National Healthy Marriage Resource Center
"Effectively Launching your Healthy Marriage Program" Webinar
May 2007

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center broadcasted a webinar entitled "Effectively Launching your Healthy Marriage Program," on May 16, 2007. During the course of the webinar, we received more questions than we were able to answer during the time allotted. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is a follow-up to many of the questions posted during the webinar.

1. ***Can you discuss some strategies for recruiting and selecting volunteer staff and volunteer mentor couples?***

There are several sources of volunteers and mentor couples that other grantees have found to be useful, such as faith and community based organizations, philanthropic organizations, service fraternities and sororities, and groups like the Junior League, The Urban League, and the Freemasons. You should also learn who the leaders are in your target population's community. If you can identify and get the support of community leaders or mavens (as suggested by Shalyta LaBoo - Project Director for East Capitol Center for Change's Healthy Marriage-Strong Families Initiative and presenter on the May webinar), you are more likely to have access to members of your target community that can serve the grant as volunteers. Finally, don't forget about your class graduates. Many grantees have found ways to involve program graduates in future classes – from classroom support to mentoring to class facilitation.

First you should ask yourself, does a potential volunteer express a commitment to the project's goals? They should be willing to commit to a certain number of classes, participant couples or length of time, and open to receiving training and adhering to the program's rules on marriage education, domestic violence, voluntary participation and faith-based guidelines. Volunteers must also be comfortable with recognizing the limitations of their role as lay volunteers. For example, they should not provide advice, counseling or therapy to participants and should turn to program staff when they are presented with a situation beyond their training (i.e. domestic violence, infidelity or substance abuse). Look for volunteers that are personable and out-going, yet willing to listen. Finally, if you are recruiting volunteer couples, you will want to make sure that both spouses are willing to participate in the program and are committed to its goals.

2. How important is it that our program staff looks like our target population?
Remember you cannot discriminate on the basis of sex, race, and ethnicity when hiring staff. Rather than trying to find staff that looks like your target population, you should look for potential employees that can *relate to* and *be trusted by* your target population. If your target population prefers to, or can only, communicate effectively in a language other than English, you need to make sure that key staff are conversational, if not fluent, in that language.

Evaluate whether potential employees empathize with and respect your target population. Does your staff understand and identify with the kinds of stressors and life stages your clients may be experiencing? Examples include parenting, especially single parenting, trying to raise children in a step-family, unemployment or underemployment, trying to plan a wedding and/or dealing with unsupportive family members or friends. Do your potential staff members know the systems that your target population may interact with, like TANF, WIC, Medicaid, Child Support or Section 8 offices? Also, make sure that your staff can speak using phrases and examples that resonate with your target population. In addition, your outreach workers must feel comfortable meeting your target population where they are – whether they're in prisons, on college campuses, living in public housing high-rises or in high schools.

Finally, potential staff must also feel comfortable supporting healthy marriages, screening for and addressing disclosures of DV, working with other staff, working odd hours, speaking in front of a group, disclosing some personal information as examples and working with your data collection system.

3. I understand that my grant limits the kind of incentives I can provide program participants. Do you have any suggestions for other ways to fund participation incentives?
First, check with your Federal Project Officer (FPO) if you haven't already, to get clear guidance on what you can and cannot provide as participation or completion incentives. Be clear about what activities might be considered programmatic supports (e.g., food, child care and transportation) and what activities are programmatic attendance or completion incentives (e.g., gift cards, cash, and door prizes). After you've received that guidance, think creatively about products or services that can be used as incentives (these can either be covered or not covered by grant monies). Some creative examples include serving a nice, candlelit meal at the last class; giving an extra child care voucher to be used for a parents only date; providing a subscription to a relationship magazine; taking a family photo and framing it; giving parents a book they can read to their children; and hosting a potluck social picnic halfway through classes.

Next, start identifying funding opportunities. You could write up a small proposal and submit it to a local philanthropy. The following resource may help you craft your message: http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/files/Marriage%20Guidebook.pdf. You should also think about approaching local charities and social philanthropic organizations like the Masons, the Elks, the Rotary Club, the Junior League and service fraternities and sororities. Local businesses may be willing to provide small gift cards. Gift cards can serve as both gifts and enticements for people to try new companies, and possibly purchase more goods or services than the gift card covers. Grocery stores, fast food or casual restaurants, gas stations, discount stores and toy stores are all possible partners.

