

Site Exchange Series Overview

The Promise of Peer-to-Peer Learning

Effective Services Series

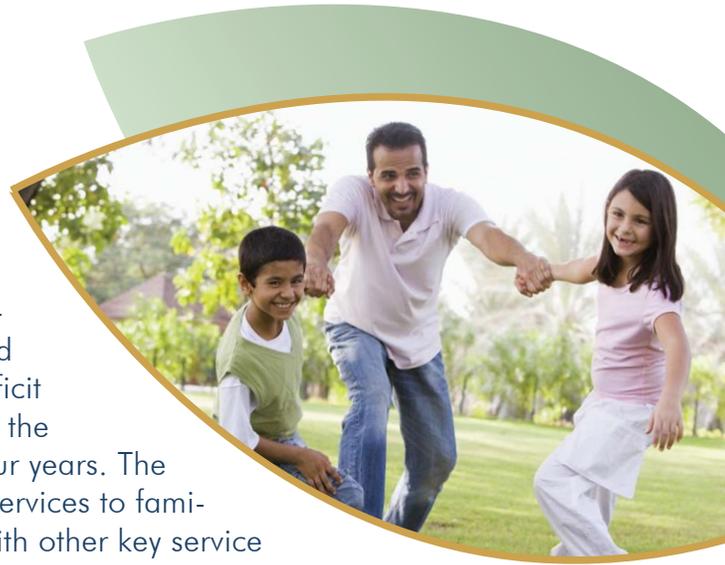
Successes Achieved by the Demonstration Programs

Report 1 of 3



The OFA's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Projects

How can the Federal government best support the formation and maintenance of healthy families? What strategies can be used to help parents get well-paying jobs and keep them? The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance's (OFA) Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood demonstration projects – authorized when the TANF program was reauthorized in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (PL 109-171) – have been at the forefront of exploring these questions for the past four years. The OFA grantees provide important community-based services to families. By offering voluntary programs in partnership with other key service providers (e.g., domestic violence prevention organizations, birth centers at hospitals, TANF and workforce investment agencies, faith- and community-based organizations) these grantees strengthen the safety net available to families in their communities. These demonstration programs are a part of the Administration for Children and Families' national strategy of enhancing child well-being.



Responsible Fatherhood programs teach fathers healthy marriage skills, responsible parenting, and support their economic stability. Healthy Marriage programs provide skills-based marriage education services to help those who are considering, or have chosen marriage, to form and sustain healthy marriages. These demonstration grantees have brought the promising practices and knowledge of two distinct fields to bear on promoting children's well-being. Local service providers build core relationship (e.g., communication, problem-solving, parenting) and employment skills that couples and parents can use to strengthen their families. Healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood service providers also help establish realistic expectations about the emotional and financial responsibilities associated with healthy and stable relationships – both marital and parental. For individuals raised in homes without a father present, Responsible Fatherhood programs may be the first environment in which they learn how fathers can contribute economically and emotionally to their families. Similarly, for those raised in families or communities where marriage is uncommon, Healthy Marriage programs may be the first opportunity to learn the behaviors and attitudes necessary for creating and sustaining healthy marriages.

High-school youth and college students participating in these services are also learning skills that will contribute to successful developmental outcomes. Relationship skills taught in these academic settings are expected to help young people have healthier

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relationships with parents, peers, teachers, employers, boyfriends, and girlfriends. Healthier relationships are expected, in turn, to facilitate better academic and employment outcomes as well as assisting these young men and women to raise their own children. If young people have not had parents or other adults to role model healthy relationship skills, these school-based services can provide essential supports for their transition to productive adulthood.

OFA is building knowledge about what it takes to form healthy families and strong communities. Grantees are bridging two distinct fields of practice, leveraging the best from both areas. They have and will continue to develop critical knowledge about how to deliver healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood services in partnership with other community-based and government-funded service providers. This knowledge can be harnessed and used as a foundation for informing future social policy and programs.

