

The Supporting Healthy Marriage Demonstration & Evaluation

March 2008

What is the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) Project?

- Multi-site, multi-year study of intervention aimed at improving healthy marriages among low-income married couples with children
 - impact & implementation research
 - random assignment of couples at 8 sites across the United States
 - 2003 to 2013

SHM Team Members

- MDRC (lead)
 - Abt Associates, Inc.
 - Child Trends
 - Optimal Solutions Group
 - Experts in a range of fields
-
- Funder: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services

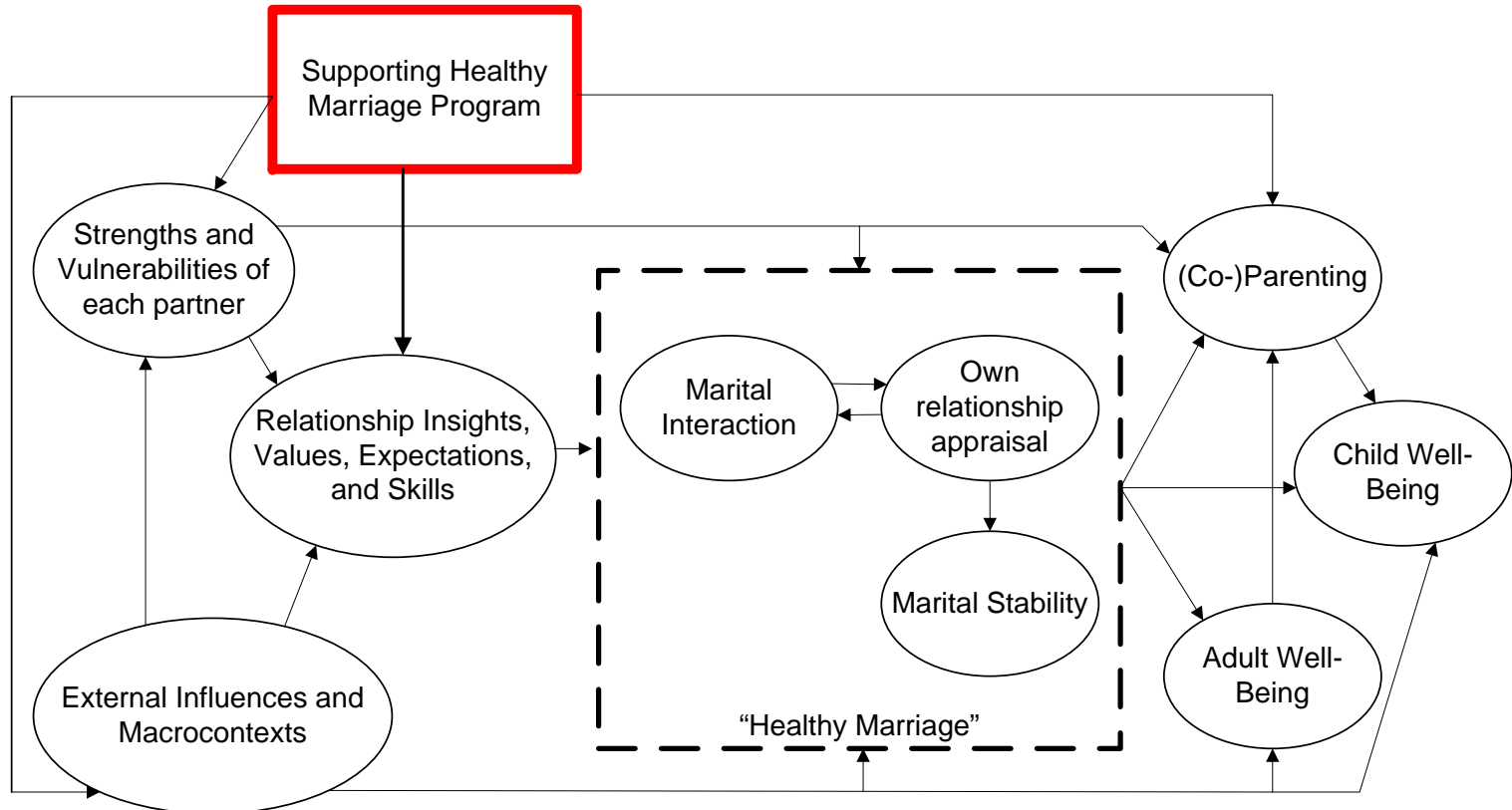
SHM Goals

- Help sites implement innovative, research-based marriage education programs and strong tests of the intervention
- Provide reliable information on program implementation and impact through rigorous research design
- Build knowledge base for practitioners on how to implement effective marriage education programs for diverse and economically disadvantaged populations

Why marriage education for low-income married couples?

