Office of Family Assistance
Guidance Memorandum

TO: **OFA Healthy Marriage and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Grantees**

DATE: **December 13, 2007**

As the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood projects have entered their second year of program operations and continue to move forward with data collection and reporting activities, an increasing number of grantees have been asking for more clarification regarding OFA's expectations around data collection, reporting, and evaluation. To respond to these queries and provide consistent information for all grantees, we have developed this memorandum in order to summarize the evaluation requirements (as specified in the program announcements), to provide an overview of how these requirements fit with the different types of evaluation that grantees may be conducting (based upon their funded proposals), and to describe the types of evaluation technical assistance that OFA has made available to support grantees. Our goal is to ensure that there is a common understanding among Federal staff and grantees with respect to the evaluation expectations for the Healthy Marriage demonstration grants and the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grant program.

   I.   Program Evaluation Expectations

   Grantees are expected to meet, at a minimum, the level of data collection activities and requirements enumerated in the program announcements for Healthy Marriage and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood:

   1.   **Project milestones** are clearly identified and there are plans for monitoring and documenting progress toward project milestones that are thorough and reasonable. Plans for monitoring progress also allow for identification of barriers and catalysts to achieving milestones and making relevant adjustments as necessary.

   2.   **Expected project outcomes** are clearly identified. A range of project outcomes may be observed. Basic program outcomes may be measured by surveying participants to assess their satisfaction with the program or to identify what they found most helpful. Other outcomes may address participants' knowledge of and access to other social services. Grantees also may include more sophisticated assessments. These assessments may compare measures such as marital status, quality, stability or satisfaction at the end of the program to measures completed before the program. Advanced and complex evaluation plans are not required for funding. Plans for monitoring and documenting changes in participants or community outcomes are thorough and reasonable.

   3.   Key staff responsible for tracking progress toward project milestones and measuring project outcomes should possess **adequate knowledge, training and experience** to carry out these functions.

II.   Different Types of Evaluation

A. Descriptive Evaluation

There is an expectation that all grantees, at a minimum, will be participating in a descriptive evaluation. A **descriptive evaluation** describes the services and activities that were implemented in a program. Each grantee was funded with an expectation that a specified number of participants would be served and that specific services would be implemented under the authorized activity areas for the designated priority area. Process measures, or "output" data, *describe* who received the services, what they received, and "how much" of the service was provided. Therefore, grantees should be tracking the number, type, and duration of services. Progress toward project milestones is successive, and therefore, data should be collected on an ongoing basis over the course of the demonstration to monitor and describe how well the established goals are being met. This information will enable grantees to demonstrate to ACF whether they were able to provide the services that they were funded to provide.   Please note that service outputs must correlate with the allowable activity areas that grantees were approved in their application. The sample tables included in the *Suggested Semi-annual Report Format* provided by OFA provide an example of how grantees can monitor and report their progress toward service implementation milestones.

Examples of service outputs include:

- Number of fathers who attended skill-based parenting education sessions
- Number of fathers who participated in counseling
- Number of fathers who participated in Work First services
- Number of fathers who participated in educational sessions on effective parenting practices
- Number of career-building and advancement workshops offered
- Number and type of employment and training materials disseminated
- Number of relationship skill education workshops offered
- Number and type of marriage preparation programs offered
- Number of couples that participated in marriage skills training programs
- Number of couples interested in marriage that participated in pre-marital education programs
- Number and type of advertising campaigns conducted on the value of marriage
- Number and type of educational sessions in high schools on relationship skills and budgeting
- Number and type of outreach materials disseminated
- Number of staff trained
- Types of staff training provided

A descriptive evaluation also involves the collection of "descriptive statistics" on the characteristics of program participants, such as age, race, marital status, education, employment, and number of children. This information can be used to help interpret whether the program is reaching its intended target population and whether adjustments to the service approach may be necessary. These descriptive statistics also help to identify who benefits most from the program and can be used to interpret the findings after the evaluation has been conducted.

A descriptive evaluation may also include descriptive *outcomes*. These are not based on longitudinal changes in an outcome variable (i.e., they do not rely on the measurement of outcomes at different points in time) but describe the status or condition of participants after they participate in a program.

Examples of descriptive outcomes include:

- Number of program participants who are knowledgeable about available services
- Number of program participants who are knowledgeable about how to access services
- Number of program participants who believe their participation in the program was beneficial
- Number of fathers who completed a GED
- Number of fathers who completed anger management class
- Number of fathers that established a Parenting Plan
- Number of fathers that established Paternity
- Number of fathers that had contact with their children
- Number of couples who completed a relationship enhancement or marriage skills program
- Number of couples who are committed to their relationship
- Number of couples who report satisfaction in the marital relationship

B. Comparative Evaluation

A comparative evaluation is used to measure outcomes by (1) making a comparison between conditions after participation in a program and conditions prior to participation, (2) comparing individuals who participated in a program with similar individuals that did not participate, or (3) a combination of both. Whereas a descriptive evaluation can report on milestones such as the number of fathers who had contact with their children, this measure does not indicate whether there has been a change or improvement in fathers' levels of contact. To know this, one would need to know the level of contact that fathers previously had established with their children in order determine whether the current level reflects an increase or improvement. A comparative evaluation speaks to this issue by assessing whether there have been changes or improvements in participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, or behaviors. In a comparative evaluation, outcomes are operationalized (usually in a numeric or quantitative format) so that they reflect that a change is being measured and that some comparison is being made to determine whether a condition has "increased, " "improved," or is "greater" after the intervention. There are several different types of comparative evaluations. Some of the common types of comparative evaluation that OFA grantees may be implementing to measure program outcomes are listed below.