OFA and its Technical Assistance (TA) Team have supported the demonstration grantees in their efforts to strengthen family relationships and improve child well-being. Specifically, OFA sponsored a series of peer-to-peer site exchanges designed to advance the fields of healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood. The site exchanges—a unique form of grantee-to-grantee technical assistance in which participants build from the successful practices of their peers by observing programs and procedures firsthand—focused on key partnerships grantees formed to engage high-priority populations in their programs. A list of site exchange participants may be found in Appendices A and B.

Site Exchanges: A Peer-to-Peer Approach to Learning

While quality technical assistance can take many forms, one often underutilized option is to learn from the best practices of peers. A mix of formal presentations and informal discussions, peer-to-peer learning can offer many advantages. Such learning takes place in a non-threatening environment, where grantees have the flexibility to observe and ask questions. In addition, many grantees may find a strong comfort level in developing relationships with peers who also can provide valuable advice to overcome vexing challenges.

In its purest form, a “site exchange” is an intensive seminar with opportunities for job shadowing and discussion. It is a unique form of peer-to-peer technical assistance in which participants build from

The Office of Family Assistance has learned a great deal about what does and doesn't work in the fields of family self-sufficiency.



the successful practices of their peers through direct observation and discussion. As a result, visitors are able to observe effective practices “on the ground” where they can learn the policies, structures, and approaches that may allow them to improve their own programs. Visiting agencies have face-to-face, in-depth discussions about successful strategies for overcoming common challenges.



With these factors in mind, OFA and its technical assistance team facilitated a site exchange series during which Healthy Marriage (HM) grantees opened up their doors for site visits from other HM and Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grantees. Visitors observed programs and workshops, interviewed agency leaders as well as program participants, and engaged in peer-to-peer discussions about program challenges as well as successes. The goal of these site exchanges was to facilitate communication across diverse grantee agencies in an effort to provide new learning opportunities and insights that can enhance program quality in future years.

A site exchange is many things, but it is *not* designed simply to highlight an exemplary host while singling out the shortcomings of visiting programs. The overall strategy is to “make the strong stronger” by capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise of Healthy Marriage grantees. Selection criteria for “host” and “guest” sites¹ followed a general principle of linking grantees with strong practices to those seeking to enhance strategies on specific issues, such as partnerships, outreach and recruitment, or program evaluation. OFA and its TA Team identified host sites and guest grantees. Each of the site exchanges involved one or more “guest” sites, in which selected HM and RF grantees sent representatives to the host site for two days of observation and discussion. Each site exchange also had a TA facilitator whose role was to lead discussions and set up a detailed agenda with the host agency. Each two-day site exchange was preceded by a conference call between host and visiting grantees about the intent of the meeting, the proposed schedule, and participant expectations. Sessions and activities were generally held at the offices of the host agency.

A site exchange can be a powerful technical assistance approach that engages peers in direct observation and discussion of successful programs and practices.

Some Pitfalls to Avoid

In designing, planning and conducting site exchanges, OFA and its TA Team gained many insights about the best ways to organize these two-day peer-to-peer learning conferences. Some of the most salient findings are in site exchange logistics and the mix of participating agencies.

¹ See Appendices A and B for more detailed descriptions of the participating host and guest grantees respectively.

Logistics. For most of the meetings, at least two visiting grantees traveled to the host site. Some of these hosts were urban locations, while others were in college towns or small towns that required extensive travel to and from a major airport. Site exchanges in Alabama and Mississippi in particular required extensive travel for participants. As a result, the TA Team built in a travel day for participants. This policy was popular among participants and was one valuable “lesson learned” from the site exchange experience. The travel day was a suggestion from visitors to the initial site exchanges, held on the West Coast, who encountered some of their own travel challenges. One official noted that, after an early morning flight to the West Coast, the site exchange included an afternoon full of presentations followed by a three-hour evening classroom observation. By seeking input on logistics from the very first site exchange, the TA Team was able to make modifications—including the travel day—for those exchanges that occurred later in the summer.

