National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

September 2007 Webinar
"Working with Couples"

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center broadcasted a webinar entitled **"Working with Couples**" on September 19, 2007. During the course of the webinar, we received more questions than we were able to answer. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is a follow-up to many of the questions posted during the webinar.

1. How is serving couples different than serving individuals?

Although couples are obviously made up of two individuals, recruiting and providing services to couples, rather than individuals, as a service unit are somewhat different. In recruiting couples, you need to either speak (literally or figuratively) to both the male and female members of the couple, or provide ways for the person interested in the program to talk to their partner about marriage education. You cannot ask one partner to push their spouse or significant other to attend, but you can help them to craft a message about program participation that is likely to resonate with their partner.

Once you bring a couple in for services, it is important to look for signs of domestic violence. Not only do you want to provide opportunities for victims or batterers to seek help (which you want to do for *all* clients), you also need to ensure that participation in a marriage education program will not endanger or misinform domestic violence victims. For example, while communication skills help most couples calmly discuss concerns and needs, employing communication techniques in a discussion with a batterer will not protect the victim from violence.

While delivering your classes, you may want to ensure that the curriculum's content addresses couple-level needs and allows for partners to gain information about skills and tools to interact with each other. Additionally, you may want to work with your couples to lay some ground rules about personal disclosure. When both members of a couple are present, what a wife reveals about her marriage is likely to reveal something about her husband as well. You need to set up procedures (like a "stop" sign partners can use to signal that they're uncomfortable with the information being shared) and rules (like couples should discuss at home what topics are too intimate for group sharing) to prevent "over-sharing" and stop over-sharing before it violates people's privacy as individuals.

Finally, serving couples has implications for how you count your service delivery and rules for participation. Will you count couples as two individuals or as one couple? Will you allow one spouse to attend if the partner is out of town, sick or working? Will the partner have to participate in a make-up session for the couple to receive credit for the class? If your couple breaks up during the class, will both be allowed to attend separately, only one member or neither member? As you can see, using couples rather than individuals as your service delivery unit has implications for many programmatic activities, decisions and processes.

2. How do I work with couples who are facing other challenges that are beyond the scope of this program?

Many couples that you work with may have needs and challenges in addition to strengthening their marriages. Couples may be facing such challenges as underemployment or unemployment, variable work schedules, lack of child care, parenting issues, substance abuse issues, housing problems, financial issues, literacy issues, transportation issues, mental or physical health issues, or education issues. They may be involved in the criminal justice system, the child welfare system, the child support system or the immigration system. It's important to develop a process for learning more about the other challenges or difficulties that your families are facing (see question 4).

Some of these issues you may be able to address with your program, in a limited way, by providing a hot dinner during the program, providing child care or child care vouchers during the program, providing transportation to and from the program and providing convenient class times and a flexible make-up program so that participants can complete the class. On the other hand, your program is not designed to address food, child care and transportation needs more generally, nor are you expected to address other challenges like literacy issues or involvement in the criminal justice system. You can, however, take some actions that both show you care about your participants and help them to find resources that are designed to support them in addressing their other challenges.

The easiest thing you can do is acknowledge that your clients have other challenges. Give them a bit of time to discuss important concerns, like budgeting better, getting a job or being a good parent. Let them know that many people struggle with those issues, and to the extent the facilitators feel comfortable, they can identify with the participants by discussing how certain challenges are present in their own lives. It is also important to develop examples and discussion topics that will resonate with your clients. If your current curriculum uses discussion topics that are not relevant to your participants, change them to be more suitable. For example, if the curriculum wants couples to discuss buying a home, and your clients are not in that financial position, change it to talk about renting an apartment or securing a Section 8 voucher.

Finally, you will best serve your participants if you develop a network of social service providers that can help your clients with their other health and social service needs. You need to identify agencies that address a multitude of needs, and cultivate good relationships with those that provide services most often needed by your clients or target population. You can identify these organizations in a variety of ways: many United Ways develop community resource guides, county-level offices often have a list of health and social service agencies, the phone book has agencies listed by the kind of service they provide, the school systems often have family-oriented service providers lists, oftentimes clients mention trusted organizations, and finally, identify one trusted organization, ask them to name other agencies, and develop a snowball list. Remember, referrals are most helpful when you know what the agency is like, they know what kind of services you're providing, and you have an actual name of a person to whom you can point your participants.

