staff meetings, community meetings, or agency-sponsored town hall events. [Building Community and Stakeholder Interest and Support](#) includes promising practices and lessons shared by stakeholders with respect to basic engagement.

Level two of integration is *Partnerships*. Stakeholder partnerships that are properly planned and developed maximize resources and minimize service gaps to help the couples and families served to have safe, healthy relationships and move toward achieving self-sufficiency. Consider partnering or expanding existing partnerships with safety-net service providers (e.g., domestic violence providers, cooperative extension agents who provide healthy marriage skills education, workforce development boards, credit unions or other financial institutions, child welfare agencies, and other agencies serving specific cultural populations). The potential benefits of partnerships include informed referral policies, cross-training, and formal and informal information-sharing. Agencies may partner to develop appropriate protocols for safety intervention, refer clients to a partner agency's existing workshops in

healthy marriage and relationship education, or achieve full integration of healthy marriage and relationship education into community service delivery. [Forming Effective Partnerships](#) covers promising practices and lessons learned from stakeholders regarding forming and maintaining partnerships.

Level three is *Full Integration*. *Full Integration* incorporates a comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education program into existing services, although individual components may also be integrated depending on the needs and existing strengths of a community's services. It also encompasses training for service providers and agency staff toward seamless integration of healthy marriage education skills into case management and service delivery. [Effective Messaging](#) and [Engaging Individuals, Couples, and Families](#) provide guidance from stakeholders on two key aspects of full integration. [Moving Toward Integration](#) provides further guidance from stakeholders on successful signs of and strategies for full integration.

From Challenges to Promising Practices: Lessons Learned from Safety-Net Stakeholders

Forming Effective Partnerships

Benefits of Developing Partnerships

Partners are those individuals and agencies that can provide ideas, facilities, facilitators, specialized knowledge, and other resources to help move toward full integration of healthy marriage and relationship education. By developing partnerships within the State, Tribe or Tribal Consortia, or community, agencies can integrate external expertise such as domestic violence and child welfare experts to help develop family safety protocols; build trust; and gain significant support to carry out their mission.

Structuring Partnerships

When strategically choosing partners to assist and support integration of healthy marriage and relationship education, it is important to select those most able to contribute effectively in creating a successful initiative. When a strong partnership is formed, leadership changes may affect partnerships. Several stakeholders suggested creating a memorandum of understanding with a partner to define the relationship between the parties. When leadership changes, the partnerships can continue to stand. Stakeholders suggested making it clear that a partnership is with the agency, organization, or company and not with the current leader or any other particular person. They recommended using a formal agreement document, such as a memorandum of understanding, although this may be dependent on the entity. For example, it may run contrary to building a trust relationship in certain cultures such as a Tribal organization. When a new leader comes into office, a formal partnership agreement increases the likelihood of continuing the relationship.

The Resource Center's [Partnership Types and Tools](#) Web page has more information about different partnership structures, along with templates for partnership agreements and memoranda of understanding.

Once the partnership is established, inviting partners to be included in strategic planning for a successful initiative could be productive for all parties. Melanie Reese, the coordinator for the Utah Commission on Marriage in the Department of Workforce Services' Office of Work and Family Life, suggested asking a partner to be on an advisory board or including them in group meetings. She

observed that this helped her agency's partnership flourish and allowed the partner to feel more included in the project, creating a greater sense of buy-in. By including partners in planning, stakeholder agencies can gain multiple perspectives on community strengths and needs.

Overall, stakeholders felt that strategies centered on establishing trust and mutual respect in partnerships were the most effective – much like healthy interpersonal relationship skills. Specific suggestions included:

- **Show partners how healthy marriage and relationship education is relevant and important to what they do.** Some potential partners may not know what healthy marriage and relationship education is and why it is important. [Building Community and Stakeholder Interest and Support](#) provides more detail on educating supporters. While educating partners on its importance, agency representatives also can explain positive impacts on the population the partner agency serves and the contribution that the partner can make toward successful integration.
- **Make major decisions as a group when possible.** As discussed earlier, including partners on advisory boards can create a stronger relationship, but it can also give the partner a sense of belonging and ownership. This can bolster efforts at engagement, including promotion of services and referral of participants. By including them in major decisions whenever possible, partners maintain a steady knowledge base and feel greater investment in the program. Educated, informed, and invested partners provide value through additional resources and creative solution-building. This can be particularly important as these resources and creativity can expand services beyond the scope of allowable activities based on current agency funding.
- **Talk to partners to obtain recommendations for facilitators, contractors, and other partners.** Stakeholders shared the need to facilitate a mutual trust and understanding. Agencies can express this trust by asking for recommendations for other partners to make integration successful. This can include ideas for facilitators, contractors in the area, or others. The people within partner agencies often have statewide or community connections that can increase the network of individuals, groups, organizations, and agencies that would be interested, trustworthy, and beneficial to include in programming efforts.
- **Know your environment and audience.** Before approaching a potential partner, researching their agency, background, and any previous involvement in healthy marriage initiative programming can be beneficial. Having the background knowledge of how they can help in implementation can assist the provider in knowing what to ask for, specifically tailoring partnership goals to service needs, and building an overall understanding of what the partnership will entail.

