

## THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY STRENGTHENING GRANTS FOR INCARCERATED AND REENTERING FATHERS AND THEIR PARTNERS



### Strategies for Building Healthy Relationship Skills Among Couples Affected by Incarceration

Very little programming has focused on strengthening families affected by incarceration, despite the importance of familial ties for incarcerated persons and the many challenges to maintaining family relationships during incarceration and reentry. Strong partnerships and parenting relationships are linked to reentry success, including decreased recidivism, among justice-involved men (Bersani, Laub, & Nieuwebeerta, 2009; Visher, Knight, Chalfin, & Roman, 2009). Yet little attention is given to the need for learning skills that can strengthen marriages and other intimate relationships. Incarceration offers an opportunity for confined individuals and their partners to learn relationship skills that may allow them to better communicate, resolve conflicts, and increase their commitment to one another. These skills could play an important role in maintaining healthy relationships throughout incarceration and during the challenging reentry process.

The Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) were designed to support healthy relationships, parenting, and economic stability for families affected by incarceration. Under the MFS-IP initiative, 12 organizations<sup>1</sup> were funded from fiscal years 2006 through 2011 to provide services that promote or sustain healthy relationships and strengthen families in which one parent was incarcerated or otherwise involved with the criminal justice

#### About This Research Brief

This brief describes implementation findings from the evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP). It documents approaches to teaching relationship skills among incarcerated and reentering fathers and their families. The multi-year implementation and impact evaluation of the MFS-IP grants is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *This brief was prepared by Christine Lindquist, Tasseli McKay, and Anupa Bir of RTI International, under contract to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.*

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, 14 grants were awarded. One site relinquished its funding after the first year and one did not receive continuation funding.

system (e.g., recently released from incarceration or on parole or probation). Grantees, listed in Table 1, were required to deliver services to support healthy marriage and could also choose to provide services intended to improve parenting and build economic stability.

**Table 1. Funded Sites and Type of Grantee Agency**

Site	Location	Type of Grantee Agency
Centerforce	San Rafael, California	Community-based nonprofit
Child and Family Services of New Hampshire	Manchester, New Hampshire	Community-based nonprofit
Indiana Department of Correction	Indianapolis, Indiana	State correctional agency
Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota	Sioux Falls, South Dakota	Faith-based organization
Maryland Department of Human Resources	Baltimore, Maryland	State human services agency
Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice	Minneapolis, Minnesota	Community-based nonprofit
New Jersey Department of Corrections	Trenton, New Jersey	State correctional agency
Oakland Livingston Human Services Association	Pontiac, Michigan	Community-based nonprofit
The Osborne Association	Brooklyn, New York	Community-based nonprofit
The RIDGE Project	Defiance, Ohio	Faith-based organization
Shelby County Division of Correction	Memphis, Tennessee	County correctional agency
Texas Arms of Love, d.b.a. People of Principle	Odessa, Texas	Community-based nonprofit

In accordance with grant requirements, all MFS-IP grantees delivered a relationship education curriculum as a core program component. In addition, most grantees also delivered parenting education courses. Other program components varied widely among the grantees and included

- visitation support to help families maintain contact during incarceration (child-friendly visitation facilities, financial and logistical support for visitation, and special visitation assistance such as video visiting programs),
- family group conferencing or family counseling,
- case management or other individualized approaches to connect participants with needed services,
- economic stability services (employment assistance, financial literacy classes, general equivalency diploma [GED] or higher education classes),
- support groups,
- substance abuse treatment,
- domestic violence courses or workshops, and
- other group courses or workshops (such as cognitive behavioral training, life skills education, and empowerment education).

