

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



### Bringing Partners into the Picture: Family-Strengthening Programming for Incarcerated Fathers

Recent research suggests that the partners and families of incarcerated men are an important resource for men's successful reentry into society.<sup>1</sup> However, programming to support couple and family relationships through incarceration and community reintegration is relatively rare. The Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-entering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) were designed to meet this need. Administered by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), these programs provide services to families during and after a father's incarceration to enhance family functioning and improve reentry outcomes.

This brief documents implementation challenges and lessons from the grantees' first 2 years of program operations. Information gathered through site visits for the national evaluation suggests that the challenges to involving partners in family-strengthening activities are significant and involve every component of the program: recruiting partners, retaining partners, serving partners in correctional facilities, and working with partners in the community.

It is anticipated that these grantee experiences will be helpful to faith-based and community organizations, human services agencies, and correctional systems that are developing programs to assist families affected by incarceration. Future

#### About This Research Brief

*This brief describes the work of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-entering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) grantees in delivering programming to the partners of incarcerated fathers. The brief documents services offered to partners; challenges encountered in enrolling and serving partners; and solutions grantees employed to meet these challenges.*

*This brief was prepared by Tasseli McKay, Anupa Bir, Christine Lindquist, Elise Corwin, Mindy Herman Stahl and Hope Smiley McDonald of RTI International, under contract to ASPE.*

Office of the Assistant Secretary  
for Planning and  
Evaluation/Office of Human  
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Administration for Children and  
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Assistance

US Department of Health and  
Human Services  
Washington, DC 20201



<sup>1</sup> See *Incarceration and the Family: A Review of Research and Promising Approaches for Incarcerated Fathers and Their Families*, available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/Incarceration&Family/index.shtml>.

implementation reports, which will be based on additional years of program operations, will document additional challenges and lessons learned.

**What services do the grantees offer?** All of the MFS-IP grantees delivered family-strengthening services to men incarcerated in correctional facilities and provided some programming to the spouses or committed partners of these men (Table 1). Most of the programs selected commercially available curricula, including the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Caring for My Family, Exploring Healthy Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families, Married and Loving It, Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS), and Couple Communication. Two sites delivered in-house curricula specifically designed for use with their target populations: Back to the Family, developed by Centerforce staff, and Keeping FAITH, developed by RIDGE Project staff.

**Table 1. Key Services Offered to Partners of Incarcerated Fathers**

Grantee	Key Services Offered to Partners
Centerforce	Relationship and parenting skills workshops (individual and group), case management, coaching
Child and Family Services of New Hampshire (NH CFS)	Couples marriage/relationship education seminars, family reentry planning
Indiana Department of Correction (IN DOC)	Couples marriage/relationship education seminars
Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota (SD LSS)	Couples marriage/relationship education seminars, case management
Maryland Department of Human Resources (MD DHR)	Marriage/relationship education courses, parenting skills development, employment assistance
Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice (MN CCJ)	Marriage/relationship education courses, case management, parenting education, financial skills education, housing placement assistance, employment assistance
New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJ DOC)	Couples marriage/relationship education courses, case management, parenting education, financial skills education
Oakland Livingston Human Services Association (OLHSA)	Couples marriage/relationship education courses, family reunification planning, case management, parenting education, crisis intervention, support groups
Osborne Association	Couples marriage/relationship education seminars, couples counseling
Texas Arms of Love, d.b.a. People of Principle (TX POP)	Couples marriage/relationship education seminars
RIDGE Project (OH RIDGE)	Couples marriage/relationship education courses, support groups, mentoring
Shelby County Division of Correction (SCDOC)	Couples marriage/relationship education courses, case management

All of these curricula address the three basic components of marriage/relationship education as required by 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. As an example of curriculum content, the text box provides information about the PREP curricula, which six grantees chose to use.

## 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 are specifically targeted to low-income families, for their marriage/relationship education courses or weekend seminars.

- **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.”