Establishing Effective Leadership and Champions

Effective leadership requires not only expertise and understanding of goals, but also a passion for the work being done. Several stakeholders described “champions” of their initiatives as people who stepped in, publicly supported the work, and helped make the effort a success. These leaders do not have to necessarily be a particular kind of person, but someone with an understanding of the goals and resources needed is often key. One stakeholder noted that someone can become a champion for your integration or initiative if you learn about that person's passion and demonstrate how what you both are doing is a fit. Others suggested identifying someone in the community “who people listen to” – who

already has respect and influence – and educating that person as needed. A clergy person was a popular example of an influential community leader. Combining these two strategies may be very effective to garner lasting support for your healthy marriage and relationship integration efforts. Additionally, stakeholders agreed that past participants are the best “champions.” Many noted that word-of-mouth was the best referral source, once their agency began offering healthy marriage and relationship education.

Stakeholders provided examples of particular people, who through resources, connections, passion, and ideas, were able to give the program the boost it needed to be a success. These champions can connect agencies and staff to resources such as facilities, advertising opportunities, curricula, program support, program incentives, or skillful facilitators.

Bridging the Gap across Agencies

Since agencies working together can have a greater collective impact than any single agency working in a silo, stakeholders agreed that investing the time to bridge interagency gaps could provide a larger return on the investment. One frequently cited challenge was maintaining effective communication among agencies. Stakeholders’ recommendations to enhance communication and bridge the gap included:

- **Offer support to other agencies and departments.** Making your agency available to provide interagency support can encourage long-standing collaborations. This can range from offering suggestions of what is working within the agency to sharing specialized knowledge. For example, Head Start staff can offer tips on providing child care during a healthy marriage workshop.
- **Network.** Going to conferences and meetings that other potential partners will attend provides an opportunity for less formal conversation. Attending sessions on healthy marriage and relationship education can connect you with others interested in integrating these services into the services they already provide. Connections made during networking can, like support-based collaborations, become strong partnerships that grow and prosper over time.
- **Work together to accomplish shared goals.** Identifying common goals between or among agencies, which can be jointly supported by integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into services and working toward integration together, can help bridge the gap with a common solution.

Agencies can break down barriers by supporting each other with shared resources and ideas, increasing networking, and working on integrating healthy marriage and relationship education together to accomplish shared goals. This can bridge gaps that will make integrating healthy marriage and relationship education a success across the board.

Connecting with Community-Based Organizations

Potential community partners include faith-based organizations, non-profit organizations, schools, and other public service providers. They can provide resources, ideas, and connections to make integration a success. See [Bridging the Gap Across Agencies](#) and [Effective Messaging](#) for stakeholder guidance on making and maintaining connections across agencies. See [Structuring Partnerships](#) for guidance on formally establishing partnerships.

Stakeholders shared several examples of specific agencies and organizations with whom they had success in partnering based on the value of the partners' ideas and resources including:

- **Schools.** Most middle and high schools already have programs like sex education or teen pregnancy education in place in recognition that youth begin exploring intimate relationships in their tweens and teens. They may be willing to integrate healthy relationship education skills into their existing services. These partners also may offer the school building to after-school programs and would be able to advertise relationship education programs to their students.
- **Cooperative Extension.** State and County Extension specialists at each State's land-grant university already provide outreach education (e.g., health and nutrition, parenting, finances, youth development, housing) through the Cooperative Extension system. Since these specialists already provide skills education to families and individuals, they may have resources and ideas for integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into other community efforts.
- **Families.** Families and individuals, especially those who have successfully completed a healthy marriage education program, understand what other families are going through on a personal level that is unlike many other partners. They are also an excellent referral source. As noted earlier, several stakeholders identified that word-of-mouth (past participants spreading information about a healthy marriage or relationship education program) was their best source of new referrals and participants. Stakeholders also identified having family members and past participants serve on advisory boards and as peer mentors as strategies that added to the success of their programming due to the valuable input and guidance they could offer staff and new participants.
- **Faith-based organizations.** Stakeholders identified faith-based organizations, like the YMCA and places of worship, as beneficial providers of resources and partnerships in the effort to integrate healthy relationship education into their communities. These organizations often have connections, influence in the community, and other important resources that other organizations may not have. Stakeholders shared a few examples of overcoming potential barriers associated with religious freedom when a faith-based organization is a partner. The Cecil County (Maryland) Department of Social Services had their faith-based partner lead a prayer in a separate room for those who wanted to participate. Another stakeholder had its church partner give out religious information after the program, which was printed using the church's funds.