Despite the longer travel involved to more rural sites, participants at these site visits did find some unexpected benefits. In particular, they noted that there was ample time for informal discussion among grantees during van rides to and from the site exchange. For exchanges in Auburn and Booneville, all participants said they valued the van riding as an important “icebreaker” that led to richer discussions throughout the experience. In many cases, the visiting grantees developed a bond through meals and travel that lasted throughout the trip.

Selecting Visiting Agencies. All host sites for these site exchanges were Healthy Marriage grantees with extensive experience. However, there was more flexibility in selecting visiting grantees. While most did administer Healthy Marriage grants, visitors for two of the site exchanges were grantees running Responsible Fatherhood programs.

This approach seemed to work fairly well, as visiting Responsible Fatherhood agencies agreed there was value in observing programs with similar overall goals even if the agencies had a different program model. However, in some cases, there was concern about whether this provided an optimum experience for guest grantees. For future site exchanges that combine Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grantees, it may be useful to focus on more universal, “evergreen” topics common to many social service agencies such as recruitment, staff training, data collection, and evaluation. In addition, one conclusion of the 2009 series is that site exchanges are most successful when there are at least two visiting agencies.

Maximizing the learning opportunities of a site exchange requires careful attention to the “mix” of participants, the logistics of the visits, and the focal topic.



Documenting the Knowledge Built through the Site Exchange Series

The Office of Family Assistance recognizes the importance of building the field's knowledge base and consequently has documented the exchange of ideas and program improvements made as a result of the site exchange series in its *Effective Services Series: Successes Achieved by the Demonstration Projects*. For the purposes of this series, "effective services" are defined as those practices or strategies that have resulted in successful, community-based partnerships or successful engagement of various high-priority populations. A total of three reports comprise this series and each is described briefly next.



1. This is the first report in the series. It provides background information on the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood demonstration projects. Central to this report is a description of the site exchange methodology including both its promises and perils as a technical assistance strategy.
2. *The Power of Partnerships* report is the second report in this series and presents four case studies summarizing the knowledge gained during each site exchange, the strategies grantees used to develop partnerships, practices used to successfully engage program participants, and the changes in practice resulting from knowledge gained during the site exchanges. The following four exchanges are documented in the *Power of Partnerships* report:
 - Effectively Engaging the Faith Community and Couples
 - Effectively Engaging Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Offices and Low-Income Families
 - Effectively Engaging High Schools, After-School Programs, and Youth
 - Effectively Engaging the University and Young Adults
3. The third report in the series, *Data-Driven Decision Making*, summarizes how grantees have integrated data into daily operations and how program evaluation has been used to document program implementation and outcomes. The report focuses primarily on a theme that has emerged across site exchanges as well as other interactions with grantees; the importance of using data for organizational decision-making and documenting a program's progress and success. One of the site exchanges focused specifically on how grantees can use data for organizational decision making.

Conclusion

The fields of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood are still relatively new—but this series illustrates there is a wealth of innovation underway in the work of many sites that are successfully serving families and fathers throughout the country. The *Effective Services Series* is designed to help make this emerging body of knowledge accessible and to advance both fields as they work to strengthen families and enhance child well-being.

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Appendix A: Site Exchange Series Grantee Hosts

The following pages provide a description for the five Effective Services Site Exchange host grantees included in this series.

