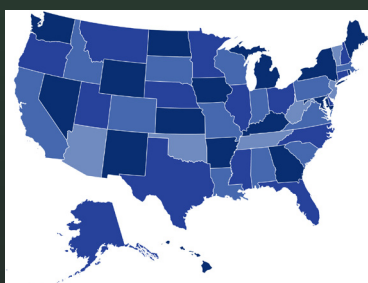


# Marriage and Relationship Education: Opportunities and Challenges for State Leaders



## Proceedings Summary



# **Marriage & Relationship Education: Opportunities and Challenges for State Leaders**

**August 29-30, 2011**

*Proceedings Summary*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its generous support and encouragement in convening a meeting of state leaders, representatives and marriage and relationship experts to share and determine state strategies to strengthen couple relationships for the well-being of children and families. The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) also would like to thank the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for their support and especially thank the participants for sharing their ideas and experiences to inform the development of this paper.

We are grateful for the thoughtful feedback and planning support provided by Project Officer Carole Thompson of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Annie E. Casey Foundation or the Office of Family Assistance.

This guide is a publication of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager, Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.

## ***Background and Purpose***

State leaders have considered and implemented various strategies to integrate marriage and relationship education (MRE) into service delivery systems in recent years. This effort has included social services (child welfare, child support enforcement, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, etc.), education, criminal and juvenile justice and the courts. Many programs have been federally funded, although states are frequently involved in implementation and oversight.

Relationships affect a variety of areas of family life that are routinely encountered by government services, including self-sufficiency, worker productivity and the birth rate. Thoughtful consideration of how state leaders can equip young people to make wise relationship choices, encourage couples to work together to raise their children and potentially prevent family violence is important, yet difficult, work.

This paper provides a summary of a gathering with state leaders and national experts on marriage and relationship education. The meeting was convened by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) on Aug. 29 and 30, 2011. The meeting provided an opportunity for a small group of state leaders<sup>1</sup> to work together, learn from and dialogue with peers and gain insight from experts in the field. This report summarizes topics covered during the meeting,<sup>2</sup> including what marriage and relationship education (MRE) is and why it matters to children, families and communities; what works in delivering MRE; and what opportunities and challenges exist for state leaders interested in strengthening families.

### ***What is Marriage and Relationship Education and why does it matter?***

Research on marriage and healthy, stable relationships has burgeoned in recent years, with mounting evidence from meta-analyses<sup>3</sup> and literature reviews<sup>4</sup> showing children raised in married, two-parent families fare better, on average, than children raised in single-parent families. Unfortunately, due to family dissolution and increasing non-marital birth rates, approximately half of all children can expect to spend part of their childhood in a household without both biological, married parents.<sup>5</sup>

Although many children raised by single, never-married, divorced or remarried parents will fare well, compared to children raised by biological, married parents, these children face a significantly higher risk of negative consequences such as living in poverty; academic, health and behavioral problems; and the risk of future personal relationship instability. These consequences translate into social and economic



issues for most states. For example, the unplanned birth of a child or the breakup of a relationship too often derails a young woman or man from completing her or his high school education, community college program, job training, etc., and can propel individuals to rely on the state for income supports. A high-conflict or abusive relationship can have profound negative effects on child and adult physical and mental health and may result in the incarceration of a parent and/or the placement of a child in the child welfare system. Indeed, entry into any of these public systems can have long-lasting negative effects for the families themselves as well as the public.

In a time of shrinking state budgets, there is enormous pressure on agencies to do more with fewer dollars. Forty-four states already project budget gaps totaling \$125 billion for fiscal year 2012; this gap is likely to increase in subsequent years.<sup>6</sup>

In response to these challenging financial times, many state leaders are thinking “outside of the box” when it comes to developing strategies to strengthen families across various social service systems. Providing marriage and relationship education is one strategy that can improve the quality of parents’ relationships, decrease the likelihood of family dissolution and improve the well-being of children, thereby reducing social and economic costs to the public.