Beyond a limited number of basic requirements, grantees could design their programs to reflect local needs and operational contexts. No one program model was required for MFS-IP grantees, and the sites varied widely in the program components delivered and the service delivery approaches implemented. Some grantees delivered their MFS-IP programs in a “tiered” manner, such that courses were offered in a series with completion of a prerequisite course (e.g., a batterer intervention, parenting, or introductory healthy relationships course) required for the

participant to go on to a subsequent course, or that intensive individualized services (e.g., visitation support, family group conferencing, or case management) were available only to participants who had first completed a core course. In contrast, other programs delivered their services to all participants as a standard set of services. In addition, some grantees enrolled only couples in their programs, whereas others allowed men to participate in the program (or certain components of the program) without enrolled partners.

This research brief summarizes the MFS-IP grantees' strategies for implementing the relationship education component, a central focus for all programs. Previous research briefs produced from the national evaluation of the MFS-IP initiative focused on the primary implementation barriers encountered by grantees in implementing their programs: delivering services in correctional settings and recruiting partners to participate in programming (see Smiley McDonald, Herman-Stahl, Lindquist, Bir, & McKay, 2009; McKay et al., 2009). These barriers were encountered in delivering the MFS-IP program in general as well as the relationship education component in particular; however, the discussion of implementation challenges is not repeated in the current brief.<sup>2</sup>

This brief focuses specifically on the strategies used among the grantees to teach relationship skills, including the format, curricula, and key adaptations made to maximize relevance for incarcerated and reentering program participants. The brief is based on data gathered for the implementation study component of the MFS-IP initiative national evaluation. Data sources include site visits conducted by the evaluation team to each site in years 1, 2, and 4 (with telephone interviews conducted in year 3), in which the team interviewed key stakeholders, observed programmatic activities, and obtained copies of written program materials.

## **APPROACHES TO DELIVERING RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION**

Grantees spent considerable effort to determine how to best implement their relationship education components. Most MFS-IP programs focused on serving currently incarcerated men and their female partners, with a few programs also enrolling a track of formerly incarcerated men. Typically, the programs treated incarcerated men as the primary program participants, in that they were recruited into MFS-IP programs first, with services then offered to the partners they identified. State prisons were the most common programmatic setting, although corrections-based programming was also delivered in federal prisons, a county prison, a county prerelease center, and a county correctional treatment facility.

Because they offered relationship education in regimented institutional environments, grantees faced challenges in balancing fidelity to their curricula and initial program models with extensive logistical considerations that guided the ultimate format they chose. Some logistical considerations included securing space within the correctional facility; securing time within the schedule; securing clearance for instructional staff; and, if needed, securing partner clearance, transportation, and participation. As described below, the grantees developed distinct strategies that reflected the circumstances of their target populations and host correctional facilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, because parenting-focused programming and domestic violence programming are covered in other briefs (see McKay et al., 2010; McKay, Bir, Lindquist, & Siegel, forthcoming), these program components are not addressed in the current brief.

Adjustments to target population and service delivery setting were common, particularly as many programs worked to address early enrollment and retention difficulties.

## Couples-Based Programming

Most grantees offered couples-based programming for their relationship education classes. In couples-based programs, the non-incarcerated partner went into the prison or jail to participate in the classes with the incarcerated partner. This model required complex logistical arrangements to bring women into the correctional facilities. Challenges included both the partners' travel and scheduling difficulties as well as the facility clearance process and supervision time required. As a result of these barriers, most grantees delivered couples-based programming in a single weekend retreat. In these sites (the Indiana, South Dakota, Texas, New York, and California grantees), the partners' transportation, lodging, meals, or some combination of these were typically coordinated by program staff and the costs subsidized. Typically, the partners stayed at a hotel near the facility and were transported to the facility for 1–2 full days of programming.



Source: Indiana Department of Correction

In contrast to the retreat format, some sites (including the grantees in Ohio, New Jersey, and Tennessee) delivered joint programming to couples in correctional settings in a traditional course format. With this format, women went into the facilities once or twice a week to participate in a 10- to 12-week course with their incarcerated partners. This approach spread out the course material over a longer period of time, allowing participants to better digest the lessons and to take more time to practice the skills learned. Yet, because many programs experienced challenges with partners' attendance (due to the substantial transportation, scheduling, and other barriers faced each week), some partners did not receive the full course material despite the greater number of hours available.