Most grantees offered couples-based programming, with partners coming into the correctional facilities. However, a few offered parallel programming, serving partners in the community and serving fathers in correctional facilities. Programs generally provided relationship education to the father and his partner, some also provided parenting skills workshops, and some included financial skills development or employment workshops. A number of grantees also provided certain program components, such as case management, to both members of the couple jointly in the community following the release of the incarcerated partner.

**How are partners identified and located?** Once a father is deemed eligible for the MSF-IP program and agrees to participate, he is asked to provide the name and contact information for his spouse or partner (typically a committed

### Why Involve Partners in Services for Incarcerated and Reentering Men? Selected Research Evidence

- Analyzing data from 500 delinquent U.S. boys followed from 1940 to 1965, Laub and colleagues (1998) determined that those who maintained good marriages were 68% less likely to commit criminal offenses as adults.<sup>2</sup>
- Bersani, Laub and Nieuwbeerta's (2008) analysis of data from a sample of 5,000 Dutch men and women enrolled in the Criminal Career and Life Course Study suggests that the association between strong marriages and reduced criminal offending may persist across sociocultural contexts and is more robust for contemporary couples than for couples in earlier generations.<sup>3</sup>
- Visher et al. (2009) found that, among a subsample of 652 released men returning to 3 U.S. cities, those who were married or in committed cohabiting relationships were half as likely to report engaging in drug use and/or committing a new crime at 8 months post-release compared to those who were uninvolved or in noncommitted relationships.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (1998). Trajectories of change in criminal offending: Good marriages and the desistance process. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 225–238.

<sup>3</sup> Bersani, B. E., Laub, J. H., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2008). Marriage and desistance in the Netherlands: Do gender and socio-historical context matter? *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 25(1), 3–24.

<sup>4</sup> Visher, C. A., Knight, C. R., Chalfin, A., & Roman, J. K. (2009). *The impact of marital and relationship status on social outcomes for returning prisoners*. ASPE Research Brief, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/09/Marriage&Reentry/rb.shtml>.

romantic or parenting partner) in the community. At most sites, program staff then contact the partner by mail and telephone with information about the program and invite her to participate.

Programs often had trouble initiating contact with partners: unanswered phone calls and letters were common. Staff attributed this difficulty locating partners in the community to several factors. Mistakes in the contact information initially shared by the incarcerated partner were frequent: staff frequently requested contact information a second time from the incarcerated participant before securing the correct address and telephone number. In other cases, contact information was simply outdated because of the lack of recent contact between the partners. Finally, some failures to make contact were attributed to deliberate nonresponse on the part of the partner. It was noted that the practice in some sites of making “cold calls” to partners, rather than having the incarcerated participant initiate contact, might contribute to lack of initial responsiveness. Staff at these sites observed that this disadvantage was balanced by a desire to avoid the potential for coercion by the incarcerated partner and ensure the emotional and physical safety of the partner in the community.

## Challenge 1—Recruitment: Why Would I Be Interested in This?

Some partners were not interested in participating in the offered services. Some had a general lack of interest in relationship-strengthening services while others were not willing to invest

**Program Solution: *Women’s Skepticism about Incarcerated Partners’ Ability to Change***

Grantee staff in New Jersey have increased partner interest by probing about relationship issues that could arise during the incarcerated partner’s impending reentry and letting partners know how the program can help the couple address some of those challenges.

**Program Solution: *Lack of Partner Contact during the Incarceration***

A key component of the Ohio grantee’s program was to help renew interest in maintaining the relationship and encourage communication by subsidizing the cost of telephone calls and visits.

**Program Solution: *Partners More Focused on Parenting than Relationship Enhancement***

Staff reported that they were more successful in recruiting partners when they emphasized the benefits of the relationship-strengthening program for the couple’s children. For example, some marriage/ relationship education curricula used by the grantees emphasized communication skills intended to facilitate harmonious coparenting. Further, offering explicitly parenting-oriented components, such as parenting education or visitation support, prior to (or simultaneous with) relationship-strengthening services appeared to facilitate partner enrollment.

more in the relationship with the incarcerated partner.