Many different community organizations and institutions could make valuable partners. Partnering with non-profit organizations, like the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, can provide facilities, volunteers, or staff. Local mental health and medical professionals, domestic violence and homeless shelters, and other service providers can be mutual referral sources within the service delivery system. These potential partners can also place materials such as tip sheets and fact sheets related to healthy marriage and relationship education, especially geared toward their clients, into their waiting areas or provide them as part of their service delivery.

Stakeholders agreed that the possibilities of partnerships are endless. Partnering choices should be guided by the target audience and their specific needs. Potential partners can range from large agencies, to small organizations, or to individuals. Some stakeholders chose to plan meetings or forums and include all partners to keep everyone informed, able to discuss common goals, and on the

same page. These stakeholders found that some partners not only contributed ideas but also resources.

Engaging Families

Stakeholders shared the importance of making everything from brochures and tip sheets to curricula resonate with the targeted population (see next section for details and strategies). Stakeholders also emphasized that past participants were their best referral source. Past participants were involved in ongoing efforts to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education, which in turn brought in more interested people as word of the healthy marriage workshops and activities spread. Ways to involve families ranged from having fathers help design a father-friendly brochure to training past participants to serve as peer facilitators and mentors to new participants.

Building Community and Stakeholder Interest and Support

Information Sharing

In such a complex system of agencies, departments, and people, sometimes information can be lost in the shuffle, making it difficult to ensure that everyone receives the information that they need in order to make an initiative successful. To make information sharing a reality, stakeholders suggested that an acceptable degree of transparency be established among collaborating agencies. This may include increasing communication efforts between and within agencies and working together to solve problems that may arise. Specific suggestions included:

- **Sharing information through a listserv.** Some partners may have a listserv available and could send out information to larger groups of people about healthy marriage and relationship education programming or programs that teach specific relationship skills. In the world of email and listservs, those who receive the information could continue to pass it along to a wider audience.
- **Planning regular meetings.** Having quarterly meetings with agents and their partners can be very beneficial to update all parties on new developments, successes, and problems.
- **Planning celebration events.** When an agency has a great deal of success, celebrating may be valuable to keeping enthusiasm within the project. Inviting families and individuals being served, partners, champions, facilitators and leaders will bring everyone involved together to inform the group of the successes that a program or initiative has had. This may involve awards or a special speaker.

Educating Supporters

It is often vital to have the support of community leaders and government officials. Stakeholders shared that one way to do this is to educate these officials on the taxpayer costs of safety-net services and the benefits of healthy marriage and relationship education and skills to prevention efforts and achievement of self-sufficiency.

- **Share statistics from the nation, state, and county.** Let supporters know what relationships look like in the county or state compared to the national statistics. This type of information could include marriage, divorce, teen pregnancy and cohabitation rates. By sharing this information, supporters will have the knowledge about State or community strengths and issues, which can narrow the populations to target.

- **Highlight success stories.** Supporters like to know that these types of integration strategies can be successful and enjoy seeing examples of success stories. Give details about successful efforts in other States or Counties, such as those in Utah or Oklahoma. The Resource Center highlights success stories on its Website at <https://healthymarriageandfamilies.org/success-stories>.
- **Develop a strategic plan for success.** Stakeholders also recommended demonstrating a well-laid out strategic plan that identifies existing community strengths and resources, needed resources, action steps for integration, and anticipated outcomes. This may be done through a less formal conversation or through a presentation, depending on local customs and relationships. Having a well-developed strategic plan can create a sense of trust and understanding. As plans change, updating officials can be important for future support. See [Strategic Action Planning](#) for more on strategic planning.

Although stakeholders identified educating community leaders as an excellent initial step, they also recognized the challenges due to changes in political leadership. Every election cycle may result in new officials in leadership positions. Stakeholders recommended designating a staff member to monitor changes and facilitate these relationships. Additional engagement practices that worked for stakeholders included:

- **Start at the top.** Educating directors of agencies, state legislators, the governor, the mayor or other high-level officials to receive their support made it easier to gain the support of those whom they lead.
- **Develop a one-on-one relationship.** Putting a face to the cause created an interpersonal connection that led to strong partners and supporters. This may require phone calls or face-to-face conversations and will require more time, but is worth the effort.
- **Keep leaders informed and up to date.** Keep supporters informed of any major changes that occur to maintain a relationship built on transparency and trust. Invite supporters to events, such as celebrations and “graduation” ceremonies, and keep them informed about successes to show them that their investment was worth their time and other resources.

Demonstrating Impact

Stakeholders felt that evaluation is important to document the impact that the program or integration effort has in the community. It may be required to continue funding support, depending on the terms of the funding. Some stakeholders also expressed frustration and confusion around evaluation strategies (e.g., tools to collect information and knowledge about conducting evaluation) as well as data concerns due to lack of participation and retention issues. A suggested solution was to involve an external partner such as a university to design and implement an appropriate evaluation.