Grantees perceived a number of advantages to the couples-based approach to relationship education, including the following.

- *Appeal to Prospective Participants.* The opportunity to see one another in a less constrained setting than the prison visitation room constituted a strong incentive for many couples.
- *Real-Life Relationship Skills Practice.* Participating couples were able to talk through real-life challenges with one another, discuss plans for release (if relevant), and begin practicing their new communication skills with one another.



## Parallel Programming

Some grantees could not get approval from correctional facilities to bring partners into the facilities for any kind of couples-based programming. In these sites, grantees offered relationship classes through parallel programming. Under the parallel programming model, incarcerated men took classes in the correctional facilities and their partners took classes in the community. Two sites (the Minnesota and Michigan grantees) used this format for relationship education classes.

Perceived advantages of the parallel approach to relationship education included the following.

- *Lower Burden on Correctional Partners.* Participating correctional facilities did not have to provide the additional visitor clearance work and additional security associated with bringing non-incarcerated women into contact with incarcerated men for service delivery purposes.
- *Streamlined Enrollment for Men.* Programs that delivered relationship education separately to men and their partners on the outside could bring enrolled men into their courses immediately if desired, without the delays associated with securing partners' participation.

## Hybrid Approaches for Programming during Incarceration

Some programs offered additional options in order to serve as many participants as possible and to accommodate incarcerated men who either did not have partners or whose partners could not participate in programming. For example, some implemented both couples classes and men-only classes. The Indiana grantee taught a men-only healthy relationship class to all men living in the unit targeted by the program and also offered a couples retreat to men whose partners could participate. Other programs allowed men whose partners could not attend class to



Source: Indiana Department of Correction

participate (without their partners) in the couples classes. For instance, the Ohio grantee's relationship education classes included some couples and some men whose partners could not attend. Rather than combining singles and couples into one class, the New Hampshire grantee implemented a different approach. This site offered the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) in a couples format in the correctional facility, men-only PREP classes in the correctional facility, and women's relationship education "retreats" in the

community. Similarly, the South Dakota and Tennessee grantees both added men-only healthy relationship classes in year 4 to accommodate men who did not have partners or whose partners could not attend couples classes in the facility.

Some programs worked particularly hard to ensure that female partners who could not attend classes received the course material. The New Jersey grantee implemented a distance learning format in year 4 of their grant to accommodate women who were interested in participating but unable to attend sessions with their partners at the prisons. With this format, partners were mailed a copy of the course materials and were expected to complete the homework exercises and mail them back. Similarly, in year 4, the Michigan grantee began a telephone component for women who could not attend the community-based healthy relationship workshops offered for partners of incarcerated men. Partners were sent the Within My Reach workbook and

completed it over eight telephone conversations with two staff members. Also trying to accommodate women who could not participate in the couples workshops, the California grantee incorporated the content of the workshops into women’s sessions with the program case manager.

#### **Relationship Class Observations**

During year 4 site visits, RTI teams observed 10 relationship education classes. Classes were taught in both prison and community settings, with some programs including partners, others exclusively for men, and one for women only. Half of the classes were structured as all-day workshops or weekend retreats.

The topics discussed during the observed relationship classes included

- commitment,
- communication danger signs,
- decision making,
- stress styles,
- speaker-listener technique,
- dimensions of love,
- personalities, and
- problem solving.

All of the classes included a lecture component, a large majority included discussion among participants, and some included role-playing, audiovisual aids, or both. Observer ratings of participation and engagement among participants found high levels of verbal engagement. In three classes, 100 percent of participants engaged verbally in the course (with verbal engagement defined as making a statement or asking a question at some point in the class). In four classes, 70–80 percent of participants engaged verbally. In three classes, 50 percent or fewer were verbally engaged.