Research has identified predictors of intimate relationship distress and dissolution such as destructive communication patterns and ineffective conflict resolution skills, which can be addressed by educational programs. Emerging research suggests that MRE can be effective, with studies showing short-term gains in interpersonal skills and relationship quality among premarital couples and improved communication and a lower likelihood of divorce five years later among married couples.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, MRE is a prevention or intervention service that can be offered throughout the lifespan to teach effective communication, problem solving, empathy and insights into what characterizes a healthy intimate partner relationship. Research has shown positive evidence that, in general, MRE has the potential to improve relationship quality and communication among participating couples.<sup>8</sup>

MRE programs can and do serve married and unmarried couples, individual adults and high school students from diverse economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds, on a voluntary basis, in a variety of settings in communities across the United States. The curricula focus on imparting knowledge and teaching the attitudes and skills needed to make good partner choices and have successful, safe and lasting couple relationships. Curricula have been adapted for African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian Pacific and refugee populations. Curricula also has been customized for high school students, single parents, engaged couples, married couples seeking enrichment, highly distressed

### ***Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE)***

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couples, adoptive and foster parents, and remarried/step-parent couples. Some government-funded healthy marriage grantees have also conducted community-wide public education activities and media campaigns. <sup>9</sup>

### **Common Ground**

Across the political spectrum and varying interests of agencies, courts and service providers, there is common ground around the need for healthy relationships in a productive community. Varying perspectives on the *greatest* need for healthy marriage and relationship include:

- A need for positive role models who exemplify healthy relationships.
- A need to decrease relationship distress and family dissolution.
- The need for young people to learn healthy relationship skills and reduce the likelihood of the negative consequences associated with unhealthy relationships.
- The need to integrate MRE into a variety of state systems (corrections, education, human services, health, etc.) to enhance existing prevention/intervention services.

The high social cost associated with family breakdown is often identified as a reason to consider MRE. Without addressing healthy relationships at a societal level, the public bears a tremendous cost — a cost that has particularly negative social and economic effects on children.

#### **Research and Practice**

*When compared to children with married parents, children with divorced parents generally demonstrate more behavior, emotional and social problems; have lower school achievement; and are more likely to abuse substances (cigarettes, alcohol, drugs) and contemplate suicide. As they get older, they are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, earn less income, experience more unmarried births, engage in more criminal activity and substance use and are more likely to have troubled marriages that end in divorce.*

MRE provides an opportunity to proactively strengthen parental relationships for the benefit of their children as well as strengthen adult relationships for their own well-being.

#### **Philosophical and Practical Issues to Consider**

Despite common ground around the need, there are philosophical and practical issues related to the approach and role of states in healthy marriage, relationship education and family strengthening.

#### **Philosophical:**

While marriage rates have been declining in recent decades, research suggests that the vast majority of young adults still value marriage as an ideal they hope to



attain.<sup>10</sup> However, real and perceived barriers to marriage such as income, education, multiple partner fertility, unemployment/underemployment and incarceration often interfere with this goal for many vulnerable populations.<sup>11</sup> Talking about “healthy relationships” is often more comfortable for agency leaders who work with diverse and disadvantaged families.

Marriage is influenced by an individual’s values, religion, culture and life experience. Marriage is present in some communities, and absent or not attainable in others. “What is the right role?” and “What is the right message?” are important questions for state leaders. Changing family demographics and a “post-marriage” society present in some communities stymie the ability of some leaders to talk effectively about marriage. However, research and practice has found that:

- Most people will marry at some point in their adult life
- Most parents want to be involved in raising their children, regardless of their income level or marital status
- Strengthening relationships between parents may offer the biggest benefits for children, families, communities and taxpayers
- Positive change can occur from programs built on evidence of what works

There is still much left to learn about how best to talk about marriage and reach those families that will benefit from MRE with appropriate services. It is important to proceed cautiously and evaluate progress along the way.

