

# The Power of Partnerships

## *Findings from the Healthy Marriage Site Exchanges*

Effective Services Series

Successes Achieved by the Demonstration Programs

Report 2 of 3





## Series Overview

The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) sponsored a site exchange series during late spring and summer 2009. During these two- to three-day exchanges, a “host” grantee—working with OFA’s technical assistance team—designed a site visit and learning session for a small group of visiting grantees. Site exchanges focused on different types of community-based partnerships that Healthy Marriage grantees have formed to better engage various high-priority populations such as couples, youth and young adults, and low-income families. (See Report 1 of the Effective Services Series for a more detailed description of the site exchange series.)



This report (2 of 3 in the series) summarizes the knowledge gained during each site exchange, the strategies grantees used to develop partnerships, practices used to successfully engage program participants, and the changes in practice, actual or anticipated, resulting from knowledge gained during the site exchanges. The following four site exchanges are documented in-depth as case studies in this report:

- ▶ Effectively Engaging the Faith Community and Couples
- ▶ Effectively Engaging Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Offices and Low-Income Families
- ▶ Effectively Engaging High Schools, After-School Programs, and Youth
- ▶ Effectively Engaging the University and Young Adults

### Case Study Methodology<sup>1</sup>

The TA facilitators and lead writer for this report were responsible for reviewing relevant program documents (e.g., grant or continuation applications, semi-annual reports, evaluation reports), taking notes during the visit, conducting follow-up conversations 30 to 60 days after the site exchange, and writing a final report that summarized key observations and themes discussed during the exchange. These data were analyzed and used to write the case studies presented in this report.

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<sup>1</sup> Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

## Case Study #1: Effectively Engaging the Faith Community and Couples

### Top Takeaways

- ▶ With aggressive outreach, faith-based organizations (FBOs) can build a broad network of congregations and community partners to publicize the program and meet enrollment goals. In this case, a relatively small organization has used such relationships to enroll a large number of participants for a project its size.
- ▶ Proper recordkeeping is essential for FBOs. Some important strategies are to: maintain separate bookkeeping for Federal funds; omit Scripture from the curriculum, workshops and presentations; and properly account for the time of employees who may have responsibilities both within and outside of the Federal grant.
- ▶ Feedback from partners included one common theme: Consider the needs of men when designing curriculum. The grantee addresses this issue directly by utilizing both male and female facilitators. But the agency also offers programming that recognizes a male's place in the workforce, a father's role in families and a teaching tone—including humor—that keeps male listeners involved.
- ▶ Never underestimate the value of a pleasant setting for a Healthy Marriage workshop. In Northwest Marriage Institutes's case, holding an eight-hour workshop in a scenic and relaxing location is a prescription for success. As a result, participants do not see the eight-hour class as a "penalty" for past mistakes.

- ▶ Host Site: Northwest Marriage Institute (Portland, Oregon)
- ▶ Guest Sites: Beech Acres (Cincinnati, Ohio) and Friendship West Baptist Church (Dallas, Texas)
- ▶ Date of Site Exchange: May 15-16, 2009

### Partnership Development Strategies

With just a full-time director and one part-time employee, Northwest Marriage Institute (NMI) is a small grantee compared to others in the Federal Healthy Marriage program. But a surprising fact about this agency is that more than 1,260 couples have participated in eight or more hours of marriage education. Weekend workshops are generally filled, and participants say the workshops and sessions have had a major positive effect on their relationships.

How does this small program enjoy such popularity? One reason is partnerships with the faith-based community that have generated buzz in the community about the education offered by this tiny agency. Led by Dr. Bob Whiddon, a former pastor with D.Min. and M.Div. degrees, the program boasts extensive outreach with other faith-based and community groups. The



easy manner of “Dr. Bob” is one ingredient of success, but so are the marketing and outreach efforts with project partners.

One ingredient of NMI’s outreach is a monthly newsletter sent to more than 1,500 people each month, including participants or staff members affiliated with organizations such as:

- ▶ Camus, a mental health clinic that sends participants to the NMI;
- ▶ Share House, a temporary housing site that has sent economically struggling couples to attend weekend retreats;
- ▶ A pastor from Living Hope Church, a large Vancouver congregation;
- ▶ A full-time marriage and family counselor at New Hope, a Portland congregation of nearly 5,000 members.

