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

Five Years Later: Final Implementation Lessons from the Evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners

Building Relationships: The MFS-IP Initiative

The Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) funded services to support families in which one parent was incarcerated or recently released. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provided up to $500,000 per year for five years to twelve grantees. OFA's family strengthening initiative required grantees to work with both members of a couple to support healthy marriage, and also permitted activities to support responsible parenting and economic stability.

This initiative was an innovative approach to reducing recidivism by strengthening families, and required new collaborative relationships between corrections and human services agencies. At the time the initiative was conceived, little was known about what strategies might be effective for delivering family strengthening services to incarcerated and reentering fathers and their families. The agencies to which these grants were awarded were diverse in terms of service delivery history, organizational focus, and agency type. The grantee diversity also translated into varied implementation goals and strategies. Recognizing that there was much to be learned from these pioneering programs, HHS funded a national implementation and impact evaluation of the grantees.

Implementation study findings (the focus of this report) shed light on characteristics associated with implementation success. *Implementation success* refers to features of MFS-IP sites that brought their program plans to full scale, delivered services with minimal interruption, or developed innovations that would help subsequent efforts succeed. Data sources included annual interviews with grantee staff and other stakeholders, including program participants and partner agency staff, as well as administrative data submitted by grantees. Additionally, one year after the end of the five-year grants, we conducted a round of interviews to explore grantee perspectives on the legacy and sustainability of their grant activities. True to the mission of these programs, a common theme in the implementation data across sites and data collection waves was building relationships. We explore this and other lessons learned from more than six years of involvement in family strengthening in corrections in this brief. (A detailed technical report on final implementation study findings and all other study reports are available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/ and https://mfs.rti.org/.)

Services Provided to MFS-IP Program Participants

The MFS-IP program models, service settings, and target populations varied, but all of the grantees delivered services to incarcerated fathers and their partners.

Relationship or marriage education for both members of each couple was the core service provided by all grantees. Sites also offered other family-strengthening services, including these:

- relationship and family counseling
- parenting and co-parenting education
- case management
- mentoring and coaching services
- enhanced visitation options
- support in maintaining contact and communication during incarceration
- domestic violence education and referrals
- support groups
- education and employment services
- financial literacy classes

Building Relationships with Participants

Whom Did MFS-IP Programs Target?

The MFS-IP grants targeted unmarried and married **couples with children where the father was incarcerated or recently released**. All responsible fatherhood grants funded by OFA under the authority of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2006 were aimed at fathers.[1] Grantees in the MFS-IP priority area could only serve fathers who were currently or very recently under criminal justice supervision and were required to focus their services on couples. Due to the focus on couples, almost all grantees limited participation in their core services to men who self-identified as being married or in a committed relationship. Grantees added additional requirements specific to their program needs. These requirements included limiting services to fathers who would be released within a certain timeframe or to a certain geographic area.

Some grantees focused on special populations, such as men living in a specialized program-focused housing unit, or those who would be released without parole after serving their full sentences. Many grantees imposed restrictions

"There's all these basic needs programs [for reentering men], but there's not much for fatherhood and relationship building—and if a father doesn't have relationships, there's little incentive for him to work or stay out of prison. If we can establish those relationships, there's a greater incentive."

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[1] All grantees were required to provide services to all eligible persons, regardless of a potential participant's race, gender, age, disability, or religion.

designed to exclude men with a record of sex offenses or those at high risk for domestic violence perpetration.[2]

Bringing Participants into the Programs

Meeting enrollment targets is a key implementation outcome for any program. It proved a particularly challenging one to achieve for many MFS-IP programs. MFS-IP grantees targeted couples separated by incarceration—and many grantees were not able to recruit their targeted numbers of families.

Recruiting pairs of program participants necessitated a different approach than might be used in programs that enroll individuals. Most **programs treated the incarcerated father as the "primary" participant for recruitment purposes**: incarcerated men were brought into MFS programs largely through presentations and flyers in their prison facilities. Each female participant was recruited via her connection to an already-recruited male participant.[3] Typically, each man who was eligible and interested in participating in the MFS-IP program was asked to provide his partner's name and contact information and sometimes to make initial contact with her to inform her about the program. Identified partners were then contacted by program staff with an invitation to participate. Programs had a harder time engaging the women in the community than they did engaging the incarcerated fathers. Sites noted that women in the community were typically low-income mothers who faced overwhelming demands on their time and resources during their partners' incarceration.

> **Enrolling Couples Separated by Incarceration**
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> By design, MFS-IP programs aimed to enroll couples in which one member was incarcerated. Unlike couples recruited for community-based relationship strengthening work, MFS-IP enrollees typically:
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> - Were not residing with one another at the time of recruitment and program initiation
> - Had very tenuous relationships due to the strain of incarceration and the events preceding incarceration
> - Had limited communication with one another due to the incarceration (e.g., limited in-person contact, lack of access to email, extremely high phone rates for calls placed from prisons).