- **Strategy for improving well-being of low-income children through improving parents' relationships**
 - Children whose parents are married and in low-conflict relationships tend to do better on many outcomes
 - Low-income couples' marriages are more likely to end in separation or divorce, so their children are less likely to experience these benefits
 - Marriage education programs can bring about improvements in couple relationships, but we know little about their effectiveness for low-income couples

SHM Conceptual Model



SHM Target Population

- Married couples
- With children or expecting a child
- Adult couples (18 years or older)
- Low or modest income (at or under 200% of federal poverty guidelines)

SHM Target Population Facts

- 2.5 million married couples in United States below poverty line, 8 million below 200% of poverty
- More likely to have premarital births and/or children with multiple partners than more affluent married couples
- Mostly Latino (35%) or white (47%)
- Face substantially higher risk of break-up than more affluent couples
- On average, only slightly less satisfied with marriages than more affluent couples

Guiding principles for SHM programs

- Reliance on research to shape intervention
- Skills-based approach (not therapy or marital counseling)
- Voluntary participation
- Focus on couples—fathers as well as mothers
- Emphasis on *healthy* marriage and relationships
- Alertness about domestic violence

Implications of existing research on SHM program design

- **Longer-term marriage education interventions may achieve greater and longer-lasting impacts**
- **Changes in approach are necessary for low-income couples**
 - Recruitment strategies targeted to low-income couples
 - Adaptations in curriculum content, language, and teaching methods
 - Provide family support to promote program participation
 - Cultural sensitivity and relevance

The SHM Program Model

- **Services delivered over 12 months**
- **SHM program components**
 - Core Marriage Education Curriculum (~6 to 15 weeks)
 - Extended Marriage Education Activities
(~up to 12 months)
 - Family Support and Supplemental Services (Ongoing)

Marriage Education Workshops

- **Multi-session:** 24+ hour program for 6-15 weeks
- **Interactive:** Programs will use a variety of formats and activities
- **Core topics:** understanding marriage, managing conflict, promoting positive connection and communication with spouse, strengthening relationships beyond the couple, managing external circumstances, and strengthening parenting
- **Four marriage education curricula:** Becoming Parents Program, Inc.; Loving Couples Loving Children; PAIRS; PREP, Inc.

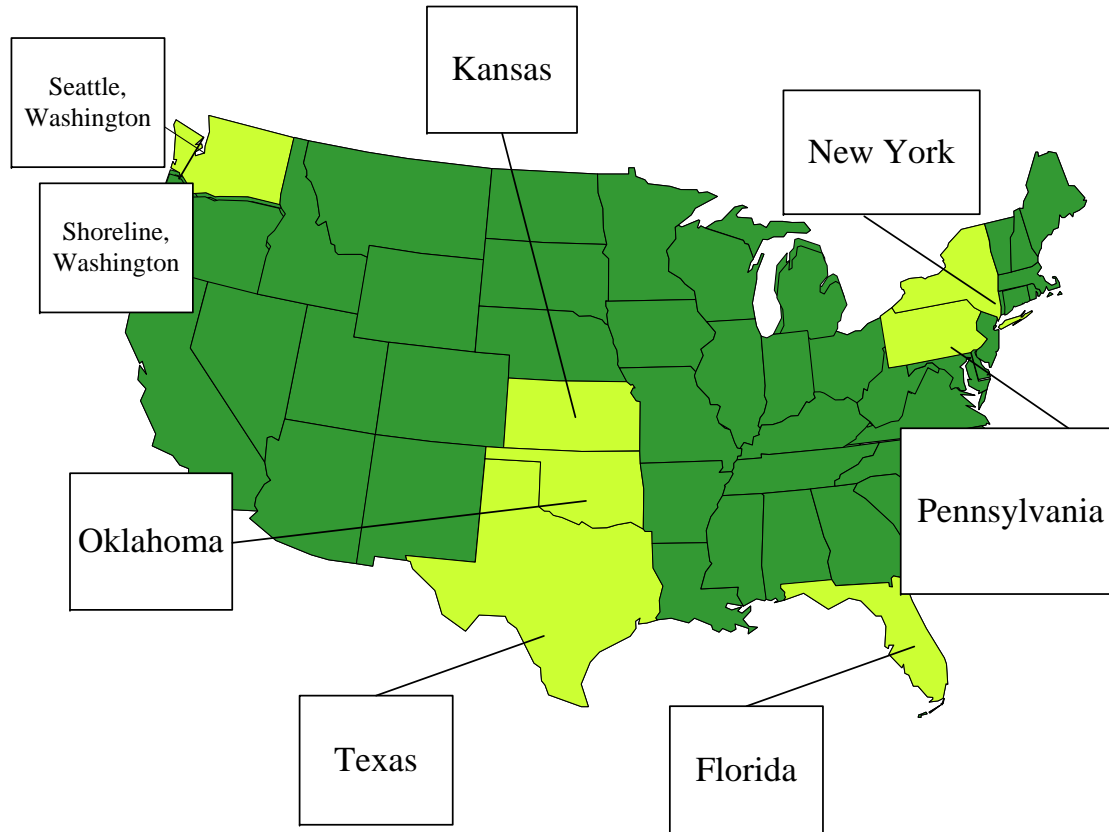
Family Support and Supplemental Services