**Practical:**

Recent federal- and state-led program operators have reached low-income men and women with MRE. Diverse populations such as incarcerated individuals, expectant couples and Head Start parents have endorsed the utility of and need for MRE programs in their communities. In addition to gaining relationships skills and often wrap-around services, participants form important bonds with other couples in the group that often result in the establishment of positive social networks.

Most MRE programs contain similar skills and strategies. Existing curricula are grounded in research, and emerging evaluation findings are positive. However, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for states or communities. A variety of strategies has been employed by various states and entities, including comprehensive, broad-reaching, state-funded MRE services; convening coalitions; and targeted strategies focused on one segment of the population. Some examples of these efforts include:

- Prominent Leaders Speaking About Marriage: Engage a committee of leaders to consider how to (1) decrease the number of divorces and (2) decrease the number of non-marital births. This strategy often includes the development and implementation of a targeted media campaign and a prominent champion the community respects speaking on the importance of healthy relationships and marriage.
- Engagement of Community Agencies: Community agencies working in collaboration with county and/or state government can help determine community needs by conducting self-assessment surveys and focus groups with the goal of integrating healthy relationship and marriage classes into their services and outreach.
- Educating High School Students about Relationships, Parenting and Child Support: Utilize child support outreach curriculum for youth that includes healthy relationship skills, the realities of being a parent and the benefits of establishing paternity and child support when couples are no longer together. An example of this is the *p.a.p.a.* curriculum developed by the Texas Office of the Attorney General.
- Reaching TANF Recipients: Include relationship education as part of TANF recipient orientation. For example, the *Within My Reach* (WMR) curriculum has been used in this manner to help those in viable relationships cultivate and stabilize their unions and marry, if desired; help those in damaging relationships leave safely; and help people choose healthy relationships for themselves.
- Redefine Childbirth from a Medical Event to a Family-Formation Event: Increase family well-being by helping expectant couples and new parents strengthen their relationships or marriages prior to and immediately following the birth of a child. In this strategy, couples are invited to a variety of additional activities that refresh communication skills for healthy relationships and provide new information on child development.

Regardless of the delivery content, context or timing, the issue of domestic violence must be addressed as the safety of all family members is paramount to any program.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

A number of common challenges and opportunities often arise when state agencies attempt to implement MRE.

### **Research and Practice**

*Family structure is not destiny, and some children growing up in single-parent households thrive. The value is not so much on “family structure” but in “healthy relationships.” Children who grow up in healthy, single-parent families can experience positive outcomes.*

## Challenges

- 1. Tight state budgets.** In light of the difficult budget times, states are confronted with the difficulty of leveraging the need for MRE programs with insufficient funding and resources to fully implement supportive MRE services.
- 2. Establishing effective partnerships and collaborations to provide MRE.** Few states currently have a statewide strategy regarding MRE, and most lack a solid plan around service delivery. Without a plan, communication between and within agencies can be a challenge, and leadership roles can become an issue (e.g., who is leading the effort; who gets the credit and/or takes the blame for program success/failure).
- 3. Gaining statewide political interest/support for MRE.** Operating a statewide social service delivery system, whether within a state-supervised system or not, requires earning the support of legislators and securing their willingness to address the importance and potential benefit of MRE. As MRE practitioners attempt to create community awareness about the availability of MRE services and what those services provide, they often face criticism that they are “pushing” marriage as opposed to accepting the diversity of family structures present in today’s society or families who may not choose marriage for themselves
- 4. Effectively craft messages and policies.** There is a broad perspective that MRE improves outcomes for two-parent families as well as youth, although it is challenging to effectively convey this message and engage government and private sectors. Policies that dis-incentivize or deter marriage add to this challenge. Therefore, practitioners are tasked with creating a value for MRE in their community – a call of action – while also helping people understand why the state cares about marriage and healthy relationships.
- 5. Determining effective strategies.** States are challenged with finding effective strategies for reaching and retaining hard-to-reach populations, including rural families. In rural areas, there are a number of barriers to program participation, including limited transportation and difficulties for participants in accessing resources. Further, there is a strong need for understanding rural programs (e.g., in small communities, success has to be measured in smaller numbers).
- 6. Addressing diversity.** An added challenge is accommodating diversity in cultural practices in relationship to marriage. Many organizations focus their services on enhancing marriages, thus limiting their potential to effectively address large numbers of participants desiring healthy relationship skills, but who are not necessarily committed to, or ready for, marriage.