Characteristics of MFS-IP Programs with Successful Enrollment

Common characteristics were evident among grantees that succeeded in meeting their enrollment targets. Typically successful agencies **brought a deep understanding of the needs of the target population** and the corrections environment based on prior work, input from the target population, and the personal life experience of program staff. They designed programs to meet the needs of the target population and service environment. And they involved **dynamic program representatives,** sometimes including program graduates or formerly incarcerated persons, who built a strong reputation for the program. In addition, **tangible side benefits to participation**, such as more frequent or better-quality visitation time with partners or children, helped engage fathers and their partners. Other aspects of program design that seemed to facilitate meeting enrollment targets included **serving multiple prison facilities**; requiring a **modest time commitment from partners**, rather than frequent or intensive involvement over a long period of time; and using the broadest possible eligibility criteria, within the OFA requirements, to create the largest pool from which to recruit. Even with the strongest

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[2] For more on target populations, see the ASPE Research Brief, *Program Models of MFS-IP Grantees* (McKay & Lindquist, December 2008) available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/models/rb.pdf.

[3] Under the provisions of the Defense of Marriage Act, the Federal government did not recognize same-sex marriage, thereby limiting services to "promote healthy marriage" to heterosexual couples.

organizational capacity and program design, **engaging this target population in couples-based work required immense persistence and flexibility**.[4]

Grantees learned early that **many of the couples they aimed to serve had very tenuous or strained relationships**, which made both male and female partners reluctant to enroll in relationship-strengthening programming. This barrier was never fully overcome, but staff addressed it by 1) emphasizing the benefits of program participation to the couple's children rather than the benefits to the couple's romantic relationship or marriage, and 2) encouraging skeptical female partners by suggesting that relationship skills improvement would be useful in co-parenting regardless of the whether they continued a romantic relationship with the incarcerated father.

As the MFS-IP initiative moved into its fourth and fifth years, word of mouth sometimes spread about programs among incarcerated men and partners in the community and reduced some of the recruitment challenges that plagued sites earlier in their implementation. Hearing positive things about the programs from peers, and seeing other men spending time with their partners or children during program activities, was a tremendous boost to grantees' recruitment efforts (though not something they could control directly).

Keeping Participants Engaged

MFS-IP programs focused on delivering services to couples during a challenging time: incarceration and the immediate post-release period. **Once couples enrolled in MFS-IP programming, staff worked hard to keep them involved.**

Programs had to hold participants' interest as they weathered strains in their romantic and co-parenting relationships; the overwhelming financial, emotional and schedule demands of low-income single parenthood (for women on the outside); and the urgency and upheaval of the time following the male partner's release (for couples reuniting—or not—after the incarceration).

Those that succeeded in retaining participants in programming in the midst of an uncertain and difficult time evidenced three common characteristics. First, they brought *realism* about participants' competing priorities and worked to make their programs accessible. Some designed shorter programs, such as one-weekend seminars, that were less challenging for participants (particularly female partners) to complete. Some offered make-up sessions, so that program interruptions could be overcome. Longer programs

> *"If you could get it all done in the first few weeks, that would be great, but you can't. [Female partners] have to go back to paying bills, and sometimes their situation is dictating that they can't do [the program] anymore.*
> —former MFS-IP grantee (TN)

improved retention by offering participants incentives at regular intervals in recognition of the ongoing effort required to participate. Program staff at most agencies helped partners in the community to overcome major participation barriers such as lack of transportation, lack of child care, and facility access problems.

To truly engage participants, programs also had to show *responsiveness* to their expressed needs. Successful grantees demonstrated an understanding of the differing needs of their male

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[4] For more on involving female partners, see the ASPE Research Brief, *Bringing Partners into the Picture* (McKay, Bir, Lindquist, Corwin, Herman-Stahl, & Smiley McDonald, August 2009). The brief is available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/Partners/rb.pdf.

and female participants, as well as changes in couples' needs as they transitioned from incarceration to reentry. For example, one grantee offered male participants a course on "fathering during incarceration," while providing female participants with tangible supports such as school uniforms for their children and help with the cost of transporting children to prison visitation. In an effort to demonstrate responsiveness and maintain trust, programs also solicited and listened to participant feedback and followed through on service delivery promises.

Among successful programs, responsiveness to participants was also evident in their choice of program services and curricula. Selecting or adapting curricula that spoke to participants' specific concerns helped to reinforce the trust that participants had for the program. A focus on skills that were applicable to families separated by incarceration—such as letter writing, making good use of in-person visit time, or communicating with children about a father's incarceration—drew strong interest from participants.[5] Successful programs also framed communication and conflict management skills in terms of their applicability to a variety of interpersonal situations beyond romantic relationships, such as parenting, employer-employee relationships, and interactions among incarcerated men.[6]

Finally, programs fostered strong participant retention by hiring staff who could readily build *rapport* with participants. Such individuals were not only competent at case management or curriculum delivery, but also capable of sharing their own experiences with incarceration or parenting, serving as role models, and making themselves available to participants outside of class time. In addition to building positive staff-client relationships, grantees also built rapport *among* participants by creating safe opportunities for them to share with one another during program activities, and facilitating connections outside of program time (such as through residence in a specialized program housing unit). Staff felt that these relationships encouraged retention and helped participants sustain the individual changes they were making as a result of program participation.

