

## Working With the Faith Community to Support Your State or Local Healthy Marriage Initiative

Faith-based organizations can offer a solid base of resources for your healthy marriage and relationship education programs, if you know how to successfully collaborate with them.

Work in the healthy relationship and marriage education field often involves faith-based organizations. Building (and maintaining) a successful collaboration with the faith community requires realistic expectations among stakeholders. You must be prepared to learn from them and be able to articulate how your relationship will be advantageous to the faith community.

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Faith communities can offer a solid base of volunteers who are invested and passionate. These volunteers can be, with the initiative's assistance, trained, empowered and equipped to carry on the sustained work of healthy marriage programs. In addition, faith communities can provide referrals, offer a place to conduct classes, and provide sustainability for your program. Although it can be challenging, it can be the most fruitful of your collaborative relationships. Several things should be considered when establishing a relationship with faith-based

organizations, no matter what the faith or religious practice.

### Remember to value places of faith because of the key role they play in strengthening marriages.

More than 90 percent of all wedding ceremonies are performed in churches, synagogues and other places of faith. Premarital preparation has almost always been done in places of faith. Marriage as an institution is considered a sacrament in some religious circles. Anyone working with the faith community should be prepared to encounter a sense of territorial encroachment relating to the work of strengthening marriages.



### **Find a representative within the organization to help you navigate its politics.**

The politics of the faith community are not easily accessible to those perceived as outsiders. Find a representative within the organization to assist you in your efforts to collaborate and *engage him or her early on*. Some issues are not so apparent and some barriers are not easily recognizable. Depending on the dynamics of your community, you may experience resistance to your proposal that appears virtually impossible to overcome. Theological differences, relationship histories, perceptions, social cliques, honorary leaders, community leaders, perceived leaders, and self-acclaimed leaders are all difficult for the untrained, uninformed eye to discern. Trust your representative to help you identify and interpret the nuances within the organization.

### **Key religious leaders should be engaged as early as possible when developing a healthy marriage and relationship initiative.**

If you fail to secure the support of faith leaders early in your grant cycle, it might be difficult to garner their support at a later date. Their input should not only be sought but embraced. Although almost every new community initiative seeks support from places of faith in their community engagement efforts, most faith leaders do not wait around for a new initiative to provide services for their parishioners. Simply stated - you will probably need their assistance more than they need yours. This fact can cause faith leaders to be quite deliberate in selecting which initiatives they will lend their influence and support. There may be a period of testing your credibility to see if you will be consistent in the delivery of services before they give wholehearted support.

### **Enlist the assistance of several smaller places of worship.**

Smaller places of worship typically do not have vast resources to dedicate to their individuals and couples. Because of this, they are often more than willing to recruit volunteers to carry out the work. Faith communities without a lot of financial resources can be easier to approach, more cooperative, and likely will be quite appreciative that their members can receive services that their current budgets do not accommodate. Refuse to fall into the trap of only collaborating with the well-known, large places of worship. You do not have to ignore large faith communities, however, it should be noted that some of these organizations do not feel the need for auxiliary services. Even though pursuing larger places of worship can seem easier for meeting objectives and getting larger numbers of people involved, the downside is that it can entail politics unfamiliar to community organizations and could take longer to build a productive relationship. Sometimes leaders of larger congregations are less willing to acknowledge that they do not have cutting edge services for their couples since it is often expected that they do.

### **The emerging work of the marriage field must respect the long term work of the faith community.**

Healthy marriage and relationship resources have been distributed to organizations that many faith-based groups consider to have far less experience than they do. Be sensitive to the long-term work of the faith community. Be aware that many in the faith community will not consider marriage educators as real "marriage experts." Marriage preparation, counseling and enrichment has for centuries been perceived to be the responsibility of the faith community. There may be tension toward those who appear to have a lot of resources (community, state or government support) to focus on strengthening

marriages and families. For a number of years this has been the responsibility of places of faith, many of whom did so by utilizing resources on a shoestring budget.

Most places of faith have a continuous stake in the community and utilize their resources to serve it. Support for relationship and marriage strengthening can be encouraged and managed by members of the faith community.

### **Faith organizations are vested in the community and provide the potential of program sustainability.**

Most places of faith have a continuous stake in the community and utilize their resources to serve it. Programs and systems established to strengthen families can become institutionalized far beyond any governmental funding stream. Support for relationship and marriage strengthening can be encouraged and managed by members of the faith community. Healthy relationship and marriage initiatives should prioritize ways to assure that their important work is sustainable and not swept away by the tides of uncertain economies and political pressures.

Understand and celebrate the historical commitment of faith communities to strengthening families and learn to navigate through the politics of these organizations. Keep religious leaders involved as early as possible in your initiative. Places of faith offer support and sustainability for marriage in many of the communities now being served by healthy relationship and marriage initiatives. Offer them as much attention and assistance as possible and

expect a deep commitment to working with your initiative.

*The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Rozario Slack, DMin., ([www.rozarioslack.com](http://www.rozarioslack.com)) for his contributions to this tip sheet. Rev. Slack is a marriage educator in the African American community and is the co-author of “10 Great Dates for Black Couples,” a relationship education curriculum written to appeal to an African American audience.*

*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.*