

Preparing for the Future: Ensuring Program Sustainability

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Managing the daily activities of a healthy marriage and relationship education (HMR) program can leave little time for thinking about the future. However, preparing for the future is a necessity for HMR programs interested in program sustainability. This tip sheet will: 1) define program sustainability 2) address important factors for achieving program sustainability and 3) provide guidance on how HMR programs can position themselves to carry on beyond the life of their grant.

What is program sustainability?

Program sustainability refers to the ability to maintain your program after your current funding stream expires. However, it may not be feasible to maintain your program exactly as it operates currently. Our panel of experts recommended that before delving into the details of how to achieve program sustainability, you and your stakeholders should brainstorm about the components of your program you want to maintain. You may choose to keep the core curriculum but reduce the number of ancillary events. Or, you might decide to work with additional partners or organizations to deliver some components that were previously delivered “in house.” Consider what elements are

The information in this tip sheet was informed by participants of a Moderated Audio Forum (MAF) hosted by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center on August 6, 2008.

Participants were identified by their Federal Project Officer as running programs that have experienced success in sustainability efforts. The participants of the MAF included:

- ✓ **Francesca Adler-Baeder**—Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (OFA)
- ✓ **Julie Baumgardner**—First Things First, Inc. (OFA)
- ✓ **Joan Butler**—Starkville Marriage Bureau (CB)
- ✓ **Robyn Cenizal**—Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families (OCSE)
- ✓ **Leo Godzich**—National Association of Marriage Enhancement (OFA)
- ✓ **Pam James and Jillene Joseph**—Native Wellness Institute (ANA)

crucial to the mission of your program – those must be included in your definition of sustainability.

What are the most important factors to sustaining HMR programs?

Buy-in from the community is crucial to sustaining your program, according to our experts. To achieve community support, educate the general public and potential funders on the benefits of marriage to fami-

Ensure you have an effective mechanism for recruiting participants – without them, you will not have a sustainable program.

lies and children. Panel members explained that in educating the general public, it is important to understand the cultural factors and phrases that resonate with your community. Additionally, couples who have completed the program and are willing to serve as role models or spokespersons for your program can become “marriage ambassadors” to your community. Our panel also reiterated the need to use the media to get the message out about your program. When offered a media interview, one expert suggested that using community leaders to advocate for the program can prove far more effective than having the program director use that same media spot. Panelists agreed that developing standardized organizational procedures and processes, delivering a quality program and ensuring an effective mechanism for recruiting participants are essential to program sustainability.

How can HMR programs position themselves from the outset for sustainability?

Thinking about program sustainability even before your program delivers services may seem like “putting the cart in front of the horse.” Not so, says our panel of experts. Positioning for sustainability early in the life of your project is key to long-term success. Collaborating and networking with community leaders are essential to securing long-term support. It is important to meet with representatives from other community organizations prior to developing your program to gain a sense of the unique needs of your community. Consider performing a formal community needs assessment, developing an initial question-

naire or conducting a baseline survey that measures a wide range of attitudes, knowledge, and skills with respect to relationships. Not only will this help you provide the most relevant

programming for your community, but the results of the survey can be used later to help document the progress your healthy marriage program has made toward key outcome measures. Surveys, along with collecting pre and post-test program questionnaires, can be powerful marketing and fundraising tools to support program sustainability.

What other elements, in addition to obtaining new financing, are important for demonstrating sustainability?

Document your program evaluation efforts. Demonstrate to funders how your project outcomes align with the wider research that has been performed in the healthy marriage field.

Early in the planning stages, form an advisory group that includes a diverse set of community stakeholders. Encourage your advisory council to share ownership of the program’s sustainability.

Panelists all placed a high value on program evaluation to bolster sustainability efforts. While stressing the importance of evaluation for both program refinement and advancing learn-

ing in the field, one expert noted that a limitation most healthy marriage programs encounter with regards

to scientific rigor is the lack of a randomly-assigned control or comparison group. Program evaluation data can go a long way toward helping your program achieve sustainability. When your data show positive outcomes, incorporate those outcomes into your public awareness campaign. Share encouraging outcomes with facilitators and partners, so that they get feedback on the fruits of their labor. In targeting additional funding, show how your project outcomes align with the wider research performed in the healthy marriage field.

Panelists also emphasized the importance of keeping in mind the type of program you are running when formulating your sustainability plan. A sustainability strategy for a grassroots public awareness campaign may be different than that of a faith-based organization that provides weekend retreats for married couples. As part of your sustainability plan, decide when and where you want to allocate staff and financial resources. For example, if you spent a lot of effort on marketing at the beginning of the program, you may not need to expend as many resources on marketing after your grant has ended.

Are there special sustainability considerations for HMR programs that are serving a specific target population or geographic location?

Regardless of the target population or area being served, healthy marriage programs need to understand the unique cultural needs of the community and population they intend to serve. Knowing your population well can help you frame your program in ways that resonate with them. For example, if you work with a population that typically values the precept of “family” more than “marriage,” you will want to draw clear linkages between healthy marriages and strong families. As one expert noted, connecting with community leaders and giving them ownership of the

program helps to foster cultural sensitivity – as well as attract additional donors.

For programs that cover multiple counties or large regions, our experts suggested selecting a curriculum for which training is inexpensive and easily attained. A curriculum that allows trained facilitators to train others to teach the curriculum may help ensure sustainability when resources are limited. Consider encouraging communication between communities participating in your initiative so they can share their experiences and learn from one another to make their service delivery more efficient and effective.

How can HMR programs locate additional funding opportunities?

Tip: Consider approaching health and wellness organizations for additional funding. Highlight the recent research findings regarding linkages between marriage and physical wellbeing.

Below are some criteria and tips experts to consider when targeting additional funding opportunities and potential funders.

- ✓ Maintain a broad view of national, state, and local organizations that could provide additional

resources for your healthy marriage program. Don't put all of your eggs in one basket when it comes to requesting resources. In approaching organizations, clearly communicate your mission statement and core values. Eliminate misconceptions by explaining what your program offers, and what it doesn't.

- ✓ Seek funding from private national foundations with family-friendly missions. When requesting funding, show how your mission aligns with

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theirs. Still, stay true to your program's core values. Be wary of adapting your program's mission only to fit the needs of certain stakeholders.

- ✓ Work with policymakers and legislators to set aside TANF funds for marriage education. For more information on states that have used TANF funds to promote marriage and family strengthening activities, read the NHMRC's fact sheet, TANF Funds and Healthy Marriage Activities, at <http://healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/tanffundh-mact.pdf>.

- ✓ Talk with other grantees or organizations in your community about how they have achieved sustained funding. Established community organizations, even if they are not providing healthy marriage and relationship education, may provide a wealth of knowledge about navigating local funding streams.
- ✓ Look for classes in your community that teach organizations how to approach foundations for funding. Writing a grant proposal for a foundation requires a slightly different approach than developing a federal proposal. As well, foundations typically place a high priority on evaluation results, so be sure to include relevant data and evaluation outcomes.

For current information and strategies to help your healthy marriage program, visit the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) website at www.healthymarriageinfo.org.