Many women harbored skepticism about the incarcerated partner’s ability to change. This was the case particularly for the partners of parole violators and men who, when given the opportunity to be released on community supervision rather than serving their full sentence, chose to serve out their full sentence.

Many partners also wondered, “If I don’t have the problem, why do *I* need to come?”

**Competing demands.** Staff in several programs observed that many partners were overwhelmed with their current commitments and were reluctant to take on another one even when specific logistical barriers could be addressed.

**“I haven’t been in touch with him in 10 years.”** Staff from many sites reported that they contacted women who had been identified as the romantic partners of incarcerated participants, only to be told that they did not consider themselves to be currently involved with the men, had not had contact with them in years, or were now

married to or involved with other people. These partners told program staff that they had moved on from the relationship during the incarceration and were not at all interested in reviving it.

In contrast, grantees also reported that some women were not interested in participating because they believed that their relationships were already so positive and committed that they could not see room for improvement.

**“He will always be my kids’ father.”** Many women did not perceive relationship-strengthening programming as highly relevant or compelling in and of itself. Female partners cited concern for their children as a primary reason for participating in services.

Given partners’ demanding lives and the complex nature of their relationships with the incarcerated men and the correctional system at large, flexibility, tangible incentives, and interpersonal sensitivity were instrumental in effectively including partners in programming.

## **Challenge 2—Retention: If I Were Interested, How Would This Work?**

Although partner motivation is the driving factor in deciding to participate in these programs, the number of logistical barriers facing the partner is also important, particularly for retaining partners in programming over time. Such barriers to retention include time constraints, parenting responsibilities, and lack of transportation. Grantees invested time and resources in understanding each partner and her situation, maintaining communication with partners over a long time period, offering flexibility in timing of participation, and providing material supports and incentives when possible.

**“I have to work and can’t get time off.”** Most partners held low-paying jobs that did not offer flexible scheduling. Several programs reported that initial recruitment efforts were stymied by prospective participants’ schedule conflicts and noted that they needed to adjust class times and days to accommodate work commitments. Even when staff thought they had resolved a schedule conflict and arranged for free transportation, partners were frequently no-shows.

**“Who will care for my children?”** Child care was a common constraint, especially for those programs that asked partners to make a multisession commitment (i.e., those programs that involved partners in activities on a regular or repeating basis as opposed to inviting partners to a one-time couples’ seminar).

### **Program Solution: *Geographic Dispersion of Partners in the Community***

Several grantees that served partners residing in a wide geographic area offered a one-time seminar format. This minimized travel and made the commitment manageable for partners who did not have time for multiple program activities or weekly class sessions.

### **Program Solution: *Competing Time Commitments***

Many grantees provided participants and partners with incentives. As part of the Maryland program, partners in the community received \$25 Target gift cards, and incarcerated men received 10 additional hours of family visitation time.

### **Program Solution: *Lack of Child Care***

In its program design, the Tennessee grantee planned for some of its partner programming to coincide with child-friendly visitation activities for fathers and their children.

### **Program Solution: *Lack of Affordable Transportation***

Grantees provided various forms of transportation assistance to participating partners, including bus passes, gas cards, travel expense reimbursement, and prearranged group transportation. Some programs also assisted partners with expenses for food, lodging, and child care so that they could attend program activities.

**“I don’t have a car and I can’t afford to pay for gas for my friend’s car.”** Some prospective participants did not have access to a car, some faced significant travel time, and others lacked funds to pay for gas or other transportation expenses.

**“How many times do I need to do this?”** Some of the same obstacles that prevented women from enrolling in programming also hindered retention. Uncertainty about pending commitments (such as retail and service industry work schedules) prevented some partners from being able to commit to attending until the last minute, and a variety of emergent situations often interfered with the participation of others who had committed in advance.

### **Challenge 3—In-Prison Programming: Going to Prison Isn’t My Idea of a Good Time...**

In addition to the challenges associated with getting partners enrolled in the MFS-IP programs

**Program Solution: *Lack of Trust***

During the initial visit with partners in the community, one grantee’s case managers initiated an informal getting-to-know-you conversation, postponing enrollment paperwork until a later visit. They invested a lot of time in the initial visit, spending up to 4 hours and frequently bringing food. Investing in the relationship with the partner sometimes alleviated mistrust by making the partner feel heard.