As a result, the agency maintains a friendly network of healthy relationships, and these informal networks of congregations and community-based referrals provide a steady stream of referrals. At the time of the site exchange, the agency had served more than 500 of the 600 target couples for the fiscal year; overall, it has served 1,570 couples to date. Referrals also are done by word of mouth, with former participants touting the benefits of the program.

The site exchange made clear that, while NMI is not itself attached to a religious congregation, its site director’s experience—including nearly two decades of work as a pastor—strengthens the program in significant ways.

One advantage was that Dr. Whiddon had immediate trust with many local congregations, which enhanced access to married and divorced couples needing support. At the site exchange, Shannon Ingman, a Marriage and Family Therapist at a 5,000-member congregation in the area, actually attended NMI’s workshop with her own husband. “It had already developed a strong recommendation in my church, and learning about the program I went ahead and recommended it to struggling couples. But my husband and I wanted to see it for ourselves—and after being here I’ll have no problem recommending this to others in need of a ‘booster shot’ in their marriage.”

A second advantage is that the program’s reputation can spread quickly via word-of-mouth conversation in routinely gathering congregations and faith-based communities. That has clearly happened in NMI’s case. “Initially, we had to advertise—and we did so, on cable news networks, and via other means. But since our first year, the word’s just spread,” Dr. Whiddon reports. They have not spent resources on advertising since the beginning of the program’s second year.



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*Faith-based organizations have ready access to those who value marriage and who respect the perspective of clergy on the matter of marriage.*

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A third advantage is the respect—especially in conjunction with many first marriages—that many couples hold for the *role* of clergy. Not only are most first marriages conducted in a religious organization, but such organizations typically enjoy a high level of respect on the issue. As a result, their participation as partners in the Healthy Marriage initiative is fostered and encouraged. Capitalizing on the level of trust enjoyed by these organizations—plus strong word of mouth—the grant program has built a strong reputation.

## Practices for Engaging Program Participants

Northwest Marriage Institute also has won a strong endorsement due to its engaging curriculum and setting. NMI has a stated goal to maintain strong interest among both women and men throughout its eight-hour curriculum. While traditional social service agencies have a long history of effectively serving women and children, they typically have less experience with men. NMI offers programming that recognizes a male employee's place in the workforce, a father's role in families, and the kind of teaching "tone" that keeps male listeners involved. Perhaps more than many human service providers, pastors—as well as rabbis and imams—have a longstanding history of serving men as well as women. When these individuals become partners with Federal programs, clergy can draw on their public and private work with a range of men, women and families. Ministers who have extensive experience in leading *whole families* bring particular gifts to this work—especially in terms of keeping the men actively involved.

During NMI's workshop, the kinds of questions that Dr. Whiddon addressed kept men engaged. As one attendee said, "A lot of times the wives are just happy to get their husbands in the room. They're hoping he'll learn something—but guys are the harder sell." By leading workshops in a manner that implicitly or explicitly acknowledges distinctions about a male's orientation, and still addresses the needs of both partners in the relationship, male clergy can impart important skills to participants.

NMI spent extensive time developing an eight-hour curriculum with interactive content, an engaging presentation style, and ongoing reinforcement. In most cases, the programming is delivered by one male and one female facilitator, a combination that provides a balance of gender perspectives that NMI considers essential for success. Presenters are direct in acknowledging differences between men and women in how they approach subjects; in fact, they welcome such discussion and a commitment to provide balanced views of marriage and relationships.

Past participants made available during the site exchange said this approach was welcome and an ingredient of the workshop's success. One married couple spoke candidly and insightfully about their positive experiences in the program. They noted how NMI presenters regularly integrated humor into the presentations, which helped develop a comfort level particularly among the male participants. NMI also noted how many past participants continue to assist the agency by serving as volunteers, stuffing envelopes and performing other administrative work to support the small program staff.