Look at the people and organizations you interact with everyday. If you regularly use the same caterer to provide meals during class, would they be willing to throw in a free catered meal for a family as a door prize incentive? Does anyone on your staff have access to free or low-cost items or services? For example, if your administrative assistant's spouse manages a bowling alley would he be willing to donate some lane time as an incentive?

Finally, remember that you possess a needed skill that many people and organizations might be willing to barter for. Approach local businesses and offer to teach marriage education to their staff in return for gift cards. Many of the skills taught in marriage education can be applied to interpersonal and client relationships more generally.

4. ***Can you talk about the benefits and drawbacks to signing formal contracts or memoranda of understandings (MOUs) with our partner organizations? If we wanted to design a contract or MOU, what would we put in it?***

Partner organizations are great because they extend the reach of your program and can provide additional capacity and/or serve as key referral sources. While forming partnerships can really accentuate and grow your program, you may find it helpful to institute certain safeguards to ensure that the collaboration remains positive and fruitful. One way to do this is to sign a formal Memorandum of Understanding Agreement (MOU), (i.e., a formal agreement you develop with the partner agency that explicitly outlines the expectations, roles, and responsibilities each entity bears in the collaboration) with your partner agencies.

For most organizations, the benefits of signing a MOU outweigh the drawbacks. It has often been the case that partner organization roles and responsibilities are established through a verbal agreement that rests on the good faith of each party. While some verbal agreements have worked and have proven to be non-problematic due to long-standing and tested partnerships, often relying solely on verbal agreements can lead to acute challenges. Some HM programs that have used verbal agreements later find out that commitment levels were different than anticipated, the partner organization had different ideas about their roles and responsibilities, there was a lack of clarity on both sides, and/or partner organization's priorities had shifted prior to the launch of the HM program or with new leadership. In these instances, not having a signed MOU proved to be troublesome as the HM program had no official, documented contract from which to negotiate. In those cases, HM programs have had to seek out new partner agencies or develop capacities that the partner organization was going to provide.

The benefits of signing an MOU include: 1) providing both organizations time to share and discuss expectations and goals; 2) documenting and holding accountable the partner organization's commitment to the HM program and their expected roles and responsibilities; 3) safeguarding both organizations from any misunderstanding; 4) institutionalizing the commitment from staff turnovers at either partner organizations; and 5) acting as leverage for uncooperative staff. To maximize these benefits for your HM program, develop MOU's interactively with partner organizations. Detail roles, responsibilities, expectations, requirements, payments or reimbursements, dates and deadlines as well as involvement in any particular events or activities. This interactive process helps to ensure that expectations are the same and work is manageable.

Possible areas to address in your MOU include:

- a statement of commitment from all staffing levels of the partner organization;
- identification of a partner organization liaison to serve as the “go-to” contact person to discuss progress or issues, roles and responsibilities in HM program;
- role in referral process;
- role in training process;
- what the partner organization will be held accountable for (e.g., quota of facilitators trained or clients taught per time period or clients referred);
- commitment to collect data;
- financial arrangements if applicable;
- accountability and performance expectations;
- how problems will be addressed, and
- the start and end date of their participation.

Remember that you are developing a partnership that should benefit both organizations. In the spirit of cooperation, you may want to make sure that your MOU is either flexible enough to allow for program evolution and adaptations, or that you put a process into place that allows either organization to renegotiate the MOU on a regular, possibly annual basis.

5. What are some strategies for working with my partner organizations to ensure proper reporting and accountability?

There are several ways that you can help ensure that your partner organizations are held accountable and report necessary information. One is to invite your partner organizations to be part of the reporting and responsibilities development process. They should meet with your evaluator to better understand the program’s data needs and the results of their reporting activities (as the St. Louis Healthy Marriage Coalition does). Give your partners the opportunity to provide feedback on measures and the way they are collected and reported. Providing your partner organizations with regular updates on data analysis results will help reinforce the goals of their data collection and reporting.

Additionally, you should incorporate reporting requirements and time tables into your MOU or contract. Be as specific as possible – if partner organizations can see the data collection instruments and get a sense for the level of effort needed to comply, their commitment to the process will be better informed. Consider tying payments or reimbursements to satisfactory completion of reporting requirements.