### **Research and Practice**

*Overall, MRE has been shown to be generally effective at improving couples’ relationship quality and communication skills.*

## Opportunities

Although challenges to providing MRE exist, there are also opportunities. Perhaps the greatest of these opportunities is the perceived compelling need for MRE across states.



1. MRE programs have the potential to **inform decision-makers on the importance of preventative measures** to address the economic drain of family fragmentation. With legislative support, MRE practitioners are better positioned to change the culture of their communities (e.g., neighborhoods, cities, entire state).
2. Although limited funding and resources are a significant challenge, they may also provide an opportunity to **be creative in the services offered**. Integrating MRE into existing programs (e.g., public systems such as welfare/TANF, child welfare, child support, Head Start, adolescent health, public education, public health, employee assistance programs, juvenile justice and corrections) is a strategy that may not require new funding, but would involve retraining current service providers to deliver MRE.
3. **Partner with existing agencies and services.** Crossover can happen through the development of partnerships with faith-based groups, coalitions, non-profits, government, fatherhood programs, family and consumer science teachers and other social services. Acquiring local college and university support could also be advantageous, as it would allow MRE systems to conduct rigorous research around program implementation (e.g., what programs work best for specific populations).
4. **Build on what is already working.** After conducting an assessment of what is being done in a given state, it may be possible to replicate promising programs for a nominal cost. For example, if an MRE program is successful for an incarcerated population at one institution, it may be successful in other correctional facilities or similar settings, such as juvenile justice and ex-offender programs, as well.
5. **Address needs expressed by citizens.** Listening to community members' thoughts and needs regarding interpersonal relationships and family supports provides an opportunity to connect to constituents and give them a voice in the process of identifying how best to invest in families.
6. **Form Public/Private Partnerships.** Seek partnerships with the business community by helping them understand the benefits of MRE for employee performance and health. Also, work with philanthropies to develop additional funding sources.
7. Continue to **convene state leaders and share information.** Organizations such as the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) have found this to be a good way to bring states together to build community partnerships.

8. **Address state-level policy disincentives to marriage and review marriage license fees.** These fees can support MRE, divorce reduction, or domestic violence programs. License fees can be decreased as an incentive for couples who complete premarital education, parenting education, or MRE. An alternative idea for states is to introduce legislation that requires divorce notification and a designated waiting period before couples can file for divorce.

## **Conclusions**

The lessons and new insights emerging from this forum have many implications for ways that current public systems, state leaders and program administrators can integrate MRE as a strategy to enhance efforts to strengthen families and improve child outcomes. This report outlines the foundational research, innovative strategies and opportunities for implementing MRE in many different settings and arenas. Whenever possible, these ideas and suggestions should draw upon existing research about what works, effective implementation, and consensus on promising practices.



In summary, multiple options are available when thinking about infusing MRE into state efforts to strengthen families:

1. States should replicate and expand programs that have been shown to be effective. States also should explore the possible ways of integrating MRE into corrections, family courts and human service programs providing services to families and children.
2. Employ a preventive, developmental approach to strengthening family relationships by mandating the delivery of MRE to youth — perhaps through the public education system.
3. Consider non-programmatic approaches that are low or no cost. Assess the availability of current MRE services. Convene state advisory panels to begin discussions about what will work in each state. Look for a champion who is passionate about the issue and will take the needed steps to cut across silos to keep the agenda moving forward.
4. Finally, look for “low-hanging fruit.” Identify an issue or related policy that already has momentum that can be used to begin a conversation about MRE and the importance of supporting healthy relationships as the foundation for a thriving society.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center has multiple tools and resources available to help states develop and sustain programs around MRE. A recently expanded section of the NHMRC website focuses on research and policy and includes useful resources for practitioners and additional support materials for technical assistance for programs. (See <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research-and-policy/index.aspx>.)