Although these operational strategies worked well during the male partner's incarceration, most programs still reported **immense difficulty in delivering services to couples after release**. Many programs did not try to serve couples after release, but those who tried and succeeded had several common characteristics. First, they capitalized on a strong rapport with the incarcerated father, his partner, and sometimes other family members. Second, they provided family strengthening programming in the context of significant practical assistance with employment, housing and/or child support issues. Third, they included a focus on character development or religious faith that seemed to appeal to men interested in making a fresh start after release from prison. Finally, a few programs served men or couples on the outside but avoided the challenges of retaining them through the release transition. These programs enrolled men after release, rather than continuing services begun during the incarceration, and typically took advantage of existing groups of released men who were receiving services through a partner agency.

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[5] For more on strategies to support parenting, see the ASPE Research Brief, *Parenting from Prison* (McKay, Corwin, Herman-Stahl, Bir, Lindquist, Smiley McDonald, & Siegel, April 2010). The brief is available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/Innovative/rb.pdf.
[6] For more on relationship education and skills-building approaches, see the ASPE Research Brief, *Strategies for Building Healthy Relationship Skills among Couples Affected by Incarceration* (Lindquist, McKay & Bir, March 2012). The brief is available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/RelationshipSkills/rb.pdf.

How Helpful Was Grantees' Prior Organizational Experience?

Grantees' efforts to achieve their implementation goals were heavily shaped by program design and the various operational strategies (described throughout this report) they used. However, some aspects of their pre-existing organizational capacity shaped implementation success as well.

- Grantees that had previously collaborated with the organizational partners they needed for their MFS-IP programs had fewer start-up delays due to partnership challenges and fewer partnership-related service interruptions. Pre-existing partnerships helped these grantees to overcome bureaucratic obstacles to hiring program staff, navigate complex correctional facility environments, and meet OFA's requirements for addressing domestic violence.

- Prior organizational experience delivering similar services gave grantees an advantage in understanding what was feasible, anticipating obstacles, and generating workable strategies for overcoming them.

- Program leaders who brought prior experience with corrections culture had an easier time negotiating program activities and requirements within the constraints of institutional procedures.

- Agencies familiar with implementing evidence-based interventions quickly grasped the need for balancing fidelity with flexibility. Grantees strove to implement curricula with fidelity and to maintain the integrity of their program designs, but—in the absence of true evidence-based practices for family strengthening work with justice-involved couples—they also had to make intelligent adaptations.

- Past experience with multi-site service delivery helped grantees develop strong supervision and staffing approaches (e.g., "cross training" so staff could easily cover for one another) to maintain service continuity.

Though the factors above facilitated implementation success, a few exceptional grantees without extensive prior experience were also successful. Those that had not already built organizational capacity in the areas above compensated with very energetic and pro-active networking, as well as creative problem-solving in the face of obstacles that they had not anticipated.

Building Relationships between Corrections and Community Agencies

MFS-IP programs faced unique challenges in cross-agency collaboration and partnership based on their charge: to implement human services programming within correctional institution walls. Many faced the challenge of delivering concurrent or continuous services in the community as well.

The grantees themselves came from both within and outside the local correctional system (see **Table 1**), and the particular obstacles they faced in these endeavors differed based on the sector from which they came.

Chief among the challenges faced by both corrections and community-based agencies was the need to collaborate for service delivery within and outside of the prison walls. Because healthy organizational partnerships were essential to service delivery in many sites, **overcoming the challenges associated with building and maintaining these partnerships was central to a grantee's ability to achieve its program goals**. Depending on each grantee's agency type, infrastructure and program design, partner organizations might have included:

- The state department of correction
- Correctional facility personnel
- Probation and parole agencies
- County social service agencies
- Domestic violence agencies
- Other community- and faith-based organizations

Table 1. MFS-IP Grantees

	Location	Agency Type
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 / People of Principle	Odessa, Texas	Community-based nonprofit

Some grantees reached out to the community for service delivery and partnership building, while others "reached in" to correctional institutions. Both models were successful and both had significant challenges.

"Reaching In": Prison-Based Service Delivery

During program start-up, **every aspect of service delivery—from staff hiring to the timing and location of every program activity—had to be agreed on in collaboration with each correctional facility partner.** All grantees, even correctional agencies, had to "reach in" to facility wardens and superintendents to negotiate prison-based program operations.. Even in facilities where corrections staff were highly enthusiastic and program staff were highly knowledgeable about institutional constraints, some aspects of the service delivery plan had to be adapted before programs became operational. This negotiation process included securing each facility administrator's initial approval for participation, identifying recruitment avenues at the facility, securing classroom space for all activities, securing officer coverage or other security arrangements for all activities, working with detailed facility-specific regulations and procedures, and then building familiarity with correctional officers and other line staff.

> *"I came from corrections and can appreciate where [corrections staff] are coming from. I'll compromise. I don't ask things on principle; I ask for what's essential, listen to them, and find the middle ground."*
> —former MFS-IP grantee (NY)

Challenges to prison-based service delivery continued long after the start-up phase. These included facility closures, temporary lockdowns, changes in administrative regulations, facility space shortages, and limited correctional officer availability, all of which directly impacted MFS-IP activities.