Effective Messaging

Effective Messaging to Peers and Partners

The message that safety-net stakeholders send to peers and partners about efforts to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education can either create greater support and increased understanding or turn supporters away. Stakeholders recommended that agency representatives and staff personalize the message by tailoring the information to the peer’s or

“Let partners know that it is
‘our program’ not ‘my
program.’”

(Nicole Earls, Washington)

partner's interests, resources, or needs. Stakeholders also used different formats for messaging to meet different peer and partner needs and preferences (e.g., presentations, handouts, video testimonials, sharing statistics). Additionally, stakeholders emphasized that the message should create a sense of shared obligation. Creating an idea of "our program" and not "my program" provides peers and partners with a sense of ownership.

Effective Messaging to the Public

Engaging the public is important to gain wide community support. Letting the public know that it is a community effort and not just an agency effort can encourage potential participants and partners to become involved. Stakeholders focused on messaging to the public through advertising. Although advertising can be costly, Ronald Nix, the Program Coordinator for the Maryland Department of Human Resources, shared that some public relations firms helped his initiative with advertising at little to no cost. He created this partnership by building a relationship with the firm's leadership and by educating the business leaders on the importance of healthy marriage and relationship education. Methods stakeholders used to let the public know about their particular program or effort included:

- **Billboards, television, and radio.** Leasing a billboard in a prime location can reach a large audience. Several stakeholders identified billboards as their most successful marketing strategy. One stakeholder added that people were calling even after the program being advertised was over. Sandra Lewis, the Program Manager at the Cecil County Department of Social Services in Maryland, cited using billboard and radio ads as beneficial to recruiting and promoting their classes. Local television and radio stations may be able to provide a segment of advertising for free or at a discounted rate. Local television and radio personalities may also be willing to do a segment on an agency initiative.
- **Agency waiting areas and client meetings.** Some stakeholders had healthy marriage education brochures available at different agencies throughout the community, such as the health department or the TANF program office. Others gave social workers materials such as tip sheets and fact sheets along with programming information to take to the families that they were serving.
- **Internet and social media.** Stakeholders discussed the advantages of modern technology. Taking advantage of social media and Internet technology can be very low cost and also reach a wide audience. Using popular social media sites to advertise a program or to distribute information is often free. Several stakeholders created a Website as a cost-effective way to advertise a program and to share information and resources. On the site, their agencies can have information such as how to participate in healthy marriage education, when events will be happening, and for whom the program is intended. It can also include resources such as tip sheets and fact sheets as well as links to other resourceful Websites. However, the challenge with using technology is that it may not reach the intended population. For example, people living at or below the poverty level may not have ready access to the Internet and those with low-literacy may have difficulty understanding written descriptions and resource links.

Effective Messaging to Families and Participants

Creating an effective message to families and participants can be important in both engaging and retaining participants. Stakeholders learned to make brochures, announcements, and logos that resonated with the targeted population using the above strategies. Many safety-net stakeholders agreed that handouts such as tip sheets and fact sheets need to be simple and easy to read in order to

draw in their target participants. A recommendation was to routinely gather participant feedback and incorporate it to make programmatic improvements. This let the participants know that their opinions were valuable, which in turn helped them feel engaged and willing to speak highly of healthy marriage and relationship education to others. However, one stakeholder cautioned that her program staff were usually present while participants filled out the evaluations and they rarely received negative feedback. Thus, it may be beneficial to leave the room or provide other assurances of confidentiality in the process. Messaging strategies recommended by stakeholders included:

- **Make ads appealing to your target audience.** Just like marketing for a product, the look and feel of brochures and announcements for healthy marriage and relationship education courses or workshops can influence public interest. Lori Chaves, who works with a Head Start parent population in Western Massachusetts, shared that her program struggled to engage fathers. Program staff reached out to the few fathers who had previously participated to help design a father-friendly brochure. The resulting brochure was very different – from its pictures and colors to its language – and was very successful in bringing fathers into their program. Ronald Nix, the Program Coordinator of the Maryland Department of Human Resources, also shared the success of their use of a logo to brand their program materials. Logos should speak to the targeted audience, whether it be couples, youth, or a certain gender.
- **Focus on the positive.** Stakeholders agreed that positive messages – highlighting successes – are more effective than negative ones. One stakeholder gave an example of a program’s advertisement that included a negative statistic about outcomes of children in single parent families. The ad turned people away from the program rather than drawing them to it.
- **Make workshop names appealing.** Stakeholders gave examples of ways they spiced up workshop or session titles to make them sound more appealing and less stigmatizing. For example, one stakeholder used the title *Wanna Know How to Become a Millionaire?* instead of *Budgeting Class*. Another stakeholder served a meal and used *Mom’s Lunch* as the workshop name.

Involve families. One stakeholder’s agency held a contest for children. They had a group of children draw what they thought a healthy marriage looked like and the winner’s drawing was used on a billboard advertising healthy marriage and relationship education.