Grantee	Organization and Project Description
<p>Auburn University, Center for Children, Youth, and Families (Auburn, Alabama)</p> <p>http://www.alabamamarriage.org/</p>	<p>Organization Description</p> <p>The Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (ACHMI) is a partnership between Auburn University, the Alabama Children’s Trust Fund, Family Resource Centers, Mental Health Centers, and many other agencies and individuals at the State and Local levels who have joined together to build and sustain healthy relationships and stable marriages throughout Alabama. ACHMI’s goal is to strengthen Alabama families by: 1) raising public awareness of the importance of healthy, stable relationships and marriages for children, family and community well-being; 2) increasing access to healthy relationship/marriage resources for all Alabama citizens; and 3) training community members and professionals in research-based educational programs that strengthen relationships and marriages.</p> <p>Project Description</p> <p>The ACHMI project intends to create a pro-marriage culture in Alabama through their public advertising campaign and increase access to marriage education services across the state by providing marriage education utilizing 5 different curricula, and 8 grantee sites.</p>
<p>Booneville School District (Booneville, Mississippi)</p> <p>http://boonevilleschools.org/</p>	<p>Organization Description</p> <p>Located in Northeast, MS, the Booneville School District includes an elementary school, middle school and high school.</p> <p>Project Description</p> <p>The Booneville Healthy Marriage Initiative is implementing a program that creates public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage, teaches the skills needed to increase marital stability and health, and educates high school students on relationship skills, budgeting, and the value of marriage.</p>
<p>Northwest Marriage Institute (Vancouver, Washington)</p> <p>http://northwestmarriage.org/</p>	<p>Organization Description</p> <p>The Northwest Marriage Institute is based in the Pacific Northwest (Washington and Oregon), and exists to serve the community by providing education in marriage and related subjects, and to provide professional, pre-marital and marriage counseling. The goal is to ensure access to affordable education and counseling by providing professional services, in private sessions and in workshop formats, to all people regardless of their ability to pay.</p>

Project Description

The Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant for the Northwest Marriage Institute serves low-income married couples by providing them with marriage enhancement and marriage skills training programs. Some of the objectives of the program are to offer successful marriage education workshops to couples and help married couples apply the marriage skills that they are taught. Desired outcomes include an increased number of low-income couples acquiring the skills for a healthy marriage and an increased availability to low-income couples of opportunities for continued training. The program implements the following activities: recruiting couples in the targeted area for marriage training; providing relationship skills training in communication and conflict resolution; and providing opportunities for booster sessions to reinforce the skills that have been learned.

**Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project
(Sacramento, California)**

www.sacramentohealthymarriage.org

Organization Description

The Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project is a non-profit organization with a network within the County of Sacramento, California. According to this organization, they have extensive social services experience and have a proven track record of providing critical services to low-income people.

Project Description

With its partners Birth & Beyond and Early Start, the Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project works collaboratively to provide services to low-income, unmarried, and expectant or new parents.

**University of Central Florida
(Orlando, Florida)**

<http://www.mfri.ucf.edu/>

Organization Description

The Florida Marriage and Family Research Institute at the University of Central Florida was created in 2003 to facilitate the development of research and clinical initiatives to better support couples, marriages, and families. The institute conducts original research and facilitates and supports scholarly activity of faculty and graduate students interested in marriage, family, and child issues. Additionally, the institute can provide outcome and process evaluation services for other research projects that are part of and independent of the institute.

Project Description

The "Together Project" aims to bring marriage education services to low-income married couples with children in the Central Florida region and to collect data comparing couples who participate in marriage education with those in a control condition. Over the life of the project, the goal is to serve 200 couples and to collect data on 200 control couples. Control couples will be placed on a waiting list for services and will be eligible for marriage counseling services at the UCF Community Counseling Clinic after completing one-year follow-up data. The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) marriage education curriculum is used in four-month segments for participating groups, and the program will follow-up with booster sessions for the couples.

Appendix B: Site Exchange Series Guest Grantees

The following pages provide a description for the 11 Effective Services Site Exchange guest grantees included in this series.