Even when the grantee was the state correctional agency (about one quarter of MFS-IP grantees), the grantee still had to conduct facility-level negotiations and work within facility-level constraints and procedures to achieve the desired programming conditions at each facility. Due to the structure of state correctional systems, in which individual facility wardens and superintendents retain significant local decision-making authority, even state departments of correction did not get everything they wanted for program implementation at the facility level.

The wishes of program implementers were typically secondary to facility routine and security considerations. However, their right to deliver the program was not questioned.

In addition to the facility-level negotiations outlined above, human services agency grantees had an additional challenge: they had to first build relationships with the departments of correction, before they could reach out to correctional facility staff. **Gaining buy-in from correctional partners took longer than expected for most community-based grantees, and maintaining access and goodwill required substantial attention** throughout the grant period. Stakeholders cited state-level correctional leadership initiatives (such as improving programming in prisons or reducing recidivism) as exerting a strong positive influence on the welcome that was extended by state departments of correction and local correctional facilities to community-based grantees wishing to deliver MFS-IP services. Whether such initiatives were present or not, successful "reaching in" relationships tended to arise when the MFS-IP program:

- Fulfilled a high-priority unmet programming need for the state department of correction or local correctional facility

- Built on a longstanding relationship between the grantee and correctional agencies that predated the grant

When one or both of these conditions was met, the program was perceived as a joint venture between the correctional department and the grantee organization, and partners were jointly invested in finding timely solutions when difficulties arose.[7]

"Reaching Out": Community-Based Service Delivery

Delivering community-based services required grantees to "reach out" to engage the partners of incarcerated men and to serve couples after release. During the male partner's incarceration, grantees engaged women in the community in several ways: 1) making initial contact and conducting intake interviews, 2) bringing them into prison facilities to participate in joint relationship or parenting education with their male partners, 3) offering women-only relationship or parenting education courses in the community that paralleled those offered to men inside the prisons, and 4) providing individual assistance with needs such as housing, transportation, financial literacy, and prison visitation clearances for women and their children. In addition, some grantees also offered services in the community to both members of participating couples after the male partner's release.

To provide services to participants living in the community, grantees developed relationships with organizations specializing in community-based service delivery. Direct delivery of services in the community was not viable for correctional agency grantees operating exclusively within the physical boundaries of a facility. Even among human services grantees, many organizations were better staffed and networked to deliver services within the prisons than outside them. Therefore, grantees recruited

> "The issues are child support, visitation, baby mama drama. So [that determines] the entities to link to. Most of these guys need help with child support, and if you can't help them with it, then they don't have time for that. It's why you have to build those partnerships."
> —former MFS-IP grantee (MD)

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[7] For more on working with and within correctional facilities, see the ASPE Research Brief, *Strengthening the Couple and Family Relationships of Fathers behind Bars: The Promise and Perils of Corrections-Based Programming* (Smiley McDonald, Herman-Stahl, Lindquist, Bir and McKay, August 2009). This brief is available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/Corrections-Based/rb.pdf.

organizations with expertise serving individuals and families in the local communities to which their participants were returning, particularly in the areas of housing, employment assistance, domestic violence response, and substance abuse treatment.

In recruiting community partners program staff encountered three significant challenges:

- Community partners' lack of experience serving justice-involved men and their families
- Long delays between initial partnership building and release of first program participants into the community
- Differences in organizational mission or service philosophy

Programs that served families in a wide geographic catchment area post-release (two of the twelve sites) seemed to invest more heavily in the continuity of these partnerships than did those focused on in-prison service delivery and/or a smaller community catchment area. Community partnerships were also more likely to succeed when they were based on a working relationship that preceded the MFS-IP grant, when they were actively maintained through communications from the grantee throughout the grant period (even during times when no participants were being served in the community), or when community partners did not have to wait for MFS-IP program participants to be released in order to begin services.

Many sites struggled with community-based service delivery and made numerous changes to their community-based services during the grant period, commonly: 1) adding community-based relationship skills classes for women or couples in an effort to include women who were unable to attend prison-based classes, 2) adding new partnerships (such as housing, employment or child support agencies) to meet participants' post-release needs, or 3) eliminating low-enrolling community-based services in order to focus resources on prison-based activities. As noted in Section 2, sites found it extremely difficult to recruit and retain families in community-based programming, and many did not continue to try. Several characteristics were evident among sites that did continue to offer these services (about one third of the grantees):

- Strong leadership commitment to offering services in the community

- Infrastructure for community-based service delivery (programming space, staff with time and skills to deliver community-based services)

- Access to a population of released men being served through other programs (either at the grantee agency or a partner agency)

- Strong referral partnerships with community-based organizations serving the same target population as the MFS-IP program

Yet even among grantees that continued to attempt it, few were ever able to build strong participation in community-based services.

Did Grantee Agency Type Determine Success?