Connecting Outcomes to the Message to Sustain Buy-In

Sustaining buy-in for an initiative is often about keeping partners, staff, and participants excited about what is happening and able to envision how their efforts will lead to better outcomes – for staff, clients, or both. Stakeholders noted that some target participants may not have experienced good role models for healthy relationships so they may not know what one looks like. One stakeholder noted that it is important to have a common working definition of a healthy marriage (or relationship), and suggested encouraging open-ended discussion about what a healthy marriage looks like during a first session or at the beginning of a workshop. For staff buy-in, a stakeholder identified the importance of adequate training, particularly because staff will likely outlive the administrator’s tenure in an agency and be the ones to sustain integration.

Engaging Individuals, Couples, and Families

Overall, stakeholders emphasized that successfully engaging the individuals, couples, and families they served was the key to making their integration efforts successful. They stressed that participants need to feel that they are in a “safe” space for sharing information, particularly in small or rural communities. Addressing special circumstances appropriately, identifying suitable curricula, preparing and training providers, and adapting approaches to reach diverse populations were also identified as important aspects of successful engagement.

Addressing Special Circumstances

As one stakeholder observed, families who receive safety-net services are often in crisis and impacted by substance abuse or mental health issues. Stakeholders acknowledged the complexity of working with families who face multiple barriers to self-sufficiency and well-being, and emphasized that healthy marriage and relationship education is not a panacea. Nevertheless, it is an important prevention effort. Stakeholders felt that its impact would depend on the individual’s safety status and level of readiness for change. Stakeholder themes and recommendations included:

- **Incorporate concrete supports for basic needs.** Stakeholders emphasized that having access to resources that help with participants’ basic needs – such as food, shelter, and transportation – helps engage participants and eliminate lack of basic needs as a barrier to participation.
- **Address safety first.** Families served by public service providers may be involved in a high conflict relationship with emotional or physical abuse present. Stakeholders suggested partnering with domestic violence specialists and child welfare agencies or having agency representatives on advisory boards to have protocols in place and address safety issues that arise. They also suggested allowing participants to self-identify as needing more immediate assistance by providing a check list to all participants of indicators of intimate partner violence. One challenge identified by stakeholders is that it is difficult to educate domestic violence victims on how good their relationship could be while respecting the complex feelings involved in the current relationship. Although healthy marriage providers can educate them on future relationships, it is important to be sensitive to the needs and emotions of the victim.
- **Make it a family event.** Stakeholders suggested hosting family nights with integrated activities so that all family members could participate. One stakeholder observed that the family might not even realize they were learning something along the way. Another stakeholder shared that staff had adapted their curriculum all the way down to pre-school level so the whole family could participate together.
- **Keep it simple and readable.** Some participants may have a low reading level or little comprehension of the English language. These are important considerations when selecting curricula, using handouts, choosing activities, and connecting with participants. Some delivery strategies that stakeholders suggested included using more verbal cues, video clips, simple handouts with a lower reading level, and materials in the participants’ first language.
- **Have numerous service partners.** Stakeholders recommended having numerous partners, including domestic violence shelters, mental health providers, and substance abuse treatment facilities to be able to refer clients who are either unsafe or not ready to receive healthy

relationship education due to serious, chronic issues. Healthy marriage and relationship education may be able to be integrated into longer-term treatment programs as well.

- **Meet people where they are at – literally.** One stakeholder was able to provide healthy marriage and relationship education workshops in homeless shelters and at the local YWCA. Another stakeholder attempted to provide whole family workshops at the prison; however, the prison administration was reluctant to let mothers and children into the facility.

Identifying and Tailoring Curricula and Resources

Stakeholders identified a variety of curricula that their agencies used to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into service delivery. Several stakeholders stated that they use the curriculum as a “spring board” for facilitators. While many agreed that a skilled facilitator is the key to a successful curriculum, they also stated that they used good curricula to train facilitators. Many stakeholders stated that they use curricula as a guide, not a rule, emphasizing flexibility in using the curricula. Stakeholders also emphasized the need to adapt curricula and other materials. One challenge they identified was finding curricula for the diverse audiences they serve. While this is a challenge, there are numerous ways to overcome this barrier. They include:

- **Identifying curricula in the language needed.** As noted earlier, if the audience being served does not use English as a first language, it may be helpful to have curricula that are available in the participants’ first language.
- **Adapting delivery, but covering core topics.** While countless curricula exist that revolve around healthy marriage and relationship education, it may be difficult to find one that meets the particular needs of a community’s target population. Stakeholders agreed that sometimes it is necessary to adapt curricula or activities to meet those needs. However, many also emphasized the importance of fidelity to the curriculum to ensure that all the core areas are covered. One caution is that it may be necessary to contact the authors of the curriculum to gain permission to make adaptations. Some stakeholders suggested using video clips, especially for youth or low-literacy groups. Other suggested strategies include story-telling (important in Native American culture), referring to personal experiences (facilitator or participant), or referring to pop culture or current events. Adapting curricula to the unique needs of participants sometimes simply takes a creative touch. Nicole Earls, a TANF Coordinator for the Quileute Tribe’s TANF Program in Washington, made a connection between a Relationship Wheel found in the Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training curriculum (a curriculum developed for child welfare professionals under federal grant funding) and the medicine wheel used in Native American culture. Making these connections and adapting curricula to the specific population can create better understanding of the major points for the participants.

