



**Strengthening Marriage and Marriage Prospects:
Integrating Lessons Learned from the Healthy Marriage and
Family Formation Project**

June 20, 2007

Jeffery M. Johnson



Strengthening Marriage and Marriage Prospects (SMMP) Background:

The overall purpose of the Morehouse College *Strengthening Marriage and Marriage Prospects* (SMMP) Project is to help couples that choose to marry gain greater access to marriage education services that enable them to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages. Morehouse has partnered with the National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL) who has a demonstrated track record of working with healthy marriage projects.




SMMP BACKGROUND

Morehouse College also partners with the historic Providence Missionary Baptist Church (Atlanta, Georgia) as an urban project site and Family Development Task Force Inc. (Cordele, Crisp County Georgia) as a rural project site to operate comprehensive community-based healthy marriage education programs.



SMMP Target Population

- ❖ **Married and unmarried couples, and couples romantically involved, but not living together are the primary target populations**
- ❖ **The secondary targets are couples who have separated, but not yet divorced who are referred or request participation in the program.**

ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL The Program	AS MEASURED BY The Outcomes	EVALUATING AND LEARNING
1. DESIRED RESULTS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Improved child well-being. •Healthy marriages •Stable, family-friendly environment for children •Stable, two-parent, biological families 	6. INDICATORS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Child substitute care caseloads •Children in out-of-home settings •Marriage rates •Divorce rates •Non-marital birth rates •Children referred to CPS •Children in juvenile justice system •Teen birthrate 	7. DATA SOURCES & METHODS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Site Visits •Interviews •Focus Groups •Surveys •State and local Government databases Administrative records
2. MOTIVATING CONDITIONS & CAUSES Number of children in substitute care programs and/or receiving child welfare services. High non-marital birthrate. Decline in marriage rates High child poverty rates. Poor school performance. High teen birthrate. Prevalence of abuse & neglect among children.	School attendance rates	
3. PROGRAM STRATEGIES RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD RESPONSIBLE PARENTING MARRIAGE EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE CASE MGT BUILDING RELATIONSHIP SKILLS INTEGRATE PROMISING PRACTICES WORKSHOPS STRATEGIC ALLIANCES	5. PERFORMANCE MEASURES <i>Measures of Effect</i> # Marriages formed. # Families preserved # Families reunified # Guardianship # Behavioral development # Academic achievement <i>Measures of Effort</i> # of intakes # of enrollments # of individuals served # of couples served # of assessments # of training sessions # of consultations	8. EVALUATION QUESTIONS Was the SMMP project implemented as intended? Were SMMP's program strategies associated with changes in participants' psycho-social perceptions of 1) what constitutes a healthy marriage; and 2) the implications of family preservation, unification or formation or lack thereof on child well-being? Did SMMP achieve its goals and objectives? Were the programs and practices that comprise SMMP's approach to marriage and relationship education associated with any of its short and long term outcomes? What were the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of SMMP's service approach and what are the recommendations for strengthening their weaknesses? 9. STAKEHOLDERS Community members Strategic Allies Program Funders Board Members Program Staff Program Participants Evaluator
4. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES INTAKE & ASSESSMENTS TRAINING CLASSES COUNSELING PEER SUPPORT CASE MANAGEMENT LEGAL ASSISTANCE		10. MECHANISMS FOR LEARNING Regular evaluation reports Designated periodic "learning meetings" to talk about evaluation results with stakeholders Staff meetings

SMMP Objectives/Goals

- ❖ Approximately 150 clients or 75 married and unmarried couples will be provided services per year as measured by intake data;
- ❖ Approximately 90% of the couples will experience a statistically significant increase in knowledge of the benefits of marriage and how to move towards a healthy marriage, as measured by the pre/post marriage education tests that accompany the curriculum;
- ❖ Approximately 90% of the females and the males will report that their mates manage conflict better as measured through a follow-up survey six months after the completion of the training;

SMMP Objectives/Goals

- ❖ **Approximately 50% of participants will report that they implemented some or most of the financial planning strategies learned as measured by the follow-up survey;**
- ❖ **Approximately 50% of the married and non-married participants unemployed or underemployed participants will report working towards actually finding employment as measured by the follow-up survey; and**
- ❖ **Approximately 25% of the unmarried participants will report that they are planning to marry and/or have married.**



SMMP Approach

(written in the proposal)

The SMMP project builds upon lessons learned and the experience of NPCL, a partner in the Healthy Marriage Initiative in Florida, who has contributed to a project design and approach that will not merely seek to educate the targeted groups about healthy marriages; but, seek to address the environmental and life system factors that comprise barriers to marriage.

Atlanta and Cordele Approach

STRENGTHENING MARRIAGE AND MARRIAGE PROSPECTS SERVICES

The Providence Missionary Baptist Church (Atlanta) and the Family Development Task Force Inc. (Cordele) SMMP project includes the following 16 weeks of classroom based services:

- ❖ **PAIRS (*Relationship Skills for Strong Families* Curriculum)**
- ❖ **PARENTING EDUCATION (Fatherhood Development and Team Parenting)**
- ❖ **FINANCIAL LITERACY**
- ❖ **SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT (Without Proselytizing)**
- ❖ **ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT**
- ❖ **MENTOR COUPLE MATCHING**



HMFF Project Goals

- ❖ Enable married and co-habiting couples to develop stronger and healthier relationships.
- ❖ Encourage co-habiting couples to address their long-term commitment to each other and to move towards marriage.
- ❖ Assist couples who do not live together as a result of divorce or out-of-wedlock birth to develop team-parenting skills.
- ❖ Build the capacity of local child welfare agencies and community based organizations to promote healthy marriage and family formation.
- ❖ Achieve safety, permanency and well-being for children and families.



