

Collaborating Within State Government to Support Healthy Relationships: Tips for State Administrators

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There is a large spectrum of government services and programs that can be included in healthy marriage programs. The natural and immediate thoughts go to the human services field; however, there are many other areas that offer opportunities for healthy marriage/relationship programs. These include corrections and criminal justice, juvenile

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justice, health programs (including Medicaid and mental health), education, as well as Head Start/ Early Head Start. Within human services, programs that serve refugee families, TANF families and protect children (child welfare) are logical partners, too.

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The following tips are strategies to foster interest for healthy marriage programs across multiple areas of state government.

1) **Convene an informal internal government meeting of policy leaders and/or mid-level operational staff from a variety of agencies.**

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bring others on board over time. Over-invite to meet target numbers.

2) Prepare to educate your colleagues on the value and benefits of healthy and successful marriage for the general population and for low-income individuals.

In preparation for this informal gathering of policy leaders, create a clear and concise summary of the existing research that supports healthy marriage programs. Develop a handout or a power point presentation to clearly communicate the basics of why marriage matters in a relevant and applicable manner. Provide sample resources from other states. This may include reports, newsletters, program summaries and articles. Include national and local statistics on marriage and divorce. Your state's department of vital statistics should have some of this data. You can also gather information from organizations such as the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, CLASP, Institute for American Values, Pew Charitable Trust, the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy and the Census Bureau.

3) Present the information yourself. Do not turn it over to someone else or an "expert." This information sells itself, and it is most important that you, as a senior policymaker, show your leadership. It will speak volumes.

4) At the meeting, brainstorm how this research and information applies to the different agencies and programs. Many times after exposure to the research, policymakers are stimulated to think creatively about ways to apply information to their program areas. It is most effective to share general ideas as opposed to specific ones to

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get the participants thinking and talking. Pose questions during the meeting to generate discussion.

Suggested Questions:

- What systems or program exists where couples (or individuals) are convened?
- How can these systems become distribution points for information concerning healthy marriage? Are there natural points in the system where recruitment into marriage and relationship education may be appropriate?
- Do you have case workers that work with program clients regularly? Can these case workers be trained to deliver some aspect of the healthy marriage message?
- Where is there a need for services?

Discussion Ideas:

- *Health Departments* include women, infants and children (WIC) in their outreach efforts to families for prenatal services and child nutrition programs. This puts workers in contact with mothers (and fathers) at a time when both are interested in the well-being of a baby. Studies show that the biological parents of this child, at the time of pregnancy, have high hopes for the stability

of their co-parenting relationship and romantic relationship. This is an opportune time to recruit for relationship education.

- *Juvenile Justice* reaches young men and women who may already be parents or are at risk of becoming young parents. Often times those in the juvenile justice system have never seen a healthy relationship modeled. Time in the juvenile justice system is an opportunity to prepare those in the system and/or their partners for healthy relationships once they leave the facility. Address follow-up and transitional programming upon release, as this is the most critical time for real behavior change.
- *Criminal Justice* incarcerates men and women who have spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends and children on the outside. The relationships are critical to re-entry programs. A healthy relationship program within the facility, which also allows the partner to participate, is very valuable. Again, it is critical to have a follow-up program for these individuals when they are released. This provides a place where they can meet others who are working on their marriages and/or relationships. This kind of peer group can also provide a wonderful support network for re-entry.

Follow-up

Schedule a follow-up meeting before concluding the first meeting. Give your colleagues the opportunity to invite one interested agency (public or private) to the next meeting. Highlight each individual's progress and provide opportunities to discuss possible barriers and offer solutions.

Marriage and relationship education lends itself to many government departments and agencies. Policymakers can communicate the potential of integrating healthy marriage ideas into a variety of

programs. Facilitate this process by convening and leading a meeting with various representatives of public sector programs. Give them information and help them make the connections between their area of expertise and healthy relationships.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Mr. Jerry Regier, MPA, former Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families and Oklahoma Secretary of Health and Human Services for his contributions to this tip sheet.

This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.