The institute also offers a powerful “carrot” for program attendance – a weekend getaway marriage course with an overnight stay on Oregon’s coast. Two hours west of Portland, this setting provides another way to build a comfort level among men and women attending the eight-hour course. Instead of perceiving the eight-hour program as a “penalty” for past mistakes, participants see the opportunity almost as a vacation from the regular routine – and one that provides a welcome opportunity for reflection and growth.



## Changes Resulting from the Site Exchange

- ▶ Among the visiting grantees at the exchange, Friendship West said the experience prompted them to re-double efforts to attract partners. Within two months of the site exchange, the church said it added four new partners, boosting enrollment. Some are churches, while others are community groups or non-profits. The organization also may expand its quarterly electronic newsletter to a monthly publication available both in print and online. Friendship West is also increasing its marketing to men by partnering with businesses and sports franchises.
- ▶ Beech Acres said it has adopted some of NMI’s approach to using volunteers to help grow the program and sustain it after Federal funding ends.
- ▶ Both agencies said they are reviewing their programs to provide an environment more welcoming to men. “It’s always been tough to keep men engaged,” one site exchange participant said. Having a male instructor, using humor, and providing incentives such as an overnight trip are all powerful motivators, officials said.
- ▶ OFA and its technical assistance team will disseminate to the field a succinct set of principles for effectively engaging men in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs that are grounded in knowledge gained through this site exchange as well as other interactions with grantees.

## Case Study #2: Effectively Engaging Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Offices and Low-Income Families

### Top Takeaways

- ▶ Once a struggling grantee, the Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project has flourished through partnerships with community and government agencies, in particular the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program.
- ▶ With three part-time program specialists from the state’s welfare-to-work program, the project receives not only state-subsidized employees but also staff with a strong

understanding of the challenges facing the region's most at-risk families.

- Among these challenges is the common experience of post-traumatic stress disorders among low-income individuals and the negative impact they can have on all relationships. According to Healthy Marriage Project staff, workshop staff and facilitators must recognize these issues as they seek to provide effective programming.
- ▶ Using welfare-to-work recipients as employees can provide a positive career-changing experience for these individuals. The practice also may help grantees increase the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of its staff.
- ▶ Bilingual program specialists are particularly helpful in promoting outreach and recruitment for the program.

- ▶ **Host Site:** The Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project (Sacramento, California)
- ▶ **Guest Sites:** Texas Health and Human Services Commission (Austin, Texas); Project SOS (Jacksonville, Florida); Strong Start for Cuyahoga Families (Cleveland, Ohio)
- ▶ **Date of Site Exchange:** June 17-18, 2009

## Partnership Development Strategies

Early on in its Healthy Marriage grant, officials at the Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project (HMP) feared losing Federal funds for unsatisfactory performance. But today, the program is recognized as an exemplary grantee site. This evolution occurred primarily because the project was able to develop effective partnerships with community and government agencies, including those in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program that serves public aid recipients. Today, the program boasts many partners, an effective curriculum, and a strong relationship with the region's African American community. Some of the program's significant partners include:

- ▶ CalWORKS provides three part-time program specialists from the state's welfare-to-work program. State subsidies cover 75 percent of salaries for these staff members, many of whom have life experiences similar to Healthy Marriage class participants.
- ▶ The Sacramento County Birth and Beyond Program is a strong partner, referring clients. Its eight local Family Resource Centers also host healthy relationship training in community settings.
- ▶ The Sacramento Rotary Club provides free office space for the Healthy Marriage program and other human service agencies, including a Women, Infants and Children (WIC) office.

Other organizations also provide referrals, including Sacramento programs that work with low-income pregnant and unmarried couples. These include Sierra Nueva School (for pregnant and parenting teens), Kaiser Women's Health, and the Black Infant Health Program.

One of the greatest challenges for Healthy Marriage programs is to work successfully with low-income, unmarried couples. In its early days, the Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project knew it had qualified staff, a strong message, and a role to play in a community with many households headed by single mothers. But, as officials noted, “marriage” sometimes seemed like a bad word to use in northern California. That’s when HMP began a series of partnerships with public agencies in the greater Sacramento area that focused on economic self-sufficiency. This effort resulted in partnerships with the Sacramento Department of Human Assistance and CalWORKS, the state’s welfare-to-work program that trains welfare recipients for employment.