Corrections and human services agency grantees experienced some of the same challenges with regard to prison- and community-based service delivery, but each type of agency brought assets to the task that were not shared by the other. Perhaps as a result, some correctional system grantees felt that their success in MFS-IP service delivery would have been impossible had they been a human services agency—while some human services agency grantees believed that successful implementation would have been impossible for a correctional agency.

Neither perspective was supported by cross-site data; grantees' **success did not hinge on whether they came from the corrections or human services fields**. Yet it often did depend on their experience and skill at building the corrections-community collaborations required to effectively serve families whose lives were lived on both sides of the prison gates.

Building Safe Relationships: Addressing Domestic Violence

The time of incarceration and reentry targeted by MFS-IP programs presents opportunities for justice-involved men and their partners to build better family relationships. Reentry can also be

> *"Even if they didn't commit a violent offense to get here, just by being in a prison they're being steeped in violence."*
> —former MFS-IP grantee (CA)

a time of elevated risk, as couples struggle to safely rebuild their relationships after release. Recognizing this possibility, OFA required that each grantee demonstrate plans to partner with a domestic violence coalition or expert consultant and develop a domestic violence protocol. Sites' approaches to each of these requirements—and their perceived success—varied widely.[8]

Building New Partnerships with Domestic Violence Agencies

Grantees partnered with statewide domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, local domestic violence service agencies focused on providing services for victims and batterers, or both. Partnerships between MFS-IP grantees and their local domestic violence organizations often broke new ground, with domestic violence agency staff at several sites expressing **early concerns about the idea of providing family strengthening services to justice-involved men** and their families. Some planned partnerships never crystallized because this hurdle could not be overcome.

Among grantees that succeeded in establishing initial partnership agreements with domestic violence agencies, two challenges frequently arose. First, the screening procedures used by some agencies to identify elevated risk for domestic violence yielded fewer than anticipated referrals for services, which was a source of frustration and concern for domestic violence agencies. Second, domestic violence agencies that were paid by grantees to provide services (such as educational workshops) to MFS-IP staff or participants often experienced challenges related to their own **lack of infrastructure for corrections-based service delivery** and lack of familiarity with the protocols and constraints associated with providing programming in correctional facilities.

Despite these significant obstacles, grantees familiar with the domestic violence field were often able to navigate domestic violence partnerships successfully. To be successful, it was important for MFS-IP program staff to:

- Be willing to learn and speak the language of domestic violence organizations
- Anticipate and respond to their concerns around victim safety
- Build interpersonal trust with individual domestic violence service providers

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[8] For more on domestic violence, see the ASPE Research Brief, *Addressing Domestic Violence in Family Strengthening Programs for Couples Affected by Incarceration* (McKay, Bir, Lindquist, Steffey, Keyes, and Siegel, March 2013). This brief is available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/13/MFS-IPDomesticViolence/rpt.pdf.

In addition, **involving domestic violence agency partners during the program planning stage proved crucial** to securing their full buy-in and ongoing investment in the program. While having a partner's early involvement in program design is considered ideal in many situations, it was truly crucial for partnerships requiring as much mutual education and trust-building as those between MFS-IP grantees and domestic violence organizations. Grantees with successful partnerships sought and incorporated the guidance of domestic violence agency partners in every aspect of program approach, including staff training requirements, program eligibility criteria, screening and recruitment procedures, and service delivery protocols.

Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence

A **need for stronger approaches to domestic violence screening** with justice-involved couples was evident based on the implementation evaluation reviews of MFS-IP grantees. There were no uniform requirements for domestic violence screening, and the approach used by most grantees at the time of initial enrollment (asking incarcerated men if they abused their partners) rarely identified any couples at elevated risk. More promising strategies, implemented by fewer grantees, included:

> *"It's a safety consideration. If you just used the Propensity for Abusiveness Scale with men, you'd miss 15% of [couples at elevated risk for domestic violence]. If you only used the Family Secret Scale with women, you'd miss about 12–13%."*
> *—former MFS-IP grantee (SD)*

- Interviewing incarcerated men about risk factors for potential abusiveness, rather than asking them to directly self-disclose (illegal) abusive behavior

- Conducting a separate domestic violence screening with each member of the enrolled or prospective couple

- Screening participants later during their program participation, once trust had been built with staff

As might be expected, across all sites, screening approaches focused primarily on identifying men's abuse of their female partners. However, given survey findings from this evaluation on the degree to which both members of the couple engage in violence, one-sided screening might not be adequate for couples in this population.[9]

OFA required that all grantees develop a domestic violence protocol, but there were no uniform requirements for what that protocol would include. At sites that worked closely with a domestic violence partner or expert consultant, protocols included a description of risk screening and assessment procedures; services to be provided to individuals identified as being at elevated risk; and plans for responding to incidents of domestic violence that might occur during program participation. Other sites interpreted the "protocol" requirement differently, producing documents such as an MOU with a domestic violence agency partner or a description of educational content on domestic violence to be delivered to participants. A **need for more guidance on the expected elements of a domestic violence protocol** was evident. Ideally, a template provided by OFA could be customized by grantees with the help of a local domestic violence agency partner.