For more information on choosing curricula see *Guide to Free and Low-Cost, Research-Based Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Curricula for Safety-Net Service Providers* at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org.

Recruitment and Retention

Several stakeholders identified recruiting and retaining participants as a significant challenge. Although each agency's situation had unique factors, common themes emerged as success strategies. These included:

- **Removing the stigma.** As noted earlier, several stakeholders hosted events such as a mom's lunch or a family movie night instead of teaching in a presentation or lecture setting. Staff then integrated healthy marriage and relationship education into the event. One of the benefits that stakeholders identified with this strategy is that it helped to remove the stigma of seeking help or services. Stakeholders stressed that these events be held in the right environment. For example, a male-only event could be held in a lodge or at a sports facility. It is also important to work toward letting participants know that participating in marriage and relationship education does not make them weak or categorize them as having an unhealthy relationship.
- **Building trust with clients.** Stakeholders suggested allowing participants to share their input on what they want or need when it comes to marriage and relationship education. Some stakeholders held focus groups with participants to get opinions on everything from curricula used to marketing strategies. Lori Chaves, the Director of the TLC Building Healthy Relationships Initiative at the Holyoke Chicopee Springfield Head Start in Massachusetts, did a focus group with fathers to get their opinions on products and now has a 97% retention rate for her program. This strategy can build a relationship and, therefore, build trust between the agency and individuals or families being served. Once this relationship is built, participants may be willing to recruit others in the community through word of mouth.
- **Using program supports and incentives.** Providing program supports that helps families to participate, such as transportation, child care, and a meal can increase attendance and retention. When individuals have transportation, parents have someone to take care of their children, and families do not have to worry about providing a meal, they are more likely to attend a program. Using other incentives can be costly, but several stakeholders shared ideas for free or low-cost incentives for participants. Charlena Freeman, a social work consultant for the Alabama Department of Public Health, shared that their agency gave out play money to participants. The more the participant attended and participated in the program, the more money they received. The participants could use that money to purchase items from a "store" that the staff created. Having partners or community businesses donate things for the "store" could make this idea a low-cost incentive. Other examples included purchasing romantic items on clearance after Valentine's Day and partnering with area restaurants to donate coupons. Offering incentives that are of specific interest to the audience you are serving was another idea. For example, offering diapers and other baby items to new parents. Agencies may be able to talk to state officials about lowering the cost of a marriage license for couples who complete a premarital counseling course. Federal stakeholders (TANF, child welfare, child support enforcement) should keep in mind that while supports like transportation and childcare are important, the incentives suggested may not be considered an allowable expense under federal funding and may require partnerships or other funding sources.

The Resource Center will offer free, on-line training for safety-net stakeholders through its *Virtual Training Center* beginning in 2013

- **Celebrating accomplishments.** Once a program or initiative is complete, stakeholders suggested planning a celebration event for the families that completed the program. This can be as large or as small as staff chooses. It can mean a cake on the last night, or a large celebratory dinner or other event. Using community partners to sponsor these events is a great way to engender support for your program as well as fund these events which are not typically allowable under government funding. Stakeholders requested information on resources related to making a program more enticing for participants. They also suggested that facilitators survey participants to see what they would like to see in future initiatives to meet their needs.

Preparing Providers and Facilitators

Stakeholders identified many challenges as well as a variety of methods for choosing and preparing staff to provide healthy marriage and relationship education. Stakeholders noted that facilitators can take on-line or satellite trainings to save on travel costs and time. Some stakeholders negotiated with agency leadership to arrange for facilitators, who participate in additional trainings, to receive continuing education credits. Stakeholders also suggested strategies that acknowledge the potential for facilitators to experience compassion fatigue – such as offering stress relief tips and care-for-self tips.

Adapting Approaches to Reach Diverse Populations

Adapting for Diverse Adults

In order to reach diverse populations, healthy marriage and education providers or facilitators need to understand the people they are serving. This can include being flexible with curricula, conducting research on cultures that facilitators may not know as much about, taking cultural differences among participants into account, and knowing about historical trauma experienced by certain cultures. Different ethnicities and cultures may find different learning techniques valuable. As mentioned above, many Native American tribes place value on storytelling. Hispanic culture generally places an emphasis on the entire family, including children being present; thus, programming that accommodates having children participate with the parents may be of particular importance to Hispanic participants. Different cultures also see marriage and family in different ways, so it is important to educate staff and encourage respect for differences. As noted earlier, one stakeholder also suggested encouraging open-ended discussion about what a healthy marriage looks like during a first session or at the beginning of a workshop. Some cultures may not have examples of healthy marriages or relationships. For instance, Tribal stakeholders shared that the government removal of Native American children from their homes and placement of them in boarding schools is often linked to cultural perceptions of a lack of examples of healthy relationships, marriages, or parenting on reservations. In aligning curricula with community needs, stakeholders identified finding an ambassador, or another type of “champion,” to serve between agencies and the diverse families they serve as an approach.