Eventually, HMP hired CalWORKS recipients as interns and staff. These staff had strong experience and an ability to reach out to the at-risk population to be served by the agency. As HMP leaders noted, these new employees understood client needs in areas such as transportation and child care, as well as the realities of public housing and crime-ridden communities. In addition, these individuals had “living connections” to Head Start, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program and other support offices that could serve as fertile recruiting ground for the program.

As a CalWORKS official noted, HMP provides a positive career-changing experience for these welfare-to-work participants. With their addition, HMP also increased the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of its staff. There is a strong net gain for the program as well, since these employees have stepped up recruitment of at-risk individuals.

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*The Sacramento HMP partnership with CalWORKS increased engagement of TANF recipients in healthy marriage services.*

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## **Practices for Engaging Program Participants**

Through relationships with churches and other groups, the project has forged strong links with the African American community. One example is the group’s co-sponsorship of Black Marriage Day 09 in conjunction with The AMEN (Association of Ministers for Empowering Neighbors) Group. The organization has five full-time and five part-time employees to help focus on participant recruiting. The agency also works with the Department of Human Assistance of Sacramento County to recruit individuals.

Town Hall meetings have become an effective route to build community buy-in, particularly among African Americans. “We’ve started to gain the sustainability we’ve been looking for,” one agency official noted. More groups then buy into the idea that the initiative will continue and not just end after the grant. New links with groups such as 100 Black Men also have paid off in referrals and stronger relationships—with many of these linkages fostered by the CalWORKS employees.

Four Program Specialists—one male and three female—serve as the outreach and recruitment staff of HMP, and two of them are bilingual. Recruitment occurs principally at

WIC offices throughout Sacramento County and at other community venues. Program leaders have found that WIC registration and orientation is an effective time to market the program, since potential participants are thinking about relationships and families and are receptive to hearing about a potentially beneficial program. During the site exchange, attendees observed the recruitment process in action at a WIC office.

HMP also has connected with local broadcast media to create public awareness. One of the strongest relationships is with the Spanish media network Univision. The program also advertises on 15 local radio stations, including Spanish radio.

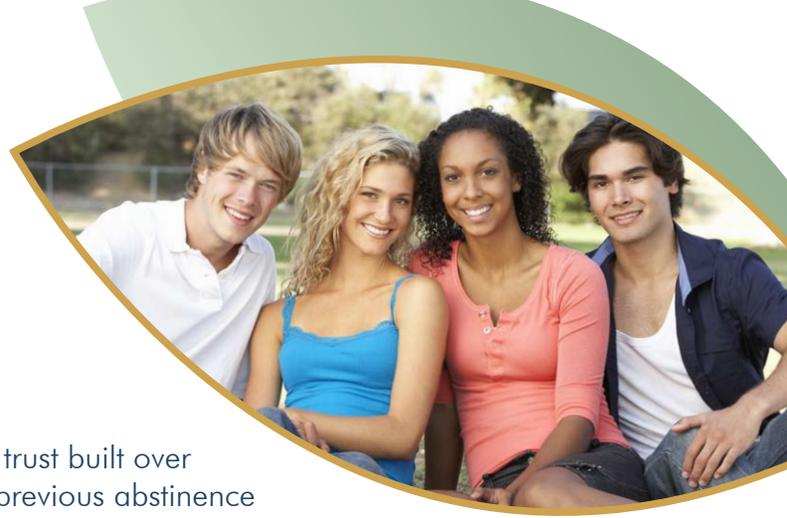
In addition, the project is at the forefront of special event campaigns in the region. Activities such as Celebration of Marriage Week, Black Marriage Day, Hispanic Marriage Day and a Valentine's Day Evening of Romance bring attention to the HMP program and foster positive attitudes about marriage. These activities, along with web resources at [www.sacramentohealthymarriage.org](http://www.sacramentohealthymarriage.org), keep couples connected to a support network as they move beyond their initial core classes.