Grantee	Organization and Project Description
Beech Acres Parenting Center (Cincinnati, Ohio) http://www.beechacres.org/	Organization Description Beech Acres Parenting Center has been operating in the Greater Cincinnati, Ohio area for over 160 years. The organization has served families and children through partnerships with faith-based organizations and schools as well as other community agencies. Project Description Beech Acres Parenting Center's Building Strong Marriages & Relationships program works to strengthen marriages and prepare people for healthy relationships. The program provides education and enrichment activities, including those that explore positive relationship models and teach the basic skills necessary for healthy relationships. In addition, the program sponsors campaigns to educate the public on the benefits of healthy marriages and relationships.
Center for Self-Sufficiency (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) http://centerinc.org/	Organization Description Founded in 1997, the Center for Self-Sufficiency (CFSS) is a nonprofit organization that specializes in partnering with schools, community organizations and faith-based organizations to develop effective family-strengthening programs. Project Description CFSS led to the development of the Milwaukee Marriage Partnership, a coalition of diverse agencies committed to strengthening the institution of marriage. The Milwaukee Marriage project includes a community-wide social marketing campaign, the delivery of PREP to non-married expectant (and new) parents and community college students, and delivery of Keys to a Healthy Marriage to high-school students. Globally, the program focuses on marriage education and marriage mentoring services.

Grantee

Organization and Project Description

Character Counts in Maine (Portland, Maine)

<http://best4teens.org>

Organization Description

Founded in 2002, Character Counts In Maine (CCM), has delivered abstinence education that includes marriage preparation skill building for adolescents in communities across Maine over the past eight years. Their marriage curriculum teaches relationship skills which lead to the formation of safe and stable marriages. CCM has formed a coalition of civic and faith-based organizations, high schools, youth groups, churches, and marriage education organizations to bring healthy relationship education to high school adolescents.

Project Description

Character Counts in Maine is devoted to using public awareness and marriage education to improve outcomes for teens. Their program offers a Healthy Relationships curriculum based on cutting edge research, including the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) program for teens and adults. The Maine Teen Talk lesson format makes teens aware of the patterns that can damage relationships and teaches them a better way to relate to each other.

CJH Educational Grant Services, Inc./Healthy Marriage Matters (Raleigh, North Carolina)

<http://cjhgrants.com/>

Organization Description

CJH Educational Grant Services, Inc., is a private grant-writing implementation company based in Raleigh, North Carolina. Its mission is to address the social and educational needs of citizens in North Carolina.

Project Description

CJH's Healthy Marriage MATTERS (Marriage Activities Tailored for Teens through Education, Research and Services) serve youth and families in northeastern counties of North Carolina by: 1) engaging in a media campaign on the benefits of marriage and 2) promoting a high school curriculum tailored to developing healthy relationships.

Cuyahoga County Board of County Commissioners/Strong Start for Cuyahoga's Families (Cleveland, Ohio)

<http://bocc.cuyahogacounty.us/en-US/home.aspx>

Organization Description

The Board of Cuyahoga County Commissioners is a Political Subdivision of the State of Ohio, established by the State Legislature in 1807. Comprised of 38 cities, 19 Villages and 2 Townships with a population of over 1.4 million. Cuyahoga County is largely an industrial, recreational, educational and leading health care community.

Project Description

Strong Start for Cuyahoga's Families is a voluntary program that is designed to offer a "one-stop" shop experience of family support, education and resources for couples who are either expecting a baby or have a new baby that is 3 months old or younger at the time they enroll. Couples who participate in the program MUST be 17 years of age or older. Participating couples will be provided with the tools needed to enhance the life of their child.

Grantee

Organization and Project Description

Family Health and Education Institute, Inc. (Seabrook, Maryland)

www.fhei.org

Organization Description

The Family Health and Education Institute, Inc. (FHEI) is a non-profit organization providing social and educational services to families in order to increase academic attainment, improve mental and emotional well being, and increase marketable job skills that lead to financial self-sufficiency. The program especially targets families at risk. In addition to Fatherhood training, the organization offers a life skills program.

Project Description

FHEI provides relationship and parenting training. It also aims to help fathers improve their economic status by providing job training, career advancement education, job placement and family financial planning.