- Encourage and support program participation
- Reinforce couples' use of new relationship skills
- Identify individuals' or couples' needs and link with supplemental services
 - For instance, mental health, employment-related services, other financial supports, parenting programs
- Encourage safe disclosure of domestic violence and provide linkages to appropriate services

Extended Marriage Education Activities

- Activities to keep couples engaged and involved in the program so they continue to strengthen their marriages over time
 - Reinforce marriage education skills
 - Add to couples' relationship skill set
 - Have fun with each other and other couples and families
 - Learn skills to address challenges outside of relationship
- Examples of possible activities:
 - Booster sessions; couple or family social events; date nights; financial planning workshops; moms' and dads' groups

SHM Pilot Sites



SHM Technical Assistance

- Provide SHM sites:
 - Program and fiscal planning assistance
 - Staff training
 - Ongoing formative feedback on program implementation
 - Management information system
 - Tools and guidance on programmatic best practices
 - All-site policy conferences

SHM Research Design

- Study designed to answer 3 overarching questions
 - Can marriage education improve marital quality, stability, and child well-being for low-income couples?
 - Who benefits the most or the least from marriage education?
 - What makes marriage education programs work best? What challenges do programs face? What are the lessons learned?
- Two types of research to answer questions
 - Implementation Study
 - Impact Study

Implementation Study

■ Key Questions

- What did the program “look” like? What was the operating environment?
- Who was served? What are the characteristics of couples who volunteered for SHM programs?
- What strategies were used to recruit, engage, and retain couples?
- What are the participation patterns (types and frequency of contact and services received, couple retention)?
- What challenges did staff face in designing and implementing a program for low-income married couples?

Implementation Study

■ Data Sources

- Field visits
 - Structured observations
 - Staff interviews
 - Focus groups
- Program participation data from MIS
- Surveys

Impact Study

- **Random assignment: up to 800 couples in each site**
 - 400 couples in the program; 400 couples in the control group
 - Two groups begin the study with similar characteristics; program participation is the main difference between groups
 - Differences that emerge between the 2 groups can be reliably attributed to SHM services (not other external factors)

Impact Study

■ Key questions

- What were the effects of SHM on marital quality and stability? Mental health of each partner? Parenting / co-parenting? Child outcomes? Income and employment?
- What were the effects for different subgroups?

■ Data sources

- Baseline data collection
- Surveys (12 and 36 months)
- Videotaped observations of couple, co-parenting, and parent-child interactions

Status of Research

- Pilot assessments underway will provide initial implementation lessons
- Baseline data being collected in pilots and demonstration sites
- First 12-month survey follow-up will begin in 2008
- Implementation report expected 2010
- 12-month impact report expected 2012
 - Survey reports of adult and child well-being and relationship status and quality
 - Videotaped observations of couple interactions and parenting
- 36-month impact report expected 2013

Questions about SHM?

If you have any questions about the SHM Demonstration and Evaluation, please visit our website at www.supportinghealthymarriage.org