- **Pre-Post Design**—this design involves identifying an "event" that marks the beginning of an individual's participation in the program intervention. Data are then collected before that "event" or intervention begins, which is referred to as the pre-test or baseline assessment. After completion of the intervention, data are collected a second time from the same participants, which is referred to as the post-test or follow-up assessment. The follow-up data are then compared to the baseline data to identify whether participants changed or improved on the outcome measure.

- **Comparison Group**—this design involves the identification of a group of individuals assessed as being "comparable" to individuals in a participant group, but who have not been exposed to the services or interventions offered to program participants. A comparison group can be identified within the program's agency (e.g., similar individuals who could have benefited from the program) or from another agency or community that does not have the service intervention available. Typically, demographic characteristics and other key variables are examined, such as presenting conditions, to establish the comparability of the intervention and comparison groups. A comparison group may be identified before, during, or after the start of an intervention, and can be created at either the client level (i.e., individuals in the participant group are directly matched and compared with comparison individuals) or the aggregate level (i.e., outcomes for the participant group as a whole are compared with outcomes for the comparison group as a whole).

- **Historical or existing data as a comparison**—when it is not possible to locate a group of individuals this is comparable to the group of program participants, historical data can sometimes serve as a benchmark for comparison. For example, a program implementing agency-wide practice change could potentially see that all clients served by the agency are exposed to the intervention in one form or another. In this case, a program might rely on data regarding services and outcomes maintained by the agency prior to the changes in practice and compare these to the outcomes observed over time following the implementation of the practice changes.

- **Experimental Design**—this design is the most rigorous type of evaluation and is an experiment which is used to determine the extent to which a program causes change in the outcomes of interest beyond what would have been expected in the absence of the program. The gold standard for a rigorous comparative evaluation that enables an evaluator to attribute observed changes to the intervention is an experimental design with random assignment of individuals to a "treatment" group (receives the service or intervention) or a "control" group (does not receive the service or intervention). A less rigorous comparative evaluation can assess whether change has occurred in a participant group relative to the past or to a comparison group, but it generally cannot determine whether, or to what extent, the observed changes are attributable to the program or intervention of interest. An experimental design, by contrast, applies more rigorous standards of research design, data collection, and analysis to allow an evaluator to conclude with a greater degree of confidence that observed impacts are a function of the intervention itself and are not a result of other factors. Analyses typically involve the comparison of outcomes for program participants to those of a systematically and carefully defined comparison group. In other words, an evaluator would examine whether the changes or improvements in the participant group were greater, or more favorable, than the changes in a comparable group of individuals that did not receive the intervention.

Examples of outcomes measured in a comparative evaluation include:

- Improved attitudes toward children
- Increased contact with child
- Increased knowledge of effective parenting practices
- Increased knowledge of characteristics of healthy relationships

- Improved attitudes/increased feelings of optimism in couples with respect to their relationship
- Increased conflict resolution skills in couples
- Increased levels of communication in couples
- Increased level of commitment to marital relationship
- Increased feelings of satisfaction with the marital relationship
- Increased paternal involvement with children
- Increased education levels among fathers
- Increased employment and earnings among fathers
- Improved family functioning
- Increased social support for family

Some, though not many, OFA grantees have proposed to implement a comparative evaluation using an experimental design. OFA's expectations with respect to the complexity and rigor of grantees' evaluations will vary according to the evaluation plan included in each grantee's proposal. Grantees are expected to adhere to the plan included when their proposals were reviewed and their projects were funded. At a minimum, the evaluations conducted by all grantees should address project milestones and expected project outcomes through a descriptive evaluation. For grantees that have proposed comparative evaluations, the expectation is that they fully implement the intended design. Grantees that had not planned for more than a descriptive evaluation, but are interested in conducting a comparative evaluation, may do so if they have sufficient resources.

III. Evaluation Technical Assistance

The OFA has contracted with James Bell Associates (JBA) to provide technical assistance to support grantees in responding to the evaluation expectations regarding project milestones and expected project outcomes. JBA has many years of experience assisting grantees that have varying levels of knowledge, training, and experience in program evaluation. JBA staff can provide TA to grantees implementing a descriptive evaluation as well as to those implementing a comparative or impact evaluation. JBA will provide TA through Webinars, workshops, written resources and materials, and with the approval of the FPO, direct on-site assistance. Grantees should contact their Federal Project Officer at OFA if they are interested in accessing TA support through JBA. Examples of evaluation TA that are available through JBA include help with:

- Development and/or refinement of evaluation plans
- Development and/or critiques of data collection plans
- Establishment of realistic benchmarks and goals
- Development or identification of tracking tools and forms
- Plans for tracking progress toward project milestones, including the development of logic models that link activities to goals
- Identification of measurable outcomes
- Identification of appropriate data collection methods
- Examples of appropriate data collection instruments