#### **Approaches for Delivering Programming to Reentering or Formerly Incarcerated Men**

Although most programs primarily focused on delivering relationship education during men’s incarceration, a small number of grantees attempted to make relationship education classes available to reentering or formerly incarcerated men in the community. Three sites (the Minnesota, Michigan, and South Dakota grantees) offered relationship education classes to reentering men and their partners. This service was provided to accommodate men who were not able to receive the relationship education class during their incarceration, partners who could not attend prison-based classes or partners who preferred to wait until the man’s release to participate in couples workshops in the community.

A few sites developed a format for delivering relationship education services to formerly incarcerated men and their partners. In these sites, a distinct track of participants—those who were already released from incarceration—was enrolled in the program. The three programs that provided

relationship education classes to this population (grantees in California, Michigan, and Texas) delivered the classes in a community setting and offered them jointly to couples.

Although the grantees that attempted community-based classes for reentering or formerly incarcerated men worked hard to make them available, participation in these services was generally very low. Grantees with an infrastructure for community-based service delivery and established partnerships with community-based organizations were more successful with this component. For grantees that attempted to enroll a track of formerly incarcerated men, access to an existing cohort of participants in some other program or service was also helpful in enrolling a larger number of couples.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT CURRICULUM

The relationship education curricula used by the MFS-IP grantees address the three basic components of marriage and relationship education as required by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA): improving communication between couples, improving individual couples' ability to resolve their conflicts, and strengthening a couple's commitment to increasing marital or relationship stability. Six MFS-IP sites (the grantees in New Hampshire, South Dakota, Indiana, Minnesota, Michigan, and Texas) delivered a PREP curriculum. Most sites used Within Our Reach (PREP Educational Products, Inc., 2008) or Within My Reach (PREP for Individuals, Inc., 2008), versions of the curriculum tailored for delivery to low-income couples or individuals. However, in year 4, the Indiana grantee switched to the new version of PREP developed for incarcerated men (Walking the Line; PREP for Individuals, Inc., 2010) for its men-only PREP classes. In addition to PREP, four grantees used other commercial curricula, including Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS Essentials; PAIRS Foundation, 2010), which was used by the Tennessee grantee; Exploring Healthy Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families (Center for Urban Families, 2004), which was used by the Maryland grantee; Married and Loving It! (MALI Inc., 2011), which was used by the New Jersey grantee; and Couple Communication I and II (Interpersonal Communication Programs [ICP], Inc., 2011 and 2010, respectively), which were used by the Ohio grantee. These commercially available modules focused on helping couples learn relationship skills, such as effective communication and conflict resolution.

### Spotlight on Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

Six MFS-IP grantees chose to use PREP's Within My Reach or Within Our Reach curricula, which were specifically targeted to low-income families, for their marriage and relationship education component.

- **Within Our Reach** is a program designed to help couples achieve their goals in relationships, family, and marriage. The curriculum is designed to build on the existing strengths of the couple and add critical life and relationship skills to help participants create safer, more stable couple relationships—and, by extension, better environments for their children. Unit titles include "We've Got Issues"; "By My Side: Supporting Each Other"; "You, Me, and Us"; and "Connecting with Community."
- **Within My Reach** is a program designed for individuals that covers three major themes—Building Relationships, Maintaining Relationships, and Making Relationship Decisions. Unit titles include "Healthy Relationships: What They Are and What They Aren't," "Knowing Yourself First," "Dangerous Patterns in Relationships," "Commitment: Why It Matters to Adults and Children," and "Reaching into Your Future."

The New York grantee incorporated input from incarcerated men in adapting two commercially available curricula (PREP and PAIRS) for use with its target population. Similarly, the California grantee incorporated some elements of PREP along with feedback from incarcerated men in the curriculum developed for use in its couples workshops. The customized and adapted curricula emphasize ways to maintain family relationships during and after incarceration and address other needs of the populations served in these sites.