Finally, set up your reporting systems so that the process is streamlined, not burdensome, and respectful of your partner organizations’ other obligations. Send reminders of important deadlines and provide your partners with sufficient support in understanding and completing their required reporting duties. Some grantees have found it helpful to move data collection to an online system while others drive to their partners to pick up paperwork or provide pre-addressed and stamped envelopes for document submissions.

6. *Can you discuss the ways people have staffed their decentralized service delivery models?*

Healthy Marriage programs have been very creative in designing their delivery systems to fit the needs of their community and target population. Their creative designs range from a centralized delivery structure that provides services through a single individual or organizational unit (i.e., East Capitol Center for Change's Life Starts Program), to a decentralized service structure where many interconnected individuals or organizations provide services (i.e., St. Louis Healthy Marriage Coalition and the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative). There are also many programs which fall in between these two delivery models that allow for very effective and creative service delivery structures.

Some HM programs have chosen to design their delivery structures in a decentralized manner to capitalize on its ability to reach different target populations through distinct organizations and to develop ownership and investment in marriage education throughout the community. In this manner, some HM programs serve as a central resource to train facilitators from other organizations who will then provide marriage education through their home organizations (similar to the St. Louis Healthy Marriage Coalition). The program's role is not to deliver the actual classes, but provide opportunities to train new facilitators. Staffing for this program usually consists of a program director and coordinator, whose primary function is to operate training sessions, provide oversight and support, and to collect evaluation data sent from facilitators.

Another decentralized model recruits and trains facilitators themselves, and then deploys them to deliver classes at various sites across the city (similar to the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative). Facilitators are associated with and report directly to the HM program allowing for more control and standardized oversight of quality. Staffing for this program consist of a program director, several program coordinators that manage the training of facilitators and coordinate program functions, and a cadre of paid or volunteer facilitators.

Finally, another decentralized model consists of a HM program that maintains the center hub/resource function and has contracted with other organizations that already have trained facilitators, who will be deployed to deliver HM services to interested organizations. Staffing for this model consists of a program director and several program coordinators to recruit new organizations.

While the designs of the decentralized models vary, a consistency among the models is the need for core program staff to oversee and monitor HM classes, and developing access to facilitators, who may or may not be directly employed by or associated with the program.

7. *What are some suggestions for getting local businesses involved in our project?*

The first step in planning to engage local businesses is to figure out how your program would benefit from their involvement. Are you interested in:

- securing additional funding;
- increasing access to your target population;
- looking for in-kind donations;
- trying to establish or expand a healthy marriage coalition;
- providing marriage education to their staff; or

- just making a name for your organization in the community?

Refining your goals will help you to choose the kind of strategy you want to employ.

Before you arrange to meet with anyone, you need to develop an explanation for what you do and why you do it. Your reasons why should be grounded in research and should focus on things of interest to the business community like staff turnover, household incomes, reduction in welfare and social assistance participation and increased community safety. A recent report about the benefits of healthy marriages and families to the business community may help you craft your message: http://www.marriagecomission.com/files/MC%20Corporate%20Report.pdf. Remember that marriage education is better understood when someone can observe it or participate in it. Think about providing business leaders with a shortened class or invite them to observe your regular marriage education classes.

Based on your goals for involving businesses in your project, you should get creative and develop examples of helpful ways they can be engaged in marriage education services. You should also think of specific ways that your program can benefit them. For example, you could provide their staff marriage education classes during lunch breaks; advertise the business's support to your participants (e.g., this free meal you're eating was donated by Mr. Pizza – their menu is in the front of the room); add their logo to your marketing materials; or commit to mentioning their support whenever you interact with others (e.g., community presentations, newspaper articles etc.).

You may want to identify trusted members of the business community and try to make inroads with them first. Their support will lend you added credibility with other local businesses. Finally, recognize that like start-up, networking and forging relationships is a process. Be patient, but also, be persistent.

8. Should I also use my facilitators to recruit participants?

There is no right answer to this question. Instead, we present some of the pluses and minuses to using facilitators or outreach workers for recruitment and encourage you to decide based on the fit of each strategy to your program. Before we get into specific benefits and drawbacks of recruitment staffing, we want to note that all program staff should be seen as recruitment assets. You can support that effort by ensuring that all of your staff knows your target population, can explain marriage education, knows when and where the next class is being held, and is supplied with flyers or business cards with program contact information that they can provide to potential participants.

