



In 2003, the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (ACF) launched a demonstration project called Supporting Healthy Marriage. It is the first large-scale, multi-site, multi-year, rigorous test of marriage skills programs for low-income married couples. It is designed to inform program operators and policymakers of the most effective ways to help couples strengthen and maintain healthy marriages.

The project will measure the effectiveness of programs that provide instruction and support to improve relationship skills. Programs will include links to services to help low-income couples address barriers to healthy marriage, such as problems with employment, health, or housing insecurity. All programs will also provide for safe disclosure of domestic violence and access to appropriate services in the community for families in which domestic violence is disclosed.

Supporting Healthy Marriage is motivated by research that indicates that married adults and children raised by their married parents do better on a host of outcomes. Low-income couples face greater challenges to building and maintaining healthy marriages, however, and their families are consequently less likely to receive the benefits of 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 demographic groups.

## Project Goals

Supporting Healthy Marriage is a nine-year project that is being conducted by MDRC, Abt Associates, Child Trends, and Optimal Solutions Group, along with leading experts on marriage, marital education programs, and serving low-income families. The project has several stages, including the following:

- **Helping program operators understand what is likely to be effective.** The project team has reviewed what is known about how to build healthy marriages, consulted with experts on healthy marriage, and visited existing programs to identify promising services and practices. The resulting knowledge is being used to help participating program operators modify their programs or design new ones.
- **Providing assistance in implementing programs.** Program operators are given help developing, implementing and improving their programs. Examples of help include working with curriculum developers to adapt curricula, working with program managers to train staff, providing Web-based guidance on program implementation, and development of management information systems to help track services. In the current phase of work, we are providing technical assistance to eight emerging SHM evaluation sites selected to plan pilot programs. The lead agencies of the eight emerging sites are: University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL; Catholic Charities, Wichita, KS; University Behavioral Associates, Bronx, NY; Public Strategies, Oklahoma City, OK; Community Prevention Partnership, Reading, PA; Health and Human Services Commission, Austin, TX; Becoming Parents Program, Seattle, WA; and Center for Human Services, Shoreline, WA.
- **Learning what works.** The ultimate goal of the study is to learn which types of programs most effectively improve marital relationships, reduce marital instability, and benefit children. As programs are implemented, the SHM team will visit each program, interviewing staff and participants to understand how services are provided and how couples view those services. Over time, researchers will also interview and observe parents and children to learn how they are doing on a range of outcomes. The effects of the programs will be studied using random assignment, generally considered the most reliable way to assess what difference programs make.

Supporting Healthy Marriage is part of a larger HHS research agenda to study the effectiveness of efforts to sustain healthy marriages. Other research projects include the Building Strong Families evaluation targeted to low-income unwed couples beginning around the time of their child's birth, and the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation, which is evaluating community saturation approaches for strengthening healthy marriage.

## For More Information

For more information about this study, please visit the project website at [www.supportinghealthymarriage.org](http://www.supportinghealthymarriage.org) or contact Virginia Knox at MDRC ([virginia.knox@mdrc.org](mailto:virginia.knox@mdrc.org)).