From its vast experience and the background of its employees, HMP has identified what it considers an often overlooked issue for program couples: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). From witnessing acts of violence to other adverse experiences in childhood, PTSD may have a profound effect on the lives of couples and how they approach and deal with relationships. The host and guest grantees explored findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, an ongoing study involving the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente to measure an individual's exposure to childhood trauma. According to HMP, workshop staff and facilitators must recognize these issues as they seek to provide effective programming.

## Changes Resulting from the Site Exchange

- ▶ Officials from two agencies discussed the value of linking Healthy Marriage and Healthy Relationship classes to the broader workforce investment system, including one-stop career centers and workforce investment boards, as well as TANF populations.
  - All agreed that having staff members subsidized by a welfare-to-work program would provide a win-win for their program as well as for recruitment of participants.
- ▶ OFA and its technical assistance team has developed an issue brief and tip sheet for practitioners on how to access work supports for Healthy Marriage grantees and have posted these resources on the Healthy Marriage Community of Practice. A webinar was also hosted on this topic of linking to the workforce investment system.
- ▶ OFA and its technical assistance team will develop a checklist for working with state TANF agencies to establish subsidized employment opportunities.
- ▶ OFA and its technical assistance team will develop an issue brief on the prevalence of PTSD within low-income populations and the implications for practice.

## Case Study #3: Effectively Engaging High Schools, After-School Programs, and Youth



### Top Takeaways

- ▶ An effective partnership with schools requires trust built over time. In Booneville's case, the existence of a previous abstinence grant gave Healthy Marriage officials a strong understanding of the district and its needs.
- ▶ One way to partner effectively with schools is to tout the many practical benefits of the Healthy Marriage initiative. While it is commonly understood that these programs may help reduce teenage pregnancy rates, they also may provide little known benefits such as curricula for high school health classes.
- ▶ Partnerships are effective in supporting multiple marketing and outreach initiatives. In addition to billboards located throughout the community, the program offers an online networking site where students and teachers can upload profiles and connect with one another.
- ▶ Having a dedicated high school class focused on healthy relationships is an effective strategy to reach busy high school students and enhance school support.

- ▶ Host Site: Booneville School District (Booneville, Mississippi)
- ▶ Guest Sites: Character Counts (Portland, Maine); CJH Educational Grant Service/Healthy Marriage Matters (Raleigh, North Carolina)
- ▶ Date of Site Exchange: July 21-22, 2009

### Partnership Development Strategies

While public schools are a logical partner in Healthy Marriage youth programs, gaining school buy-in may take considerable time and effort. The Booneville School District Healthy Marriage Initiative (BSDHMI) operates in 26 high schools across northern Mississippi. The foundation of the program is in the Booneville district, where BSDHMI leaders previously had operated an abstinence education program with a different Federal grant. As part of the Bible Belt, notes the BSDHMI director, families in northern Mississippi embrace the notion of abstinence until marriage. This culture provided her with an easy entry into the schools when she operated a Federal abstinence education program. From there she gained school trust and was able to implement a Healthy Marriage program in high schools. Other districts in northern Mississippi also have sought to engage the program in delivering workshops and services.

Despite these advantages, however, securing school buy-in is a challenge. When approaching any district, BSDHMI first seeks support from the superintendent. This high-level contact produces the type of initial engagement that is essential to building a strong partnership. The program then targets teachers, emphasizing the usefulness of Healthy Marriage programming during the three- to five-week period that follows state testing every year. By focusing on this time period, the program can meet school needs

while not disrupting core learning time. One teacher also noted that students' grades often improve when the school addresses interpersonal problems. In addition, since BSDHMI delivers its own programming, Healthy Marriage and relationship workshops can provide teachers with a welcome break from some day-to-day responsibilities.

From its launch within Booneville, the initiative also serves other districts in the region. The recently retired Booneville superintendent helped arrange for BSDHMI to present at a regional superintendents meeting, which led to a number of other districts welcoming the initiative into their schools.

Visiting grantees also offered their views on enlisting school support. Healthy Marriage Matters in North Carolina also uses superintendents as the chief point of contact; however, Character Counts in Maine first targets health teachers at the high school level. The agency maintains a database of public health teachers that is the foundation of outreach efforts. Project leaders emphasize how the Healthy Marriage/relationship resources can help teachers meet six required health education curriculum goals. Character Counts has found this approach successful in enlisting school support, particularly in the rural areas that cover most of the state.