## MAKING RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION RELEVANT

### Adapting Curricula

To better engage justice-involved fathers and their partners, grantees made formal and informal adaptations to the content of their relationship education curricula. Staff observed that most participants and prospective participants (except those already married, who represented a

#### **Client and Staff Perspectives on the Most Engaging Relationship Class Topics**

During the year 4 site visits, both staff and clients were asked about the topics covered in healthy relationship classes that were most engaging for participants. Communication and listening skills were most commonly noted as highly engaging for participants. Specifically, the speaker-listener technique was popular according to both staff and participants. In addition, participants particularly enjoyed learning through interactive activities.

Other topics that staff believed resonated with participants included

- understanding preferences for the expression of love (The 5 Love Languages),
- understanding relationships (especially being attracted to the wrong person),
- deciding on or sliding into a relationship,
- uncovering hidden issues in relationships,
- sharing expectations,
- forgiving the partner,
- dealing with sensuality and sexuality, and
- understanding personality types.

minority in most sites) did not seem to relate to a specific focus on getting and staying married. The goals of strengthening family relationships, improving parenting, and improving communication between romantic partners and co-parents during incarceration typically resonated well and were emphasized.

Common adaptations to the content of marriage and relationship education curricula included

- focusing on improving romantic and co-parenting relationships (including marriages, dating relationships, domestic partnerships, and nonromantic co-parenting relationships) rather than focusing specifically on getting or staying married and
- adding content specific to the psychological impact of incarceration on couple relationships, such as the concepts of “institutionalized mind” and “prisonization” and their implications for maintaining closeness during one partner’s incarceration and reestablishing family dynamics after release.

As noted above, most grantees delivered relationship education jointly to couples, but a few offered separate, parallel corrections-based relationship education classes for incarcerated men and community-based classes for their partners. Others offered men-only classes in addition to couples-based classes. Among sites that offered men-only relationship education classes, these sessions were usually limited to men who reported having a committed romantic or co-parenting partner. Staff and client interview data suggest that men whose partners were unable or unwilling to attend relationship education classes with them may have been less emotionally close to their partners, in



less frequent contact, or less certain of the status of their romantic commitment. Staff delivering relationship education curricula to men-only classes commonly made a number of adaptations specific to that audience, including

- eliminating breakout exercises designed for couples to participate in together and
- shifting emphasis from couples-based reflection and planning toward individual skills development, self-reflection, and goal-setting.

Another key adaptation for men-only classes was framing communication and conflict management skills in terms of their applicability to a variety of interpersonal situations beyond relationships. Several grantees observed that healthy relationship skills broadly apply to many types of interpersonal relationships, including parent-child, employer-employee, and peer-peer. Emphasizing the manner in which the skills taught in healthy relationships classes could be used to improve these other types of relationships helped to increase the relevance of the course material in men-only classes.

Grantees reported a number of content-related adaptations that were relevant to both relationship education and parenting curricula. These adaptations included

- spending less time on information that was less salient for participants, such as the research and statistics that were included with some curricula;
- spending more time on content that resonated strongly with participants, including communication skills, various exercises involving personality typing (e.g., preferences for the expression of love, such as the Five Love Languages; personality profiling, such as the PREP Primary Colors Personality Tool), and content related to employment; and
- sharing communication techniques that were applicable even (or specifically) during the father's incarceration, such as letter-writing skills, skills for interacting during personal visits, and so on.

Finally, staff stressed that, for maximum effectiveness, content adaptations for the prison setting must not be presented as adaptations. One staff member noted:

*It's offensive to say, "This is how you really do it, but here's how you have to do it on the inside." It makes it seem inferior.*

## **Adapting Language and Examples**

In addition to adapting course content, instructors asserted that it was sometimes important to adapt the language used to deliver it. Several mentioned the need to accommodate participants with limited literacy by using simple, concrete language and by not presuming that all participants could read all course material independently. The Texas grantee noted that its curriculum was developed for learners at a fourth-grade level, but that some participants nevertheless struggled with understanding the materials. Staff at several sites underscored the importance of gauging participants' comprehension and slowing down or backing up as needed.