**Program Solution: *Criminal Records Impede Partner Admittance to Host Facilities***

The South Dakota grantee negotiated case-by-case exceptions with the State’s Department of Corrections, which enabled about half of the partners who would otherwise have been refused access (on the basis of their criminal records) to participate in prison-based weekend courses.

**Program Solution: *Institutional Security Rules***

Grantees built and maintained relationships with correctional administrators and security officers to enable delivery of corrections-based services to partners without compromising facility security. Strategies included:

- Developing formal memos with administrators to document program-related protocols and modifications.
- Holding standing meetings with correctional contacts.
- Having frequent, informal conversations with correctional officers about program goals and procedures regarding partner involvement.

and resolving logistical barriers to retention, there were additional issues that surfaced once grantees began delivering programming to enrolled partners.

As mentioned previously, most of the MFS-IP grantees offered couples-based programming inside the correctional facilities. Staff noted several difficulties associated with effectively delivering corrections-based services, including previous negative experiences and correctional facility policies.

**“I don’t really want to deal with the prison any more than I have to. I don’t trust them.”**

Some partners were wary of dealing with prison policies and procedures. Staff reported that partners were sometimes reluctant to participate in programming on prison grounds. Programs noted that many partners had negative perceptions of prison-based programs, which stemmed from disappointing experiences with other interventions. In addition, staff noted that many partners expressed weariness with prison regulations and procedures, which typically included use of metal detectors and hand searching, detailed rules for visitor clothing, and time spent in sparsely equipped waiting areas.

**“I have a record and won’t be allowed in.”**

Although background check regulations varied, most facilities prohibited partners with criminal

histories from entering. Many partners had criminal histories that prevented them from being approved for facility admittance.

**Correctional rules and regulations presented obstacles to delivering services to partners.** Driven by security needs, correctional administrators restricted which areas of the facilities could accommodate partners and what kinds of activities involving partners and incarcerated men were allowable.

Most programs needed to consider the monitoring required by the correctional facility for nonincarcerated persons taking part in prison-based services. Occasionally, facilities were not willing to allow programs to deliver any services to partners on prison grounds due to security and monitoring concerns. Certain proposed components, such as couples counseling prior to release, were not allowed by some facilities.

Ultimately, all grantees were successful in identifying available rooms within selected prison facilities that were adequate for educational purposes and appropriate for outside visitors. However, staffing remained a challenge because activities involving contact between incarcerated men and outside visitors required heightened officer supervision, often outside of regular business hours.

#### **Challenge 4—Services in the Community: I Forgot You Were Coming, Can We Reschedule?**

Grantees that offered community-based services for partners also found significant difficulty recruiting and retaining participants, in addition to challenges coordinating community service delivery when participants were scattered across large geographic areas.

Finding the staff time to provide such services and motivating and sustaining partner involvement in them were the most significant barriers, especially for programs in which corrections-based programming for the men was the primary focus.

**“I’m not that interested in talking with you.”** Although community-based activities were theoretically more convenient for most participants than facility-based activities, some of the same logistical barriers (such as transportation problems, lack of child care, conflicting work schedules, and other commitments) presented similar challenges to ongoing participation. Program staff indicated that the lack of participation might also have been caused by reduced motivation since activities offered outside of the facilities did not allow women an opportunity to see their incarcerated partners and, thus, might have been less appealing in the context of many competing demands.

**“You can’t help me get a job, and that’s the thing I need most.”** Staff noted that some partners were unable to take full advantage of community supports offered by MFS-IP programs. Many women who enrolled in programming had criminal histories or other employment-related issues that prevented them from being eligible for or benefiting from services such as job readiness or job placement assistance. In these circumstances, there was less incentive for partners to continue participating.

**Program Solution: *Urgency of Participants’ Employment Needs***

In the absence of community job placement resources for women with criminal histories, grantee staff became more involved with providing job assistance, including identifying “felon-friendly” employers.