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*When partnering with school systems, consider getting support from superintendents first. Health teachers are also important partners.*

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## Practices for Engaging Program Participants

Generating top-down support for the Healthy Marriage initiative provided other tangible benefits. For example, BSDHMI was able to present an overview of its program to child abuse support groups, with a goal to support relationship skills for high school students who have faced abuse. This work ultimately led to BSDHMI presenting its curriculum to the local school board, which facilitated development of a school-day class on healthy relationships that continues today.

The current superintendent noted that the course has value because, in his view, schools are replacing parents and teachers as conveyors of values. He is dealing with a community with a high number of divorced and never-married parents and substantial teen pregnancy rates, and believes the program can make a difference for the future of the community. He added that the program has provided some unexpected benefits, as some participating students made greater attempts to be leaders at the school.

Participants also related different approaches—both successful—to deliver quality instruction. BSDHMI uses in-house staff to teach sessions within schools, which gives the agency control over facilitator quality. By comparison, Healthy Marriage Matters pays teachers \$500 to



teach the classes. In addition, the agency pays the school for the cost of a substitute teacher during the day that the school teacher is engaged in healthy marriage training. She describes this strategy as a win/win for both the school administrators and the teachers engaging in the training.



Strong marketing and outreach is another essential element to BSDHMI’s success, both within schools and its target communities.

The agency has an extensive advertising campaign through billboards that are located around town. The billboards use catchy slogans that convey the messages of the healthy marriage movement, particularly to young people. Feedback from teachers and youth indicate that this visible strategy has proven effective in building interest in the program.

BSDHMI also developed an online networking site, ([morethanwaiting.com](http://morethanwaiting.com)), on which students and teachers can upload profiles and connect with one another. Visiting agencies also offered input on this issue. One grantee, Healthy Marriage Matters, uses alumni ambassadors—students who have completed the program—to talk with both superintendents and students.

## Reflections of Visiting Grantees

Site exchange participants said they learned many ideas and strategies for potential use at their agencies including:

- ▶ Outreach to superintendents on a regional level;
- ▶ The potential usefulness of a credit class for students;
- ▶ More high-profile outreach efforts to generate visibility; and
- ▶ The host grantee and one guest grantee continued their networking after the site exchange because they felt there were additional practices to share and things to learn from one another. The host grantee visited the guest grantee to better understand its program and outreach practices.

In addition:

- ▶ OFA and its technical assistance team will explore further the unique challenges faced by rural communities when implementing social programs like Healthy Marriage Education programs (e.g., effective outreach, easily accessible services) and further develop appropriate technical assistance for addressing these challenges.

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### Catchy Slogans

*“Best Friends = Best Mates”,  
“Healthy Marriage, The Trip of  
Your Life”, “Bubbles Won’t Last  
but a Healthy Marriage Will” - are  
used to connect with young people*

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## Case Study #4: Effectively Engaging the University and Young Adults

### Top Takeaways

- ▶ Universities can serve as vital partners for Healthy Marriage programs. In Alabama, a university setting gives the grantee access to a low-cost array of graduate students for program support. The university also provides venues for participants to perform skits and engage in role-play activities.
  - ▶ Healthy Marriage grantees successfully engage young people by conducting outreach and recruiting partners in the settings where youth reside.
  - ▶ Creating a Teen Advisory Board is a policy that can promote program buy-in and give young people ownership of a Healthy Marriage or healthy relationship program.
  - ▶ Role-playing activities—such as a series of skits or short plays—provide a real-world approach to engage young people.
- ▶ Host Site: Auburn University (Auburn, Alabama)
  - ▶ Guest Sites: The Center for Self-Sufficiency (Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Northwest Arkansas Healthy Marriages at John Brown University (Siloam Springs, Arkansas)
  - ▶ Date of Site Exchange: September 9-10, 2009

### Partnership Development Strategies

Rather than serve as passive participants in workshops or activities, young people in and around Auburn, Alabama, play a hands-on role in Healthy Marriage programming. By reaching out to schools to facilitate this process, the Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (ACHMI), headquartered at Auburn University, has reaped significant dividends. A project of Auburn's Center for Children, Youth and Families, the Department of Child Abuse and Neglect, the Alabama Children's Trust Fund and Alabama Cooperative Extension System, ACHMI has developed a winning formula for regular and lasting youth participation in healthy relationship activities.