Regardless of their content, **sites' specific domestic violence protocols were rarely used, because few identified any couples as being at elevated risk for domestic violence** during program participation. However, many incorporated domestic violence education into other

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[9] Ibid.

program components delivered to men, women or couples. Sites used relationship or parenting education curricula that incorporated content on domestic violence, or added brief stand-alone modules for delivery by course instructors or by a domestic violence agency partner. This approach was aimed at preventing domestic violence among all participants and encouraging voluntary help-seeking among those who might be at risk for perpetration and/or victimization.

The strategy of relying on couples who were experiencing domestic violence to self-identify and self-refer for help proved inadequate. Grantees that took this approach (the overwhelming majority of MFS-IP sites) were often unaware of any need for domestic violence services among their participants. Yet one site that took a multi-component approach to screening and assessment found that almost half of its prospective program participants were at elevated risk for domestic violence and needed specialized services to address the abuse before they could safely participate in the MFS-IP program. These experiences suggest that a general preventive approach to **domestic violence education must be paired with effectively identifying and serving those participants at elevated risk.** This would include better screening (e.g., interviewing both members of a couple, screening for perpetration risk factors and not just perpetration history, and assessing domestic violence risk after staff-participant trust is built), as well as offering direct domestic violence response services (such as 26-week batterer intervention courses) and providing staff-assisted referrals to local partner agencies with which the grantee has an established relationship.

Building Relationships for Sustainability and Future Success

Sustaining an Innovation

Many MFS-IP grantees branched out significantly from their prior work in responding to OFA's 2006 funding announcement, which deliberately required an innovative service delivery model. Implementing the MFS-IP initiative stretched some grantee agencies beyond their prior focus or service delivery experience. That fact also provided inherent challenges to continuing services beyond the demonstration grant period. Yet after federal funding ended, grantees remained committed to strengthening family relationships among couples separated by incarceration, and most continued to deliver some aspects of their MFS-IP programs—however, few were able to sustain a specific focus on couples-based service delivery.

Characteristics that Supported Program Continuation

All grantees, regardless of whether they had delivered family strengthening services to justice-involved families prior to the MFS-IP grants, expressed a strong commitment to continuing this work after OFA funding ended. As the grant period drew to a close, program leaders focused their sustainability efforts on federal grant-seeking, with some also exploring potential support from their state departments of correction.

Five of the twelve grantees received new federal grants to continue the work begun under the MFS-IP initiative. These **federally-funded sites retained many of their original program components**, and made adjustments to eligibility criteria and specific program components based on new federal requirements as well as lessons learned during MFS-IP implementation (see text box, "Where Are the MFS-IP Grantees Now?").

Where Are the MFS-IP Grantees Now?

All twelve MFS-IP grantees were re-contacted in fall 2012, one year after the end of their 2006-2011 OFA grants.

- Three former MFS-IP grantees (SD, NJ, OH) continued their programs with funding from OFA's Community-Centered Responsible Fatherhood Ex-Prisoner Reentry Pilot initiative. All three programs retained their core MFS-IP services, increased their focus on meeting men's post-release needs, and dropped or lessened their focus on couples-based services and services for female partners.

- Two (MI, TN) continued their programs with funding from OFA's Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood initiative. Both retained their MFS-IP service delivery approaches and added more employment-related activities. MI added economic education and dropped couples-based relationship education.

- One (MD) continued all of its MFS-IP services with support from the Montgomery County Department of Human Services, adding housing and child support related services.

- Three (IN, NY, NH) offered aspects of their MFS-IP programs (e.g., parenting and relationship education, video visiting, child-friendly visitation) with support from their state departments of correction, supplemented with support from other local funding sources.

- Two (CA, MN) continued to provide some of their MFS-IP services on a smaller scale via local public and private foundation funders.

- Former staff at one grantee agency (TX) could not be reached for interviews.

Six other programs continued to deliver services in a variety of ways. They returned to projects begun before the MFS-IP grants, embarked on new federal grants in other areas, or found local funding to implement their MFS-IP activities on a smaller scale. One program ceased operating.

Several characteristics made it easier for some grantees without ongoing federal funding to continue offering MFS-IP services. First, programs that brought substantial **prior experience (and a mission focus) in delivering family-oriented services to justice-involved families** often offered related services through other funding streams. This allowed MFS-IP program components to be more readily incorporated into other, similar programs or to be delivered by longer-term agency staff members who were retained after the MFS-IP grant ended.

Second, **certain program models lent themselves more readily to "scaling down"** to lower funding levels. Curriculum-driven programs (those that centered on delivery of relationship and parenting education courses) proved easier to sustain in the absence of federal funding than programs focused on high-intensity, individualized service delivery (such as intensive case management). Sites found they could offer family strengthening courses as frequently or infrequently as their resources allowed. In addition, some grantees had the opportunity to train a wide pool of volunteers or long-term staff on their curricula during the course of their MFS-IP grants. This gave them the option of continuing relationship or parenting courses at lower cost after the grant ended.