Adapting for Children and Youth

To serve children and youth without stigma, healthy relationship education may be offered through partnerships with non-profits like the Boys and Girls Club or YMCA or by integrating healthy relationship education into schools. As noted earlier, this could include integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into sex education or teen pregnancy education in middle and high schools. For older youth and teen parents, providing program support such as child care and a meal could be vital in ensuring participation. In addition, the curricula used should be geared toward youth.

Moving Toward Integration

What Does a Promising Practice Look Like?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines a “promising practice” as:

A method or technique that has been shown to work effectively and produce successful outcomes. Promising practices are supported, to some degree, by subjective data (e.g., interviews and anecdotal reports from the individuals implementing the practice) and objective data (e.g., feedback from subject matter experts and the results of external audits). However, promising practices are not validated through the same rigorous research and evaluation as best practices. (2010, p.5)

Each safety-net stakeholder serves different types of individuals and families, has a different set of facilitators and staff, and has a different set of resources. There are differences in funding, agency policies, applicable laws, and partnerships. There are differences in the socioeconomic status, gender, family structure, culture, ethnicity, and family situation of the families within the areas that safety-net providers serve. Because each situation is different, the promising practices will look different for each agency and effort. There will be differences in incentives that work, program support needed, partnerships, and curricula used.

While each stakeholder and community varies in the practices that best serve their population, there were common themes throughout the Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum. Multiple stakeholders suggested including program support, such as transportation, meals, and child care, as well as offering incentives when possible. Stakeholders also agreed that all materials – from brochures to curricula and supplemental activities – need to be designed or adapted for the people being served. The most common theme was keeping materials simple and understandable for those with low-literacy and a lack of education.

Strategic Action Planning

To successfully integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into existing programs, stakeholders emphasized the importance of a strategic plan that provides everyone with a road map of the purpose, method(s), and anticipated outcomes. There are several steps that stakeholders identified as important when developing a strategic plan.

- **Define needs of community.** Start out a strategic plan by asking, “What needs to be accomplished in this community?”
- **Identify available funding and resources.** What types of funding and other resources are available to begin? How will these funding sources and their associated restrictions frame what services your agency can offer? Will you offer healthy marriage and relationship education courses or workshops, or train workers to integrate relationship education skills into existing service delivery? Once these questions are answered, planners can lay out specific, reasonable goals for integrating healthy marriage and relationship education.
- **Include healthy marriages and relationships in the mission statement.** Many agencies have a mission statement. By including healthy marriages and relationships in the mission statement, it sends a message that this type of integration is a goal of the agency.

- **Decide who needs to be brought to the table.** Before creating a strategic plan, make a list of potential partners and invite them to the planning table. Once this list has been created, contact each person or organization to give them information about the initiative and ask if they would like to be included. This list may expand as the effort continues. Partners can share resources that often have fewer restrictions than government funding, which is very important when thinking creatively about program design. They also offer different perspectives on the families being served, explain strengths and limits of their service programs, and help coordinate integration.
- **Address sustainability at the beginning.** In order for an initiative to last, it needs elements of sustainability from the beginning. Include how to keep an initiative running after funding decreases or ends, and choose to invest in trustworthy partners, staff and facilitators. Strategically choosing investments can help create a program that will last beyond the first wave of excitement.
- **Decide what comes first.** While creating goals and forming partnerships are great first steps, it is important to identify a few action steps that set the plan in motion. Being specific and creating timelines will help ensure that the chosen programming begins on a good note.
- **Meet regularly with key players.** Set times for key stakeholders to meet on a regular basis. This may be a weekly, monthly, or quarterly meeting and may not include everyone. Core planners may need to meet on a daily basis to stay on track. The important thing is that everyone stays informed and up-to-date on a regular basis.
- **Discuss budget.** Identify the main funding sources and keep track of how money is being spent.
- **Document and share results.** It is also important to show funders that an initiative is worth their investment, so plan to show outputs and outcomes like keeping records of attendance and completion, family and participant satisfaction, and behavioral changes. Several stakeholders emphasized the need to identify funding and resources that will keep the initiative running after initial funding (i.e., grant funding) ends.
- **Maintain consistency.** Several stakeholders mentioned the need for consistency, from consistent facilitators to a consistent calendar. For example, Elaine Top Sky, the Program Director of the Chippewa Cree Tribal TANF program in Montana, held one of their programs every Tuesday. She identified this as important so that families were aware of when the event would be held and could get into a routine. There may be many other steps to strategic planning, but the key is to have a plan in place not only to initiate an effort but to sustain it over the long run.