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*[The curriculum script] suggests a 'time out.' That's a joke to a guy in prison. Instead, I tell them to take a step back and exhale, which means to not be aggressive and to calm your body. [I tell them] to keep from 'clicking,' which is a term they understand.*

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A number of grantees (those in Texas, California, Indiana, New York, Tennessee, and Ohio) drew on the expertise of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated staff or volunteers to help address the need for language and examples relevant to incarcerated men and their partners. In addition, instructors at most sites adjusted language to make it less formal and to include colloquial words and phrases that resonated more with participants.

Interviewees also discussed the use of cultural references and examples that were relevant to incarcerated men and their partners. According to staff, some of the references in their curricula were based on life experiences to which participants had difficulty relating:

*I can't sit here and tell this guy to imagine being in a park with birds flying and flowers around, which is what the curriculum wants, because these guys are hard and when they're here they don't want to become prey.*

Yet, interviewees from various sites suggested that participants related to specific examples with more interest and greater comprehension than when presented with abstract concepts or principles. Instructors observed that appropriate, concrete examples were very important in helping participants to grasp the key content of their curricula.

### **Adapting Style and Delivery**

Grantees relied heavily on traditional modes of information delivery during relationship education classes, including lectures by instructors and the review of written information using slides and workbooks. These approaches were supplemented with a variety of other teaching tools designed to keep participants interested and make concepts accessible:

- **Participatory exercises:** All sites incorporated interactive learning into their courses to encourage active engagement by participants, including class discussion, role-playing exercises, and games.
- **Individualized interaction:** Instructors at many sites created regular opportunities for individual check-ins to informally assess how participants related to the course material, provide additional support if needed, and allow participants the opportunity to make up missed classes using a one-on-one tutorial.
- **Video tools:** Sites that implemented commercial relationship education curricula used video clips of partner interaction that were provided as part of these curricula. In addition, these and other sites supplemented with video clips that instructors selected (the Indiana grantee), shared YouTube videos created by reentering men (the Tennessee grantee), or used professionally produced video lectures by experts (the New York grantee).

#### **Making Course Content Real: Providing Tailored Examples**

Instructors met the need for accessible, relevant examples in several ways:

- constructing “what-if” scenarios to encourage participants to generate their own examples of ways to apply the principles covered in a given class session;
- sharing instructors’ personal experiences with parenting, relationship, or reentry-related challenges; and
- incorporating participants’ real-life experiences into the curriculum. For example, one site (the grantee in New York) obtained permission to use family correspondence from former participants as examples in a module on men’s and women’s communication styles.

- **Audio tools:** A few sites used audio-based teaching tools, including public service announcements (the Texas grantee), an original song about incarceration and family relationships (the Texas grantee), and popular music to create a relaxed atmosphere while participants completed individual writing exercises (the South Dakota grantee).

Exercises that generated active personal engagement from participants were an important source of information for instructors. Using the information that participants shared verbally, instructors could tailor the pace and content of the course to fit participants' learning styles, family histories (including family-related cultural values), and current family situations.

Yet, incorporating interactive modes of learning into prison-based courses also required special care. Staff and participants noted the danger associated with emotional vulnerability in a prison setting and the risk that personal information shared in the classroom would be used on the prison yard. Staff at the California site noted that confidentiality issues were of such immediate concern that instructors typically devoted 2 hours to this topic during the initial class sessions. Once an understanding of expectations for confidentiality was firmly in place, staff believed that participants then felt free to share their personal experiences out loud and therefore could integrate concepts more fully.