## Appendix A

### Marriage and Relationship Education Forum

#### Participant List

**Paul R. Amato**, Arnold and Bette Hoffman Professor of Family Sociology and Demography, Pennsylvania State University

**Rich Batten**, Project Manager, National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

**Stacey Bouchet**, Senior Consultant, The Lewin Group

**Gilbert Chavez**, Program Specialist, Child Support Family Initiatives, Texas Office of the Attorney General

**Obie Clayton**, Donald L. Hollowell Distinguished Professor of Social Justice and Civil Rights Studies, University of Georgia School of Social Work

**Quentin Collins**, Director of the Inter-Service Family Assistance Centers and the State Partnership Program Manager, National Guard

**Kendy Cox**, Director of Service Delivery, Public Strategies

**Babatunde (Tunde) Eboda**, Program Manager, District of Columbia Department of Human Services

**Karen Elliott**, Family Life Specialist, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance Region 7

**Rochelle Finzel**, Program Manager, Children and Families Program, National Conference of State Legislatures

**Dana M. Foney**, Consultant, The Lewin Group

**Ruth Glenn**, Director of the Domestic Violence Program, Colorado Department of Human Services

**Tamra Gormley**, Family Court Judge serving Bourbon, Scott and Woodford counties, Kentucky

**Stephen Hall**, Director of Religious Services, Indiana Department of Corrections

**Courtney Harrison**, Director of Policy and Program Development, Public Strategies

**Alan Hawkins**, Professor of Family Life, Brigham Young University

**Howard Hendrick**, Cabinet Secretary and Director, Oklahoma Department of Human Services

**Gwen Holder**, Program Administrator, Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Kentucky Department of Corrections,

**Greg Jacobik**, National Guard Bureau

**Jill Jordan**, Program Manager, Division of Child Welfare, Colorado Department of Human Services

**Julie Kerksick**, Director of the Office of Economic Security, Colorado Department of Human Services

**Shaun Lane**, Deputy Director for the Division of Service Support, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

**Richard Marks**, Special Assistant, Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services

**Candace Mattison**, Community Services Director, Community Action Kentucky

**Paul McWhinney**, Deputy Commissioner, Programs for the Virginia Department of Social Services

**Mary Myrick**, President, Public Strategies

**Cindy Noe**, Indiana House of Representatives, House District 87

**Michelle Schroeder**, Policy Director, Kansas Social and Rehabilitative Services

**Leah Ward Sears**, Appellate Attorney with Schiff Hardin LLP, and former Georgia Supreme Court Justice

**Ken Summers** Colorado House of Representatives, House District 22

**Carole Thompson**, Chief Administrative Officer and Senior Program Officer in the Office of the Executive Vice President, Annie E. Casey Foundation

**Joyce Webb**, Project Manager, Public Strategies

**Melinda Wright**, Child Welfare Service Manager, Indiana Department of Child Services

**Marq Youngblood**, Chief Operating Officer, Oklahoma Department of Human Services

## Data Sources

1. Participating state leaders included representatives from Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Texas, Wisconsin, Virginia and the District of Columbia.
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8. The dosage matters — Shorter exposure to MRE does not show overall gains, and, unfortunately, a lack of racial/ethnic and economic diversity among recipients has prevented reliable conclusions about the effectiveness of MRE for disadvantaged couples, a crucial deficit in the body of research. In addition, intervention outcomes important to policy makers, such as relationship stability and aggression, rarely have been addressed. Hawkins AJ, Blanchard VL, Baldwin SA, Fawcett EB. (2008). Does marriage and relationship education work? A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(5):723-34.
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