Finally, the strength of the reputation that programs developed in the prison system—with state-level correctional administrators, facility-level administrators, correctional staff, and incarcerated men—exerted an important influence on their ability to continue delivering family strengthening services without federal funding. Programs that built a **strong reputation inside the correctional institution(s) where they operated found that stakeholders would not accept the program's discontinuation**, and in some cases decided to fund continued programming rather than see it disappear.

> *"Right now inside San Quentin, there isn't a day that I go in there that a member of the corrections staff or a person who lives there doesn't ask me when we're going to bring back the program. I've committed myself to do that."*
>
> —former MFS-IP grantee (CA)

Increasing the Impact of Future Programs

What Services Should Family Strengthening Programs Offer—and When?

When asked what they had learned from program implementation, many grantees identified specific components that they wished they had included in their original MFS-IP program designs. These included fathers-only relationship or parenting classes and employment-related supports. Above all, program leaders stressed the **importance of job placement assistance** to men's reentry success, family relationships, and continued attachment to family strengthening services. They believed that holistic programming designed to address a variety of needs beyond relationship and parenting education (including substance abuse treatment, employment and housing) could increase program uptake and impact. The experiences of MFS-IP grantees that embedded family strengthening services in the context of faith- or character-based programming (one third of sites) suggested that **supporting individual transformation was crucial** in preparing participants for reentry into families and communities.

> *"We're now spending more time directly with the dads while they're incarcerated. That has helped us keep in contact with them on the outside [after release]."*
> *—former MFS-IP grantee (SD)*

Grantees also argued that the timing of services was key. During the grant period, several sites switched the order in which they offered their family skills courses. They suggested that providing men with parenting and/or character-building courses before offering relationship education (rather than the other way around) proved more effective in engaging prospective participants. Perspectives differed somewhat on the most desirable timing of services relative to the incarceration term, but several grantees (including those that had focused more on immediate pre-release services in their MFS-IP programs) argued for **engaging men early and often during the incarceration** term. Staff-participant relationships that were built via frequent contact *before* men began preparing for imminent release seemed more likely to endure through the transition out into the community. Grantees also suggested that frequent contact after release could make the difference between meaningful ongoing engagement and complete loss of contact with the program.

> *"As someone is getting close to getting home, they're focused on getting out there and getting a job. You have to engage them in the family stuff way before they're anticipating getting out of the gate—ideally as they're coming in."*
> *—former MFS-IP grantee (NY)*

Whom Should Family Strengthening Programs Serve?

Some grantees felt that **defining "family" more broadly when serving incarcerated fathers** would help increase the impact of programming. They suggested that incarcerated men's romantic and parenting relationship structures are often complex, and also that incarcerated men often draw on crucial support from a family member other than a romantic partner (e.g., their mothers). Their ideas for refocusing eligibility criteria for family strengthening services for this population included:

- Asking each incarcerated enrollee to identify the family members who would play an important role during his/her incarceration and reentry and serving those family members

- Treating each child of an incarcerated parent as the center of a family unit and serving any adults who are involved in raising that child

Grantees believed that relationship strengthening work was a crucial aspect of reentry support for fathers, yet they had mixed perceptions of the MFS-IP initiative's focus on serving the

> *"The eligibility criteria are much expanded compared to our MFS-IP program. [We're] getting more bang for the buck and being able to meet more families' needs."*
> —former MFS-IP grantee (MN)

romantic partners of these fathers. Sites that continued to offer services after their MFS-IP grants tended to **eliminate the requirement for a spouse or committed partner's participation** and to lessen their focus on providing services for these partners in the community. Those organizations that had expanded their eligibility criteria to allow incarcerated parents to participate without a co-enrolled partner tended to state that doing so had allowed them to serve more families with their resources.

How Critical Is Clear Guidance for Program Implementation?

To support the success of future programs serving correctional populations, grantees suggested that clear, consistent communication about eligibility requirements and allowable activities was crucial. Every detail of MFS-IP service delivery had to be painstakingly negotiated within correctional system bureaucracy, so even minor changes in plan caused enormous delays. Grantees whose original program plans were consistent with OFA objectives and requirements fared much better during program start-up than those who had to modify their plans (and partnership agreements) to comply. Those who had a **clear understanding of OFA's eligibility requirements**, particularly with regard to relationship and parenting status and whether both members of the couple were willing to participate, experienced greater program stability through the grant period.

Grantees noted that communication among program directors of similar MFS-IP programs proved invaluable to implementation success. In many cases, grantees' efforts were pioneering and they had few models or peers to draw on besides one another. OFA's efforts to facilitate **peer-to-peer contact** helped to encourage innovative solutions to common obstacles and challenges.

What Is the Legacy of the MFS-IP Initiative?