One initial step was to work with schools to directly involve youth in these programs. This work is best typified by the Teen Advisory Board, developed in 2007 to provide young people with a forum to get involved in planning and implementing activities. Through this initiative, 36 high school students have joined and become the "face" of the Alabama healthy relationships program. These youth lead role-play activities, plan activities, and serve as a frequent focus group as Auburn leaders develop curricula, programming, and web resources.

With visiting grantees expressing an interest in replicating the activity, ACHMI staff provided more details on the board's development and implementation. Again, a close partnership with schools was essential. Teachers and high schools initially recommended

students for the board. As the initiative has evolved, ACHMI also has incorporated peer recommendations to find youth with the most long-term interest and commitment. Project managers say this strategy has proven effective as students “self-select” for the board via peers. However, schools are still a part of the process. Students are expected to have letters of recommendation from two school officials and someone from the community. The board is primarily comprised of high school students, though some long-time members continue to participate now that they are in college.



ACHMI also facilitates partnerships on its home base at Auburn University. The state-wide initiative capitalizes on the university setting to tap into expertise and low-cost resources. For example, the university makes extensive use of graduate students to deliver programming. These graduate students are directly responsible for the Teen Advisory Board. Given that they are relatively close in age to advisory board members, these graduate students provide valuable guidance in an engaging manner. In addition, undergraduate students at the university also participate in the program, entering data from student surveys and assisting with other project paperwork.

Auburn’s large campus also provides ample space for Healthy Marriage and relationship activities, including the advisory board’s play. ACHMI also capitalizes on Auburn’s visible presence across the state. The initiative actively markets the concept of healthy relationships at college football games via electronic tickers on stadium video systems. Working with its many partners, ACHMI also has four online resource centers, some with distinct content and identities such as [www.alabamamarriage.org](http://www.alabamamarriage.org) and the more youth-focused [www.realteenrelationships.org](http://www.realteenrelationships.org).

## Practices for Engaging Program Participants

The Teen Advisory Board is a centerpiece of youth engagement activities, and its reach is broad. This board meets bi-weekly to organize activities, which include blogging about healthy relationships and conducting outreach at sporting events. Participants observed a board meeting run by two youth members with limited participation from Auburn staff. The meeting leaders designed the agenda and led the board through the discussion. During the session, board members provided instant feedback on a new online healthy relationships booster session developed by ACHMI graduate students. There is a small financial carrot for advisory board participation, as most students receive a \$75 monthly stipend for their participation.

Probably the best-known Teen Advisory Board activity in the greater Auburn community is the board’s 30-minute play, “You’ve Got to Hear This...It’s Good and Juicy.” Designed for high school youth but also pertinent to a college audience, the play—written in part by board members—examines elements of healthy relationships. Site

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*Involve youth directly through structures like ACHMI’s Teen Advisory Board.*

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exchange attendees attended a performance of the play on the Auburn campus, followed by a question-and-answer session with the actors. While providing a forum for board members to show their talents, the initiative also engaged teens and young adults in the audience.

The play features two unhealthy male/female relationships and one positive relationship through a series of vignettes. The production captures the voice of today's students, focusing on typical male/female situations encountered by high school and college students. Individual scenes focused on male/female couples, their relationships with each other and with friends, and the concept of boundaries and communication. Following the play, each "character" had a question for the audience that triggered rich discussion about male and female stereotypes and the steps involved in establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship. ACHMI builds this discussion into every performance as a way to engage high school and college-age youth.

Visiting grantees also offered some of their ideas to engage youth. John Brown University recruits "graduates" of its healthy marriage program to serve as champions who serve as mentors to other couples. Based on past experience, the university has found that younger couples are more receptive to one-to-one mentoring than to large group sessions devoted to healthy relationships. The university employs a full-time marriage champion coordinator to operate this initiative.