HMFF Project Partners

NPCL, State of Florida Children and Family Services, PAIRS

HMFF Target Population (s):

The HMFF project targeted two client systems in the State of Florida:

- ❖ State financed community-based care provider staff and local community-based agencies like Head Start.
- ❖ Individuals and couples (married and non-married) in the child welfare system.



THE HMFF Curriculum

The HMFF project used a customized version of PAIRS entitled; Relationship Skills for Strong Families.

Participants learned and practiced a range of skills designed to help them identify feelings and needs; avoid relationship "pitfalls;" communicate effectively; problem solve constructively; develop relationship competence and emotional literacy; and build lasting relationships. Classes were offered at various locations, typically as a series of 7-10 sessions and were conducted by experienced PAIRS trainers and, as local capacity was built, were to be provided by staff of local agencies.

HMFF Implementation Challenges

- ❖ **Privatization of the State child welfare system. This created challenges in the areas of:**
 - **Client referrals**
 - **Class meeting facilities**
 - **Client support services e.g. child care, food, and transportation**
- ❖ **Local Identity**
- ❖ **Hurricanes Wilma and Katrina**



Recommendation #1

Clarify project goals and partner's roles and responsibilities.

During the start-up phase, all project partners must be clear on the goals and objectives of the project and their specific organizational roles and responsibilities. Clarity is power. Get written agreements when possible. Project partners should meet monthly and/or quarterly to revisit goals/roles/responsibilities and update one another on the progress of the project.



Recommendation # 1 Continued

Make certain that all project staff and partners understand the data collection and evaluation requirements (make sure the feds understand and agree on this), logic model and implement procedures that match these requirements. Engage your project evaluator in the design and implementation of the project. They can assist you with this. Finally, involve domestic violence service providers and other key community stakeholders early on in the process. Take advantage of existing resources and information such as DV protocols available through technical assistance providers and programs with previous experience.



Recommendation #2

Be flexible and adaptable to things that will make your project successful

Stuff happens. Be willing to make mid-course corrections and other adjustments that will make your project successful.



Recommendation #3

Engage in regular public relations and education efforts with partners and the community at large.

Develop a project fact sheet. This may be done by extrapolating data and information from the ACF Healthy Marriage, AAMHI and HHMI websites as appropriate.

Recommendation # 3 Continued

Include local information on the status of children; non-marital births; marriage and divorce rates; etc. PR Activities should emphasize what the project is-what the project is not-who the project partners are-what the project's short-term and long-term goals are-what the community can expect as a result of the project. Follow the KIS principle, keep it simple.



Recommendation #3 Continued

It may also be necessary to emphasize relationship education over marriage education. Notwithstanding the funding emphasis of projects, communities, organizations, and people may have differing views regarding marriage, the government's role in it, and whether they should support a local program emphasizing marriage. Therefore, careful attention should be given to how the project is presented in the community. Always keep in mind that your project is engaged in a change process including community and individual attitudes regarding marriage and its benefits to couples and families. Keep an open mind regarding how best to position the project while at the same time pursuing the overall project goals.



Recommendation #3 Continued

Customize operational procedures and classes to meet the needs of the clients being served. Cultural competency is critical.

To maximize participation of couples and individuals in projects, keep their needs at the center. Everything the project does should center on them. Get to know your clients and their patterns.



Recommendation #3 Continued

Make sure you have accurate phone numbers (get alternate phone numbers too) and e-mail addresses as appropriate. Encourage the use of e-mail and internet as a mode of communication. This is particularly important when scheduling classes. It may be necessary to schedule classes in the evenings and/or on weekends.



Recommendation # 3 Continued

The needs and psychographic patterns of clients should drive scheduling, not just staff availability. Projects should also avoid competing with things like Bible Study classes, particularly when operating in Black protestant church communities. Bible study usually occurs on Tuesday or Wednesday. When classes are scheduled, they should be between 1-4 hours in length depending on time of day or day of the week.



Recommendation #3 Continued

A variety of incentives should be used to encourage participation. This could be developed in partnership with local retailers, restaurants, individual donors etc. Incentives could include gift certificates, car washes, breakfast/lunch/dinner tickets, movie tickets, sporting event tickets, etc.



Recommendation #3 Continued

Projects should assist couples in securing child care and transportation services to support their attendance at classes. Refreshments should also be provided, minimally water and healthy snacks such as fruit. Time and length of classes should dictate the extent of refreshments provided.



Recommendation #3 Continued

Finally, keep the classes real. Curriculums alone cannot motivate people. Instruction should be interactive and fun whenever possible. Instruction should reflect client makeup and the community being served by the project.



Recommendation#4

Secure versatile outreach coordinator (s)

These are staff that believe in the work, understand the community environment, can communicate and work with clients, referral agencies and organizations providing support services, knows how to network, and are willing to be at community events and meetings on issues pertaining to children and families. The ideal candidate is a people person, has a social work background and/or sensibilities, and has a marketing perspective.



Recommendation #5

Identify and cultivate community champions

These are people in the community who understand and support project goals as well as those persons served directly by the project. Expanding the number of supportive people and voices for the project is what champions are all about.



Recommendation #6

Network with existing healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs, workforce development programs, health and education projects, community-based organizations, and faith-based projects working with parents and families. Head Start, housing authorities, and community centers as additional resources.



Recommendation #6

You are not alone. There will be organizations and agencies in the community doing similar projects and/or complementary activities to your project. In many instances these projects will be funded by diverse resources. Project staff should network with other community groups as much as possible for new clients referrals; referrals to jobs and educational opportunities; support services; and new funding opportunities.