Some of the benefits of using facilitators as recruiters include:

- potential participants see the same face during the recruitment process and in the classroom;
- facilitators get to try different roles in the service delivery process;
- facilitators get to meet their participants in their daily lives;
- facilitators may be able to describe the classroom experience very well; and
- the grant may experience some cost savings by multitasking employees.

Potential drawbacks include:

- facilitators may be overwhelmed with different responsibilities and time commitments;
- this arrangement reduces the amount of time facilitators are in office to do intakes, answer questions etc;
- you are limited in developing your class time schedule by the facilitators "out of office" time; and
- facilitating a class and recruiting participants require different skill sets and any one individual may not be good at both jobs.

Some of the benefits of using outreach workers to conduct recruitment efforts, as opposed to facilitators include:

- you will have different staff fully committed to each step in the participation process
- your outreach workers can spend a lot of time building relationships with individuals and organizations;
- your facilitators will remain in the building allowing them to be flexible with scheduling class time and intake and be able to address needs as they arise; and
- you don't have to hire people that can fill both roles (facilitation and outreach) well.

Potential drawbacks include:

- using dedicated outreach staff may increase the grant's staff costs;
- unless the outreach workers spend time in the classroom, they may not understand and be able to explain the marriage education experience well; and
- participants may feel "handed off" when they find out that the outreach person they connected with is not teaching the class.

9. What days and times do you think are more convenient for participants? Do you think it's better to serve a meal before or in the middle of the class?

There is not one time that is better for classes to start or meals to be served; different times may be more convenient for different types of participants. There are several ways to start to identify what times are better for your target audience. First, take off of the table any times you truly do not want to give services. For example, most people don't provide program services on Sundays. Second, think about the kinds of schedules your target audience may have. For example, mothers of Head Start children may find that the time while their children are in school is a good time for them. Fathers in job training may be most willing to come to your class if you pick them up from the center right after classes end; night shift workers may want to attend class in the late afternoon right before they head to work; and dual worker couples may want the class to start right after they've been able to get off work and pick up the kids. Third, you could offer two simultaneous classes at different times and see which one has better attendance rates. Fourth, you can ask potential participants to tell you times that work best for them. Don't forget that people's schedules may also vary by season. For example, some grantees have found that families are too busy to attend classes during school children's summer breaks, while another grantee serving Mexican-American families have learned that many families take an extended Christmas holiday to travel back to Mexico.

You may be able to figure out the best time to serve a meal by asking yourself these two questions. When does your class start? If it starts around dinner time, you should provide food first – if your class runs from 10 am to 2 pm, lunch would best be served in the middle. What purpose do you want the meal to serve? Although providing food addresses several programmatic goals, like increased retention and time for fellowship, it also allows you to schedule and time your education delivery. A meal served at the start of class allows your participants some buffer for tardiness. Participants that show up 10-15 minutes late are only missing informal fellowship and not class content. On the other hand, meals during the middle of class can serve as a nice break – especially if your class is long.

10. Should we use paid staff to manage and oversee volunteer staff?

Although you need to choose the arrangement that best suits your grant structure and finances, all things considered it is probably a good idea to have paid staff supervise, support, manage and oversee your volunteer staff (as the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative does). Volunteers are excellent sources of support because they truly believe in your program's mission, and although you need to invest in their training and on-going support, and may be more cost-effective than paid staff. Using volunteers as program staff has some drawbacks, however. Your project is just one of many priorities in their lives and you need to respect the small amount of time they may be able to devote to the project. Additionally, since people usually volunteer because they are passionate about a cause, you may find that your volunteers are better suited to recruit potential participants, market the program to community organizations, and deliver classes. Although some people will want to offer their management experience to the program, most volunteers would probably prefer to be "on the ground."

There are also some benefits to using paid staff in management positions. Managing project activities and staff is very important and may be better served when conducted by a paid (thus accountable) staff person. Additionally, those responsibilities may take more time than a volunteer can commit to a project. Finally, paid staff may stay with a project longer, allowing you to invest in their training and knowledge, and in turn, that paid staff member can then teach your changing pool of volunteers. For those reasons, you may want to use paid staff to manage volunteer staff.

11. Bridget Brennan mentioned she would be willing to share the interview protocol she uses with partner organizations. How do I get a copy of it?

Bridget Brennan, Director of the Saint Louis Healthy Marriage Coalition, has graciously offered to email the protocol to interested parties. She can be reached at **marriage@slu.edu.**