All grantees agreed it is important to serve youth and young adults "where they live," by establishing contacts within their schools or communities. ACHMI relayed its own experience in bringing Healthy Marriage programming to Tuskegee, Alabama, a community where mistrust of government is high due to the legacy of medical experiments performed on African Americans during the early 20th century. ACHMI staff took time to establish relationships with Tuskegee community agencies and residents and to emphasize that, through participation, they help their community as well as the state of Alabama.

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*Grantees reported making improvements to their partnership and programs following their participation in the site exchanges.*

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## Changes Resulting from the Site Exchange

- ▶ One grantee expressed interest in starting a youth or citizen advisory board for healthy relationship/healthy marriage efforts. "We felt strongly that it's something we can replicate," one official said.
- ▶ Another indicated that, as a result of the site exchange, they are now more interested in gaining feedback from participants via focus groups or other activities.



- ▶ One grantee has been developing a play to present before local audiences with many of the same themes as the ACHMI production.
- ▶ OFA and its technical assistance team developed an issue brief that highlighted the unique practices of engaging young adults through a Teen Advisory Board and the 30-minute play. The OFA technical assistance team posted the issue brief on the Healthy Marriage Community of Practice so that all HM grantees have ready access to these effective engagement practices.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The site exchanges in 2009 provided both host sites and guest grantees with valuable insight into the design of Healthy Marriage activities and programs. At these meetings, visiting grantees gained specific information about how to confront a range of issues affecting faith-based providers; unmarried couples, including those with children; high school and college students; and individuals with multiple barriers to self-sufficiency. At the same time, they also participated in detailed discussions about some of the most pressing challenges facing all HM grantees: recruitment, staffing, marketing and outreach, data collection, and techniques to assess project success.

While the OFA technical assistance team carefully monitored the exchanges—from planning to execution—they also agreed that this learning should not take place in isolation. That is, the greatest value may be seen in the post-exchange practices of participating grantees. With this in mind, the technical assistance team conducted follow-up calls with participants 30 to 60 days after each site exchange. These calls allowed participants to reconvene ‘virtually’ to discuss what they learned and how it may impact their services and programs. Host and visiting agencies also had an opportunity to comment on the logistics and format of the site exchanges, providing an effective focus group to assess the usefulness of this peer-to-peer learning approach.

In these follow-up calls, participants said they found the site exchanges extremely helpful. In some cases, visiting officials said they had used new marketing ideas to expand recruitment activities; in other instances, grantees had undertaken new outreach efforts to enhance their partnerships. Others noted that observing another grantee at work had given them confidence and reinforced the value of their approaches to curriculum, staffing, and outreach.

Most also cited the importance of informal learning in a non-threatening, comfortable peer environment. Host sites may have had specific expertise in a community-based partnership or engaging a particular population, yet visiting agencies also presented many of their own emerging practices across a variety of topics. Host agencies themselves learned a great deal – all in a comfortable environment conducive to both

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*Participants valued the opportunity for formal and informal learning in a non-threatening, comfortable peer environment.*

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formal and informal learning. All participants had the flexibility to ask questions of HM staff and, in many cases, their clients.

In addition, many participants offered testimonials to the success of the concept. During the follow-up calls and with little prompting, grantees cited many valuable gains from the site exchanges. A sampling of these comments:

- ▶ “It’s one of the richest experiences we’ve had.”
- ▶ “It was very hands-on, and very relational.”
- ▶ “By far, it’s the best experience we’ve had with this program.”
- ▶ “It allows you to open up, to listen, to be ‘lifted’ in spirit, and be more open to learning.”
- ▶ “It’s a very intimate setting, much different from a conference. It’s a wonderful idea and should continue.”

While annual meetings and other forms of technical assistance are useful, the intimacy of the site exchange process allows individuals to learn, discuss, and reflect in a way that promotes program quality and improvement.



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# The Power of Partnerships

*Findings from the Healthy Marriage Site Exchanges*

Effective Services Series

Successes Achieved by the Demonstration Programs

Report 2 of 3

