

# The Community Healthy Marriage Initiative: Early Lessons, Future Goals

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# Marriage and Community

- The Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (CHMI) developed out of the recognition that community norms, peers, churches, and local institutions can all influence the healthy relationship/healthy marriage goal
- As Joe Jones said about helping a couple in Baltimore, they learn skills but then return to the community
- CHMI is a bottom-up effort to alter the community as a whole

# Aspects of CHMI Approach

- Community support and mobilization can increase participation
- Activities may take place in churches, hospitals, and community associations
- Stimulate supply of services at modest cost
- Services and coalition activities may generate social interactions that encourage healthy marriages and affect relatives, peers
- Widens range of marriage-related activities to which people are exposed

# Development of CHMI

- Initial stage relied on 1115 waivers from the child support law
  - ◆ ACF provided limited funding to 14 local organizations and coalitions
  - ◆ Projects vary significantly in size and scope
  - ◆ Findings about implementation in some sites
- CHMI funding from 2006 TANF changes to a number of communities
- Full CHMI evaluation in three communities

# Early Evaluation Work

- Initial reports deal with projects in Nampa, Idaho and Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Additional reports will soon be available on projects in Boston, Chicago, Jacksonville
- Subsequent reports will cover operations in the remaining nine sites

# Elements Common to CHMI

- Limited Geographic Area
- Broad-based coalition of secular and religious organizations; collaborate with public agencies
- All offer curricula in relationship/marriage skills
- Service providers within many institutions
- Leveraging resources from local organizations
- Train the trainer approaches
- Public messaging and media
- Agreements on domestic violence protocols
- Under \$1 million in federal dollars over 3-5 years

# Examples of CHMI Projects

- No time to examine the lessons from all the sites, but can outline some lessons from two—Grand Rapids and Jacksonville
- Both have been reaching significant numbers of individuals in classes
- Grand Rapids more geographically focused and began early on
- Jacksonville operates with close ties to the mayor and other state/local leaders

# Grand Rapids Healthy Marriages, Healthy Relationships

- Began operations in 2003
- City of 190,000 with weakening economy, as unemployment rate doubles since 2000
- Grantee coordinates, partners with 10 local neighborhood organizations in low-income communities, mostly African-American
- Adds marriage/relationship skills to existing set of employment, child care, other services
- Local partners recruit, deliver services
- Collaborate in selecting curricula, other features of the program design

# Early Results

- Sponsor gained buy-in from partners who are authentic, embedded in the community
- Substantial success in attracting participants, but often not as couples
- Well over 2,000 individuals in the community have attended relationship skills classes and most complete
- This is a striking accomplishment, given the modest budget for the program—cost falls to about \$300-400 per participant
- Linkages developed with public agencies
- Project unexpectedly provides many referrals

# Evidence from Participants

- In-depth surveys by Wendy Manning, well-known family sociologist
- Small incentives attracted participants
- Participants had low expectations but saw improvements along several dimensions
  - ◆ Gains in partner problem-solving, listening, and making decisions together
  - ◆ Many learned independence, responsibility, compromise, communication, speaking to children, taking it slow (from do not marry a jerk)
  - ◆ Helped relationships not only with partners, but also with children and with customers at work

# Key Challenges

- Involving more men, longer and more specialized programs catering to specific needs
- Participants believe in marriage but face policy, economic, and personal barriers
  - ◆ Some see benefit reductions as a financial disincentive to marry
  - ◆ Some want financial stability, home before they marry
  - ◆ Some concerned about independence, drug use, relationships with children, absence of role models, fear of divorce, gender distrust

# Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families

- Began in October 2005
- Operating in large city (nearly 800,000)
- Ethnically mixed, 66% white, 30% black
- Coalition includes public agencies, local organizations, and churches; over 50 groups are participating without payment
- Adapts Covey's "7 habits of highly effective people" transformed to "effective families"; some go to "8 habits of effective marriages"
- Obtained in-kind donation from Covey

# Elements of Program

- Provision of 7 habits and 8 habits classes
- Duration is 2 classes/week for two weeks (10 hours)
- Training trainers from partner groups to conduct the classes, gaining leverage
- All facilitators are screened and are professional, including nurses, teachers, people who run programs
- Some facilitators receive training and a \$200 stipend for each workshop, but many do not take stipend
- Providing referrals to other services
- Outreach from benefit programs, hospitals, events, churches, employers, schools
- Transportation, child care during classes
- Concentrated classes, twice a week
- Graduation for those who complete

# Activities

- As of April '07, the program had served over 1,200 with nearly 1,000 graduates
- 21 day and 6 month family check-ups and annual reunion of classes
- Referrals and follow-ups with partners—clients fill out family planning tool to identify other needs
- As of late '06, program trained 73 facilitators, most from public agencies
- Conducts events, places booths at local events, such as Black Expo, and conducts media, such as public service announcements

# Participant Reactions

- Participants interviewed during site visit indicated program changed their lives
- Improved their interactions with children, understand discipline possible, but not control
- Improved listening skills
- Increased self-responsibility and taking control, participants felt valued
- They suggest making program longer and adding more content and coaching; strongly recommend course for those entering marriage

# Other Programs Moving Forward

- Some 1115-funded projects focus more on in-depth services and fatherhood
- Chicago is doing a good job recruiting couples from the local WIC food centers
- Boston is emphasizing services for fathers and especially employment-related services, couples employment, and financial literacy
- For Dallas, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, RTI/Urban will conduct an impact analysis, with first interviews in communities starting this summer and then with follow-ups at 18 and 36 months

# Added Challenges

- Staff turnover at some agencies make it difficult to sustain volunteer efforts
- Memorandum of Understanding with local agencies are hard to enforce
- Political environment in some sites not conducive to healthy marriage program, possibly limiting community outreach