The MFS-IP grantees felt the need to implement a variety of adaptations to their healthy relationship curricula to increase the relevance of the courses for men and couples affected by incarceration. Although this process likely resulted in greater engagement among the course participants, it also introduces concerns about how closely commercial curricula were followed and, therefore, the extent to which outcomes attributed to the curricula by the developers could be similarly expected for the MFS-IP program participants. A few grantees did report working with the curriculum developers in adapting their curricula; however, this process was uncommon. Most grantees continuously tweaked their courses to reflect their experiences implementing the curricula and feedback received from participants, striving to improve the course each time it was delivered. This informal and ongoing adaptation process limited the fidelity with which commercial curricula were implemented. Some types of adaptation, such as eliminating couples-based exercises (which was necessary when partners could not participate with incarcerated men) could presumably decrease the effectiveness of the curricula. However, the most common adaptations included adding topics specific to incarceration and modifying the language, examples, style, or delivery of the curricula. Content-related adaptations typically involved downplaying certain topics or making the topics more widely relevant (i.e., changing marriage-focused content to be applicable to other types of relationships), rather than excluding them altogether. Although we cannot determine the effect that this type of adaptation had, it is possible that such adaptations would not have a major impact on the effectiveness of the curricula used.

## **SUMMARY**

The MFS-IP grantees' attempts to bring relationship education—an area of programming very rarely seen in prisons and jails—into correctional settings were a pioneering effort. All grantees overcame substantial logistical challenges and implemented healthy relationships skills training in correctional settings. A particularly notable accomplishment is most grantees' ability to bring

partners into correctional facilities to participate in relationship education programming. Recognizing the need for flexibility in service delivery format, the MFS-IP grantees used several strategies to teach healthy relationship skills to currently incarcerated, reentering, and formerly incarcerated men and their partners. The grantees used creativity to modify their relationship education component in response to the needs of their target population and host correctional facilities. Adaptations made to the content, language, examples, style, and delivery made the courses as engaging as possible for participants.

The implementation experiences of the MFS-IP grantees can inform future efforts to build healthy relationship skills among families affected by incarceration. While incarcerated, many individuals are interested in improving themselves and their relationships with their partners, children, and other family members. Although not all incarcerated persons are married or in intimate relationships, healthy relationship skills broadly apply to many types of interpersonal relationships. As observed by several grantees, relationships such as parent-child, correctional officer-inmate, inmate-inmate, and employer-employee could be improved by healthy relationship skills training.

The impact study component of the MFS-IP evaluation, concluding in 2015, will determine the effectiveness of relationship education and other MFS-IP program components in strengthening relationship quality and stability and facilitating successful community reentry. Research suggests that healthy relationships contribute to reentry success, yet little is known about how to improve relationship quality for couples affected by incarceration. Relationship education that builds healthy relationship skills could play an important role in relationship quality throughout incarceration and during the critical reentry period. Even for lengthy periods of incarceration, communication and conflict resolution skills could result in more supportive relationships, improved co-parenting, and increased familial contact—all of which could be beneficial upon the individual's eventual release.

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### National Evaluation of MFS-IP Programs

Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the National Evaluation of Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

**Implementation Study:** Yearly implementation interviews were conducted with each grantee through fall 2010. The implementation evaluation has documented program context, program design, target population and participants served, and key challenges and strategies.

**Impact Study:** Survey data collection with incarcerated men and their partners is currently under way in 5 impact sites selected from among the 12 grantees. Beginning in December 2008, couples participating in MFS-IP programming and a set of similar couples not participating in programming were enrolled in the national impact study and completed the first of four longitudinal surveys designed to collect information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes. Baseline data collection is complete, with follow-up data collection expected to continue through approximately April 2014.

This brief and other publications related to the MFS-IP evaluation are available from the HHS ASPE website: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/>. A program overview and evaluation summary, as well as links to publications of interest and other web resources, may be found at the national evaluation website, <https://mfs.rti.org>.

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