**Program Solution: *Case Management No-Shows***

Case managers at several sites relied more heavily on telephone contact and less on in-person meetings to maintain communication with partners in the community. Several grantees are also exploring support group activities for partners. Moving away from a one-on-one service model may make it easier for grantees to provide community-based services.

**“I’m sorry you drove 3 hours to meet with me, but I can’t talk now.”** Several grantees provided case management visits to partners in the community, typically meeting women in their homes or in a public location in their neighborhoods. For one grantee, the service area for eligible partners included a 77,000-square-mile state, plus 100 miles in all directions around the state border. However, even grantees serving smaller geographic areas found that the time associated with traveling to individual meetings with participants was substantial, particularly because it was difficult to predict no-shows and other disruptions.

## Conclusion

Partners of men involved in the criminal justice system face a numbers of challenges as they try to maintain partner and family relationships during the incarceration or to consider whether these relationships are worth maintaining. Supporting the couple relationship through incarceration and community reintegration is complicated by the competing factors of juggling job responsibilities and single parenting.

MFS-IP grantees offered a range of services to address the needs of partners in the community, from relationship and parenting education to case management, counseling, and practical supports. Recruiting women required adaptability on the part of program staff. To overcome motivation-related challenges, grantees worked to gain partners’ interest and trust by persisting and investing time to get to know them. Emphasizing potential benefits for the couples’ children and offering tangible participation incentives were also helpful.

Grantees overcame logistical challenges by adjusting the timing of their activities to accommodate partner work schedules; condensing programming into fewer, more intensive sessions; offering child care or concurrent activities for children; and providing transportation support and lodging as needed.

Delivering these services successfully in correctional facilities and community settings demanded further resourcefulness. Grantees built collaborative relationships with correctional facilities that enabled them to negotiate successfully for the space and staff time required to deliver programming involving partners; adapted their service delivery approaches to accommodate facility security requirements; built positive, collaborative relationships with facility administrators and staff; invested staff time in building trust and rapport with partners; offered basic participation supports, such as child care and transportation assistance, to retain partners in the programming; and worked to provide relevant, convenient services to partners in their home communities.

### More Program Strategies for Enrolling and Retaining Partners

- Upon enrollment, document the history of the relationship from the partner’s perspective, including abuse, infidelity, or other issues.
- Assist partners with permissions and transportation for visitation with the incarcerated partner (particularly “contact” visits, in which partners may hug each other upon arrival and hold hands during the visit) where possible.
- Offer both couples-based and individually delivered class formats.
- Supplement in-person work with support for alternative forms of communication, such as correspondence and video visiting.
- Help meet partners’ immediate needs through other, nonrelationship-related services, so that they are better able to focus on relationship strengthening.
- Foster camaraderie among partners of incarcerated men by providing support groups and “aftercare” sessions in addition to formal curricula.



The ongoing national evaluation of MFS-IP grantees will provide opportunities to document the evolution and impact of these programs as they continue to adapt to the challenges of providing relationship- and family-strengthening services to families involved with the criminal justice system.

### 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 Re-entering Fathers and Their Partners is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

**Implementation Study:** Yearly implementation interviews will be conducted with each grantee through 2010. As programs mature and more incarcerated participants are released, grantees will gain more experience serving couples during and after release. The implementation evaluation will document insights garnered from grantee efforts to provide post-release supports in the community and navigate couples-based service provision during a period of major relationship transition.

**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 three longitudinal surveys designed to collect information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes. Baseline data collection is expected to continue on a rolling basis for a total of 3 years, with follow-up data collection extending another 18 months beyond the final baseline interview.

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/index.htm>. 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>.

For additional information about the MFS-IP evaluation, contact Anupa Bir: (781) 434-1708, [abir@rti.org](mailto:abir@rti.org); Christine Lindquist: (919) 485-5706, [lindquist@rti.org](mailto:lindquist@rti.org); or Tasseli McKay: (919) 485-5747, [tmckay@rti.org](mailto:tmckay@rti.org).

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