Providing Marriage Strengthening Services to Couples Impacted by Incarceration: Preliminary Findings from the National Evaluation of the Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-Entering Fathers and their Partners

Sponsored by:
The Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families

and

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Conducted by:
RTI International
More than 2 million individuals are currently incarcerated, representing a historic high.

For couples affected by incarceration, the development and maintenance of intimacy and commitment is impeded by:

- Barriers to contact and communication
- Transformations in family roles
- Psychological changes due to detainment

Marital bonds are also weakened by economic and emotional strain.

Until recently, there has been little programming on relationship strengthening for couples impacted by incarceration.
In September 2006, the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) awarded funds to 226 organizations to promote healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood.

Thirteen of these awards were funded under the Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-entering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) priority area (PA 5).
The grantees are a mix of state/local government agencies (corrections and human services) and community- or faith-based non-profit organizations.

The initiative provides funding of up to $500,000 per year for 5 years for the provision of services to promote or sustain healthy relationships for couples with children, where one of the parents is incarcerated or otherwise involved with the criminal justice system (e.g., recently released from incarceration or under parole or probation).

In addition to marriage-strengthening activities, grantees may deliver services that improve parenting and promote economic stability.
Grantees do not have a prescribed program model

The delivery of couple-based services in correctional settings (or to correctional populations) is a new approach (involving the intersection of human service and corrections fields).

A national evaluation of the MFS-IP initiative was funded to learn both implementation and effectiveness lessons.

The Evaluation is a joint initiative by OFA and ASPE.
Overview of MFS-IP National Evaluation

**Goals:**
- To assess the effectiveness of providing marriage and family strengthening interventions with incarcerated individuals and their partners
- To document defining characteristics of the grantees and their programs, and lessons learned from program implementation

**Main Components:**
- Impact evaluation
- Implementation study
The implementation study will characterize all 13 programs along a variety of dimensions (program design, context, project structure, target population, service model, interagency collaborations, challenges and lessons learned)
- Based primarily on site visits and review of program materials

The impact study, conducted in 5 sites only, will assess the effectiveness of MFS-IP programming on participant outcomes (relationship quality and stability, child well-being, family financial well-being, recidivism, substance use, community involvement)
- Based primarily on a longitudinal study of 2,000 couples interviewed at 3 points in time
Preliminary Findings from the Implementation Assessment

Service Delivery Settings

- All grantees are delivering services in one or more correctional facility (mostly prisons)
- Most grantees are also delivering services in the community
  - To partners
  - To incarcerated men who get released
  - To former prisoners (enrolled after release)
Program Content

- All programs include a healthy relationship component
- Most also include a parenting component
- Some programs more “holistic” in nature, including other services, such as case management, reentry, employment, education, substance abuse referrals, domestic violence, and mentoring (for children) services
Service Delivery Format

- All programs include classroom-based curricula (relationship, parenting)

- Some programs also include individualized services, such as case management, assisted visitation, coaching, and couples’ counseling
Approaches to Providing Marriage Strengthening Services

- Marriage education curricula used
  - Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (6 sites)
  - The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (2 sites)
  - Married and Loving it! (1 site)
  - Exploring Healthy Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families (1 site)
  - Caring for my Family (1 site)
  - Couple Communication (1 site)
  - Program developed in house (2 sites)
Approaches to Providing Marriage Strengthening Services (cont’d)

- Two primary delivery formats for marriage education curricula
  - Jointly to both members of the couple at the facility (typically through weekend retreats)
  - Separately to each member of the couple (typically through weekly classes, with the partner component delivered in a community building)

- Other marriage strengthening services delivered
  - Facilitated visitation, coaching, couples’ counseling
  - Some of these services delivered jointly, others individually
Challenges in Providing Marriage Strengthening Services

- Getting the partner to agree to participate
  - Some reluctance due to
    - uncertainty about future of relationship
    - time commitment and travel involved
  - Potential for coercion from incarcerated partner

- Obtaining access to deliver couple-based services in the facilities
  - Partner clearance
  - Partner scheduling conflicts (employment, child care)
    - Sometimes results in last minute attrition
  - Appropriate programming space and security
Challenges (cont’d)

- Delivering services to the partner in the community
  - Geographic dispersion of partners
  - Partner motivation to attend community-based classes
- Ensuring the relevance of the curricula
  - Cultural specificity
  - Applicability of some topics to physical separation of couple (e.g., physical intimacy)
  - Intensity of some topics (e.g., forgiveness, trust)
Grantee Strategies to Address these Challenges

- Minimizing opportunity for coercion by incarcerated partner by having program staff facilitate partner recruitment.
- Emphasizing benefits of curriculum beyond strengthening the specific relationship with incarcerated partner (e.g., communication and conflict resolution for improving co-parenting and other relationships).
- Defraying travel costs for partner for facility-based classes (mileage, transportation, hotel, food).
- Holding facility-based classes in one block of time over a weekend.
- Employing alternative delivery formats such as correspondence or video-streaming; offering both couple-based and individually-delivered classes if possible.
Strategies (cont’d)

- Providing incentives (e.g., gift cards) to partner for participation in community-based classes
- Delivering other (non marriage-related) needed services to the partner, so that she feels free to focus on the marriage strengthening component
- Applying geographic eligibility criteria to narrow service delivery area (important for community-based components)
- Modifying curricula to make it more relevant to particular population
- Ensure that role-playing is based on hypothetical, rather than real, problems
- Allowing more time for particularly intense topics
Study Resources and Next Steps for the MFS-IP Evaluation

- Topical briefs and special research reports describing the implementation of marriage and family strengthening activities for couples impacted by incarceration
  - Published: *Program Overview and Evaluation Summary* (available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/rb.htm)
  - Planned Briefs:
    - *Program Models Employed Among MFS-IP Grantees*
    - *Implementation Challenges*
    - *Delivering Family-Strengthening Services in Correctional Settings*
    - *Involving the Non-Incarcerated Partners in Family-Strengthening Services for Couples*
Study Resources and Next Steps (cont’d)

- Implementation Report on program design, context, project structure, target population, service model, interagency collaborations, challenges and lessons learned

- Impact Report, based on interview data with 2,000 couples, on the impact of family strengthening services on outcomes such as: relationship quality and stability, child well being, economic well-being, community involvement, housing stability, substance use

- For more information about the National Evaluation of the MFS-IP grants, contact:
  - Anupa Bir (abir@rti.org)
  - Christine Lindquist (lindquist@rti.org)
  - Tasseli McKay (tmckay@rti.org)