National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families: Resources and Training Available to Facilitate Integration

The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families supports safety-net service providers with the tools they need to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into already-existing services as a holistic approach to strengthening the families and communities served.

Website: www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org

Email: Info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org

Phone: 1-866-916-4672

The Resource Center offers:

- **A call center.** Staff are available Monday through Friday to answer calls or email.
- **A virtual resource center.** This user-friendly Website includes materials from past events, success stories, and a calendar of upcoming events.
- **A searchable library.** The Virtual Resource Center library has more than 300 resources, including research on promising practices that support the need and benefits of healthy marriage education skills. Resources are added monthly.
- **Stakeholder-specific products.** The Resource Center produces tips sheets, fact sheets and research-to-practice briefs.
- **Training and technical assistance.** Training and technical assistance is offered in a variety of formats including webinars, in-person training events, and a *Virtual Training Center* (coming in 2013) that offers online training modules.

Conclusion

There are many ways to serve families, couples, and individuals and each agency and set of needs is different. What works at one agency or in one region, state, or county may not work for every situation. However, the discussions at the Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum demonstrated that there are common challenges and key strategies for most programs that contributed to their success. Educating oneself, identifying and collaborating with appropriate community partners, and employing promising practices tailored to the community's or population's specific needs are what can help make an initiative to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education ultimately successful.

Additional Resources

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APPENDIX A: Participant List

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APPENDIX B: Forum Agenda



National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum: Working with Social Service Agencies to Develop Promising Practices for Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Integration

Agenda

Overview

The Forum is devoted to discussing stakeholder experiences with integrating healthy marriage and relationship education programming into existing social services. Discussions will focus on challenges that stakeholders have faced and lessons learned. The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families will document discussion highlights in a report that will inform development of additional products, webinars and Integration Institutes. Attendees will also provide feedback on the Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training (HRMET) Curriculum designed for child welfare professionals. The National Resource Center will use stakeholder input to improve and adapt the material for use with other stakeholder groups.

Wednesday, July 18, 2012

8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. Registration and Networking

9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Welcoming Remarks and Introductions

Moderator:

Ted Futris, PhD, Training and Technical Assistance Coordinator
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Presenters:

Rosalind Ginyard, Federal Project Officer
Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance

Robyn Cenizal, Project Director
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

10:00 a.m.-10:45 a.m. Panel Discussion

The Importance of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Skills in Promoting Healthy Children and Families. This session offers insights from both the healthy marriage education and the stakeholder perspective.

Moderator:

Robyn Cenizal, Project Director
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Presenters:

Ted Futris, PhD, Training and Technical Assistance Coordinator
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Melanie Reese, Coordinator, Utah Commission on Marriage,
Department of Workforce Services' Office of Work & Family Life

Debra Gilmore, Family Safety Expert
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

10:45 a.m.-11:15 a.m. Break

11:15 a.m.-12:15 p.m. Roundtable Discussion #1: Challenges

This session focuses on challenges experienced with healthy marriage and relationship education integration, implementation, and training

Table Facilitators

Kimberly Allen, John Barner, Ted Futris, and David Schramm

12:15 p.m.-1:45 p.m. Lunch Break

Lunch will be on your own, there is a list of local restaurants provided in your meeting materials.

1:45 p.m.-3:15 p.m. Roundtable Discussion #2: Success Strategies

This session focuses on how organizational assets and strengths support successful planning, integration, implementation, and training.

Table Facilitators

Kimberly Allen, John Barner, Ted Futris, and David Schramm

3:15 p.m.-3:45 p.m. Break

3:45 p.m.-4:30 p.m. **Roundtable Discussion #3:** National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families: Tools and resources to support and sustain these efforts.

Table Facilitators

Kimberly Allen, John Barner, Ted Futris, and David Schramm

4:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m. **Preparing for Day 2:** Review of Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training (HRMET) Curriculum

Moderator:

Ted Futris, PhD, Training and Technical Assistance Coordinator
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Thursday, July 19, 2012

8:30 a.m.-8:45 a.m. **Review of Day 1**

Moderator:

Ted Futris, PhD, Training and Technical Assistance Coordinator
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

8:45 a.m.-10:15 a.m. **Roundtable Discussion #4:** Processing Feedback from Day 1
Assignment: Review of HRMET Curriculum.

Table Facilitators

Kimberly Allen, John Barner, Ted Futris, and David Schramm

10:15 a.m.-10:45 a.m. **Break/Hotel Check-Out**

10:45 a.m.-11:45 a.m. **Lessons Learned**

Moderator:

John Barner, PhD, Training Development
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

11:45 a.m.-12:00 p.m. **Closing Remarks and Next Steps**

Closing Remarks
Next Steps- 30 day follow-up, Webinar, etc.
Peer-to-Peer Networking Forum Survey

Presenters:

Ted Futris, PhD, Training and Technical Assistance Coordinator
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Robyn Cenizal, Project Director
National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

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