Friendship West Baptist Church (Dallas, Texas)

<http://friendshipwest.org/>

Organization Description

Friendship West Baptist Church has been operating in Dallas, Texas for over 30 years, has a congregation of over 11,700 members, and is a prominent organization within the African American community. The church is a member of AWARI, which is the coalition of African American organizations operating in Dallas to form the "Dallas African American Healthy Marriages Initiative."

Project Description

The vision of Friendship West Baptist Church, LIFE Matters Healthy Marriage Initiative is to improve and strengthen African American marriages in South Dallas. The program consists of five components, headed by five coordinators. The five component activities are seamlessly integrated throughout communities; they are, (1) Project Outreach and Support, (2) Media, (3) Education and Training, (4) Youth Development, and (5) Marriage Enrichment and Preservation.

John Brown University/ Northwest Arkansas Healthy Marriages (Siloam Springs, Arkansas)

<http://www.liferelationships.com>

Organization Description

John Brown University serves couples in six Arkansas counties (Benton, Washington, Madison, Menifee, Montgomery, Morgan, Powell, and Rowan). The John Brown University Center for Relationship Enrichment was established in 1998. Its mission is to serve the region and adapt proven strategies and models from other communities to increase premarital and marriage enrichment participation among members of the community.

Project Description

The Center for Relationship Enrichment uses funds to provide premarital training, train individuals to serve as volunteer premarital trainers, serve couples in marriage enrichment activities, and train marriage enrichment educators. Using the PREPARE/ENRICH curriculum, the University has had multiple meetings with over 200 local clergy and ministry leaders. They have also met with several local businesses and have secured two large companies (Tyson Foods & JB Hunt Trucking) as co-sponsors for their marriage events.

Grantee

Organization and Project Description

Metro United Methodist Urban Ministry (San Diego, California)

www.metroсандiego.org

Organization Description

Metro is a faith-based organization whose goal is to empower low-income individuals, families and communities to overcome poverty and to achieve self-sufficiency through employment, education, social services and leadership development. It is the social services arm of the United Methodist Church. They offer a prisoner reentry initiative, adult-child mentoring, a neighborhood drop-in center, substance abuse recovery and a Pathways program targeting gang members.

Project Description

The program offers workshops in manhood, fatherhood, parenting, child support, paternity, domestic violence, financial literacy, and risky sexual behavior prevention. In addition to responsible parenting, participants receive financial literacy workshops, job readiness, and soft skills training and may also receive individual financial counseling, accessed credit reports and credit repair assistance.

Project S.O.S. (Jacksonville, Florida)

www.projectsos.com

Organization Description

Founded in 1993, Project S.O.S., Inc. is a non-project organization with a social services network within St. John's County, Florida. They have extensive social services experience of providing critical services to low-income people.

Project Description

Project S.O.S., Inc. serves low-income, unmarried expectant, and new parents and the majority served are between the ages of 17 and 23. Most clients are African American (49%) and Caucasian (32%). Project S.O.S. is currently conducting a mass media campaign and relationship skills classes for couples using the PAIRS curriculum. As a result, 120 participants have attended the workshops, and 100 percent of participants that needed services were referred to other organizations. The staff developed a community resource guide to support participants in receiving services.

Texas Health and Human Services Commission (Austin, Texas)

<http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/index.shtml>

Organization Description

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (TX HHSC) is a state agency who administers programs such as TANF, Medicaid, and Food Stamps.

Project Description

TX HHSC provides weekly classes to low-income unmarried couples considering marriage, pregnant TANF clients and their partners, and married and unmarried Head Start and TANF couples annually. In addition, a targeted public advertising campaign will be used to recruit program workshop participants and to educate the target population about the value of healthy marriage and its effects on child well-being.

This document was developed by the **Department of Health and Human Services,**
Administration for Children and Families (www.acf.hhs.gov),
Office of Family Assistance under two contracts with **ICF International Inc.**,
Contract No. HHSP233200700008T, and HHSP23320095636WC.

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