

Supporting Healthy Marriage Project Overview

What is the Supporting Healthy Marriage project?

The Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has contracted with MDRC to launch a new project called Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM). Being the first large-scale, multi-site, multi-year, rigorous test of marriage skills programs for low-income married couples, the SHM project is motivated by research that indicates that married adults and children raised by their married parents do better on a host of outcomes. Marriages among low-income couples are more likely to end in separation and divorce; thus low-income families are less likely to receive the benefits associated with stable, healthy marriages. While an extensive body of research exists on strengthening marriages, this research consists primarily of small-scale studies on a limited range of predominately middle class groups.

Led by MDRC in collaboration with Abt Associates, Child Trends and Optimal Solutions Group, along with leading experts on marriage, marital education programs and services for low-income families, SHM is designed to inform program operators and policymakers of the most effective ways to help couples strengthen and maintain healthy marriages. In particular, the SHM project will measure the effectiveness of programs that provide instruction and support to improve relationship skills. Programs will be required to include links to additional services that help low-income couples address barriers to healthy marriage, such as problems with employment, health or substance abuse. Programs must also provide opportunities for the safe disclosure of domestic violence and access to appropriate services when domestic violence is disclosed. The SHM team will provide technical assistance to address this requirement with all participating demonstration programs.

What questions will the SHM project try to answer?

- **Can marriage education improve marital quality, marital stability and child well-being for low-income couples?** Marriage education is intended to improve relationship quality, increase marital stability and improve child well-being. What are the effects on these outcomes of well-designed programs focused on low-income couples? Do some approaches produce greater effects on marital quality or stability than others, or greater effects on child well-being outcomes than others?
- **Who benefits the most or least from marriage education?** Low-income couples are a diverse group. An important question for SHM is whether marriage education works better for some groups than for others.
- **Why do some marriage education programs work better than others?** Because SHM deals with a relatively new type of social intervention, it will be particularly important to provide feedback to each site along the way, and to conduct implementation research that will identify best practices to benefit future program operators. The project's implementation reports will describe each site's goals and service models; the start-up challenges sites face; as well as lessons on designing

marriage skills programs, securing program funding, building interagency partnerships, identifying and recruiting couples, encouraging participation and maintaining high-quality programs.

What will a Supporting Healthy Marriage program look like?

The SHM team expects there to be variation in the program model used in different sites, based on local circumstances. However, programs that are a part of the SHM project will need to operate within certain parameters. The research team will work closely with selected programs to design interventions that include:

- A multi-session (20 to 32 hour) marriage education program that uses a curriculum meeting SHM program guidelines.
- Follow-up marriage-related services that last around nine additional months.
- Staff support, e.g., case management or on-site referral staff aimed at maximizing program participation by couples and providing links to needed services within the sponsoring organization or in the community.
- A protocol addressing domestic violence and access to appropriate services when domestic violence is disclosed.

Whom will a Supporting Healthy Marriage program serve?

- Low-income married couples (sites will have some discretion over the operational definition of “low-income”).
- Both members of the couple must be 18 years or older.
- Preference will be given to sites that serve primarily couples with children.
- Each site will work with the research team to plan to recruit 1,000 currently married low-income couples over a 12- to 24-month period, with 500 couples to receive marriage education services and 500 couples to serve as a control group that can receive other services available in the community.

What are the benefits of participating in the Supporting Healthy Marriage project?

- **Cost-free, state-of-the-art program evaluation.** The SHM evaluation will utilize a random assignment design to best measure what difference the programs make. In addition, MDRC staff will study the implementation of the SHM interventions and provide rapid feedback to program managers.
- **Cost-free, customized technical assistance.** MDRC, its partners and their consultants will assist sites in developing and/or improving their programs, drawing on programmatic experience and the latest research from relevant fields.
- **National recognition for your innovative programs.** MDRC aggressively disseminates the results of its research. MDRC studies are frequently cited in local and national media, and MDRC is often called on to testify before Congress and state legislators, as well as advise administrators and program operators.
- **Opportunities to interact with other programs doing similar work.** The opportunity to learn from others doing similar work is one of the greatest benefits of participating in a national

evaluation. MDRC will organize periodic conferences where participating sites can meet to exchange ideas and share experiences. MDRC will also maintain a website to facilitate information-sharing.

- **Program funding.** Projects selected to participate in SHM are eligible to receive some funding for program design and operations during the study.

MDRC's current plan is to work with about nine different programs on a pilot basis and to assess their progress in order to select a few to include in the evaluation.

How can my program become a site in the SHM project?

In order to select sites with the most potential to successfully complete the SHM evaluation, the SHM team has identified a number of characteristics that will apply to a promising site. At this time, the SHM project is seeking interested sites that can meet the following criteria:

- Willing to work within the SHM program design and guidelines.
- Willing to participate in random assignment.
- Able to plan for a sample size of 1,000 couples and be able to recruit couples effectively.
- Able to designate a lead agency with an existing service delivery infrastructure, program management capabilities and indicators of financial stability.
- Experienced in providing marriage education or working with low-income populations.
- Committed to establishing linkages with other social services, both by showing a willingness to do so and a track record of experience.
- Able to provide some financial or in-kind contribution to cover costs for initial program planning and some portion of operating costs.

How will the project conduct its research?

To measure a program's effects on participants, the SHM project is using random assignment. This means that families who agree to participate in the study would be assigned in a lottery-like process to either a *program group*, which would be offered the marriage education program, or a *control group*, which would not be offered the marriage education program but which could take part in any other services offered in the community. Random assignment is considered to be the most reliable method for studying the effects of new programs. As part of learning what works, the project team will also visit programs and interview staff to document program operations and participants' experiences. Through surveys and observation, the study will measure different dimensions of marital, family and child well-being.

The SHM project also includes a process study to better understand how programs are run "on the ground." The evaluation team will investigate whether marriage education is being delivered as intended, couples' experiences with the program and attitudes of program administrators and staff. In this part of the SHM project, field researchers will observe programs in operation, interview program managers, staff and participants and analyze program data. Lessons from the process study will be especially valuable because there is so little information on best practices for providing marriage education to low-income couples.

Who is conducting this project?

Funder

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) is the principal advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs designed to improve the economic and social well-being of children and families.

Lead Evaluator

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through research and the active communication of findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs.

Partner Organizations

Abt Associates, Inc. is an employee-owned company that provides research-based services for domestic and foreign governments, corporations and institutions.

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, research organization whose primary goal is to improve the quality, scope and use of research and statistical information concerning America's children and families.

Optimal Solutions Group, a certified 8(a)/Small Disadvantaged Business, is an economic and social policy research consulting firm.

McFarland & Associates Inc. is a technical and professional services company with extensive experience providing logistical support for conferences, meetings and reviews sponsored by Federal government and state agencies.

Whom should I contact for more information?

For more information regarding the Supporting Healthy Marriage project or if you believe you meet the SHM site selection criteria and would like to be considered in the site selection process, please contact MDRC at shm@mdrc.org. We would be happy to help you learn more about the project or further discuss your organization and its potential as an SHM site. Please also visit the Supporting Healthy Marriage website at www.supportinghealthymarriage.org.