One year after their MFS-IP grants ended, program leaders described a **lasting impact of the initiative on their own work, their organizations, and their communities**. Many sites attributed the following changes to MFS-IP program implementation:

- More recognition among state correctional administrators and state prison staff of the importance of family relationships in reentry

> *"I think there's been an actual cultural shift. Facilities, administration, custody [staff] are now seeing programs that help, and it's changed their attitudes overall."*
> —former MFS-IP grantee (IN)

- More competence and familiarity on the part of community organizations in serving reentering men and their families

- Enduring partnerships, particularly between corrections and community agencies, and also among community agencies specializing in prison-based service delivery and those specializing in community-based service delivery (e.g., employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, and child services agencies)

- The initiation or strengthening of community-wide reentry councils or other interagency coordination efforts

A few sites noted other changes, such as improved data sharing between corrections and human services agencies, and more recognition of the importance of a case management or case advocacy approach in serving incarcerated and reentering fathers.

Conclusion

The MFS-IP initiative represented a groundbreaking effort to recognize and respond to the impact of incarceration on families and the crucial role of family support in reentry success. No one program model was required for MFS-IP grantees, and sites varied widely in the program components delivered and service delivery approaches implemented. The MFS-IP implementation evaluation identified common elements of program design, organizational capacity, and operational strategy that shaped grantees' successes and failures in bringing their programs to scale.[10] These implementation findings can help inform ongoing work with families in correctional and reentry settings.

Implications for Reentry Collaboratives

For those working to support reentry through collaboration among correctional agencies, community-based reentry organizations, employers, housing providers, and others serving reentering persons and their families, these evaluation findings suggest:

- To lay the groundwork for productive collaboration on family skills interventions for justice-involved families, it is important to **create opportunities for local domestic violence agencies, correctional agencies, and human services agencies to network and build relationships**. Support is also needed for local human services and domestic violence agencies in their effort to **understand the culture and protocol of local correctional agencies** and **identify unmet programming needs** in the corrections and community supervision systems.

- To keep family skills programming relevant and responsive within a changing justice system, identify whether local correctional systems are moving (or have moved) toward risk-based program assignment. If so, explore ways to incorporate family skills programming into this framework. Programs should also identify and **use validated risk assessment tools** to assess risk, **target family skills program participants for the greatest potential impact**, and **separate participants by risk level** when providing programming.

Implications for Program Designers and Curriculum Developers

Examining successes and failures among the array of program models and curricula implemented by MFS-IP grantees, several lessons emerge for designing future programs in this area:

- To reach justice-involved families at times of greatest need and readiness, **begin working with participants early in the incarceration term** (such as at the time of a father's admission to prison) **and continue working with them after release**.

- To maximize fit between program design and target population, **deliver couples-based program components in one-time or short-term formats (e.g., weekend seminars).** Also

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[10] For complete implementation study findings, see the final technical report prepared for ASPE, *The Implementation of Family Strengthening Programs for Families Affected by Incarceration* (Lindquist, McKay, Corwin and Bir, June 2013). The report is available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/mfs-ip/.

consider providing extended coursework and services to incarcerated fathers without requiring partner participation.

- To increase the potential for personal transformation in family strengthening programs, **combine family skills education with cognitive behavioral skill-building** that helps participants to change their thinking patterns and emphasize the potential for **positive identity development** among incarcerated and reentering men through meaningful family relationships such as fatherhood.

Implications for Potential Funders

Successful implementation is a key prerequisite for building program models that can be rigorously tested. Strategies for program development suggested by the MFS-IP evaluation include:

- To support the most efficient use of funding resources, allow and encourage grantees to **"cast a wide net"** with regard to program enrollment: defining program eligibility criteria broadly, and providing as many points of entry into the program as possible (e.g., working with multiple prison facilities and/or multiple community venues serving released fathers).

- To help programs meet their enrollment targets and better retain participants, permit grantees to **offer incentives that are specifically meaningful to incarcerated fathers and their partners** (e.g., time credits, special visitation opportunities, storybooks or school uniforms for children).

- To increase the perceived relevance of programming aimed at improving family relationship skills, require grantees to **provide ancillary services that meet families' practical needs**, such as assistance with job training and placement, child support order modification, housing placement, and public benefits applications.

- To **identify applicants with organizational capacity for serving incarcerated fathers and their partners**, prioritize those with experience delivering programmatic interventions in highly-structured environments, a history of strong corrections-community partnerships, and/or strong partnerships between fatherhood/reentry agencies and domestic violence organizations.

This initiative brought together organizations from fields that had not historically collaborated—corrections, human services, and domestic violence agencies—in support of healthy relationships, positive parenting, and economic stability among justice-involved families. The efforts of these pioneering practitioners have yielded insights that build the growing field of implementation science and support HHS's continued commitment to identifying effective approaches for serving parents and children affected by incarceration.

> *"Fatherhood and healthy marriage has been the missing component to successful reentry. Even if you have the job, the treatment, the housing, if you don't have the connections and support, you're just treating the symptoms and you aren't treating the root problems that most often exist within family relationships. We're starting to be a part of a cultural shift in which people realize the importance of family relationships in successful reentry."*
> —*former MFS-IP grantee (OH)*

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 Responsible Fatherhood, 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: Implementation interviews were conducted with each grantee yearly through fall 2010, and again in fall 2012. Interview respondents included program staff, community partners, and participants. The implementation evaluation focused on 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 five 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 Web site: 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 Web site, https://mfs.rti.org.

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

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