3. How do I learn what kinds of challenges my participants are facing?

There are two general strategies for learning more about the challenges facing your couples and you may choose one over the other depending on your service delivery structure. One way is to conduct a community needs assessment where you learn about the needs of your target community. This could involve simply reviewing statistics from available data sources, or conducting your own survey of community attitudes, beliefs, and needs. This method will give you a general sense of what your target population's needs are and is best suited for programs that either: (1) have a well-defined target population (e.g., lower income, African American unmarried couples residing in a specific zip code) or (2) whose classes are one or two time events without intake processes. This will allow you to develop a list of resources before the class to be handed out during the one or two sessions.

A second way is to ask your potential participants directly, either during an intake process or through paperwork passed out at the first class. This method gives information specific for the people actually interested in or participating in your class and is good for programs that either: (1) have such broad target populations that it's hard to identify who might become program participants or (2) provide services over a multi-week time frame and build in a formal, personal intake process. This method allows you to provide couple-specific referrals and get a good sense of the issues specifically facing the people attracted to participating in your program.

To conduct a community needs assessment, you can use a variety of data sources. The Census Bureau and other Federal data centers may have information on the percent of your community that is in poverty, lives in subsidized housing, are single parents, are from non-martial births, have been formerly incarcerated and other measures of interest. Your state or county may also have data relevant to client population needs.[1] Alternatively, you could develop a survey about family needs and challenges and either send to a sample of your target audience or use a firm to deliver the survey via telephone. Finally, you could ask around to the social service agencies in your area that are familiar with your target population to get a sense of what needs they see most often.

To identify the needs of your participants specifically, you can either ask them face to face, or have your participants indicate their needs on paper documentation. A conversation about challenges and needs is best done during an individual (or couple-level) intake process. Sometime prior to the first class, the couple or a member of the couple, can come

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[1] See for examples, www.census.gov, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html, and www.kidscount.org/census/.

into the agency (or you could travel to their home) to talk about their relationship, their goals for the class, any demographic or pre-test data you need, and other ways that your program can help their family succeed. You might phrase the probing for additional support as a conversation, information may come up in the context of asking about other things, or you may have a standard question like, "In addition to relationship/marriage education, many families are interested in learning about other areas of family life or getting support for other daily challenges. Can you tell me yes or no if you'd like more information about the following resources?" You can then read a list of community resources that you either have a connection to, or would be willing to help couples find a resource for like, legal aid, parenting education, help navigating the child support system, learning about housing support, job training, educational opportunities, available jobs or options for child care. The same question can be posed on paperwork given at the first class, though without a face to face discussion, you may find that couples are less likely to divulge challenges. Keep that in mind, and know that you may learn about additional needs and challenges as the class progresses.

4. **My healthy marriage program targets low income families because of the range of challenges they typically face. What are some of the services that low income families may be accessing or in need of accessing that I should be aware of?**

There are a number of services and supports available to lower income families. Below we have listed several of the most common federally-funded supports along with links to the programs' websites for more information. We encourage you to talk to state and local officials to learn about programs that may be available in your community.

TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families is sometimes known as AFDC (a previous version of the program), assistance, cash assistance or welfare. It is a program that provides eligible mothers with support for limited amount of time, given that they follow program guidelines like work requirements. It is operated by the Office of Family Assistance. Link: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/

WIC: WIC is a supplemental food program for Women, Infants and Children up to age 5 (WIC). The program also provides referrals for health care and education on proper nutrition. It is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service. Link: http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/

Food Stamps: The food stamps program helps lower income families by providing monies in an electronic card to buy approved food items from grocery stores. Like WIC, Food Stamps are under the purview of the Food and Nutrition Service. Link: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/

Medicaid: Is a health insurance program for low income adults and their children. Additional programs, like S-CHIP provide greater coverage for children, such that in many families, children and pregnant women receive insurance coverage, while other adults do not. Medicaid is managed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Medicare is a similar health insurance program, but it mostly targets elderly people. Links:

http://www.cms.hhs.gov/MedicaidGenInfo/ and
http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/schip.asp

Public Housing/Section 8: The federal government provides housing support for low income families through two major services. Public housing is buildings or units within buildings that are managed by local public housing authorities that provide apartments to qualified families at reduced costs. Public housing tenants rent their homes from federal or local housing authorities. The Section 8 Rental Voucher program allows qualified families to secure affordable housing in the private market. Landlords that choose to accept Section 8 vouchers receive rent from the voucher program (usually a set amount based on the location and number of bedrooms of the unit – i.e., the Fair Market Rent). Families pay the voucher program 1/3 of their monthly income and the voucher makes up the difference between their payment and the Fair Market Rent. Both public housing and the Section 8 program are funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Links:
http://www.hud.gov/renting/phprog.cfm and
http://www.hud.gov/progdesc/voucher.cfm