

Moving From a Free to a Fee-for-Service Marriage/Relationship Education Program Model

Background

In the past, individuals and couples learned marriage/relationship education (MRE) skills through private counseling or weekend couples' retreats. Participants were usually charged for these services. Similar services were sometimes provided by religious organizations to members at no charge. However, not everyone had access to these free services and certain types of services were only available in the private sector. The cost of this assistance could be quite expensive and therefore services were not accessible to low-income couples—those at higher risk for conflict and relationship distress. However, in recent years the government has provided grants to many community- and faith-based organizations to provide MRE services in low-income communities. Most of these programs were designed to offer free services and incentivize participation by providing child care, transportation, meals, weekend retreats, and/or other rewards. As programs move away from public funding, many are looking at ways to continue these services. One sustainability strategy is charging a fee for MRE services.

Maintaining program viability is not the only reason for charging a fee. Assigning a monetary value to your services may help establish more credibility in the community. Asking participants to pay for services may also increase commitment levels and retention. This Tip Sheet is designed to highlight issues to consider when deciding if and how to transition from providing MRE services for free to a fee-for-service model.



Deciding How Much to Charge

It can be difficult to determine how much to charge, particularly when your program has provided services for free in the past. This decision is especially challenging when serving a community where participants have limited financial resources. Programs that charge a fee typically run between \$25 and \$100 per couple, depending on the service provided. The following considerations can help guide your decision-making:

- **Determine what you want to achieve by charging a fee.** If your goal is to support the entire program, you will need to know how much revenue is necessary to pay for staff, facilities, materials, etc. Even if you do not need to cover all program expenses, you might still want to consider charging a smaller fee in order to:
 - Fund one particular aspect of your program such as food, child care, or incentives

- Emphasize the value of the services provided
- Encourage participants to fully commit to the program
- **Assess your target population’s capacity to pay a fee.** Hold focus groups with past participants and ask how much they would have been willing/able to pay for the services. Keep in mind that past participants may be open to paying more since they are already familiar with the program and its benefits. You may also want to explore this question with individuals from your target audience who have not yet participated in your services.
- **Consider a service-specific fee structure.** Some organizations charge varying amounts for different services. For example, you may want to create a “menu,” like the one below, so participants can choose the service(s) that would benefit them most:

Sample Service/Fee Menu

Online assessment/ couples’ inventory	\$25/couple
One-day workshop	\$35/couple or \$20/individual
Eight-week workshop	\$50/couple or \$30/individual
Weekend retreat	\$100/couple or \$60/individual

When determining what to charge, think about the value individuals place on their time. You may find that participants aren’t as committed to attending or completing services if they have only paid a minimal amount (e.g., \$10-\$20). By contrast, participants

may be less inclined to walk away from a program if they have invested more (e.g., \$50-\$100). While you may feel that charging a fee will place a burden on participants, remember that your fee is likely much less expensive than private counseling.

Developing a Plan for Scholarships or Discounts

As previously mentioned, there may be cases when some participants are unable to pay your fee. You may want to consider discounts or partial or full scholarships.

- **Decide how many scholarships/discounts to provide and how to select recipients.** If you cannot provide a scholarship to everyone in need, you may want to establish a fixed number of scholarships/discounts for each workshop/class/retreat offered. To determine who will receive a scholarship, establish specific criteria or guidelines. You may also want to consider an application form.
- **Determine how you will publicize scholarships/discounts.** Rather than publicly promoting discounts, you may prefer to rely on the participants and/or program staff to identify a participant’s need. Or, you may decide to advertise the availability of scholarships as a way to engage participants who otherwise may have viewed the fee as a barrier to attending services. Keep in mind what will be needed, administratively, to manage scholarships.
- **Engage community partners as benefactors.** Reach out to community partners to donate funds toward participant scholarships. Organizations may be interested in covering the fees for their own constituency. Or you may find that local churches and civic

groups are willing to donate lump sums to be used toward scholarships for participants who cannot afford to pay the fee.

Making the Transition

If your program previously provided services for free, you will want to think strategically about how to transition to charging a fee. Here are some things to consider:

- **Develop a script.** You may want to develop a script for staff as well as any partner agencies involved with recruiting participants. The script might include information about the costs associated with program materials, meals, child care and any other supports to help justify the need for a fee. If your program is not charging a fee to cover actual program operations (i.e. materials, staff, facilities, etc.) you may want to provide a comparison about what it actually costs to deliver the service versus how much you are charging participants.
- **Support your partner organizations.** Think about ways you may be able to help your partners' constituencies during the transition. You may want to offer their clientele discount vouchers for a specified time period. It will also be helpful to communicate with them about your need to charge a fee. Finally, you may want to offer their constituents group discounts.
- **Determine when and how to announce the new fee-for-service in the community.** Several months before officially implementing the change, you may want to begin advertising the new fee on your billboards, flyers, monthly newsletters, etc. Make sure you deliver a consistent message throughout all of these channels. Or, you may decide to gradually

implement the change by charging a fee for specific workshops (e.g., weekend retreats, special seminars) or services provided at certain locations.

- **Establish a system for managing revenues.** Programs that previously offered services for free may not have the infrastructure in place for handling money. As you transition to charging a fee, think through how you will manage money coming in to the program. Look at your program's registration process; what payment methods would be the easiest for your participants to complete and for your staff to manage? If your program already has an online registration process, perhaps you will want to incorporate an online payment method (e.g., PayPal). Or, you may prefer payment in cash or check at the time participants register.

Programs that previously marketed free services may be apprehensive about how well a new fee-for-service will be received in the community. However, many people expect to pay something when receiving services and the change doesn't necessarily have to be a negative experience. The tips offered above will help you manage the transition and develop a successful strategy for fee-based services.

Additional Resources

[Understanding Fee-for-Service Models – ACF Compassion Capital Fund](#)

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