

# ***Empowering Families:*** **Implementation of an** **integrated HMRE, employment,** **and financial literacy program** **for low-income couples**



April 2020



**Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services**

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***Empowering Families:***  
**Implementation of an**  
**Integrated HMRE,**  
**Employment, and Financial**  
**Literacy Program for Low-**  
**Income Couples**

Report

April 2020

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The STREAMS evaluation is directed by Rob Wood and Brian Goesling. Diane Paulsell is the principal investigator. Katie Bodenlos is the project manager. Our partner on STREAMS, Public Strategies, is led by Mary Myrick. We are especially grateful to Patricia Del Grosso for her invaluable feedback on the organization and structure of the report. We appreciate Jennifer Brown for her diligent editing; Dawn Patterson for her efficient formatting; and Gwyneth Olson and Brigitte Tran for their graphic design expertise.

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## OVERVIEW

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The Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation is a random assignment impact study and in-depth process study of five Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) grantees funded by ACF’s Office of Family Assistance (OFA). To maximize its contributions to the evidence base and to inform future program and evaluation design, STREAMS is examining a wide range of populations served by HMRE programs, including adult individuals, adult couples, and youth in high schools. Each STREAMS site functions as a separate study within the larger evaluation, with each addressing a distinct research question.

This process study report presents findings on The Parenting Center’s experiences designing and implementing Empowering Families, a program developed to offer integrated HMRE and economic stability services to couples raising children together. Empowering Families offered couples four core program components: (1) a series of eight group workshop sessions using the *Family Wellness* curriculum along with economic stability content, (2) employment services and referrals to training, (3) financial coaching, and (4) case management.

The Parenting Center worked closely with the STREAMS technical assistance team and the *Family Wellness* curriculum developers to integrate the HMRE and economic stability content into a unified set of workshop sessions. The Parenting Center partnered with two local organizations with expertise in employment services and financial literacy – Community Learning Center (CLC) and Pathfinders, respectively. Staff from CLC and Pathfinders led two workshop sessions, on employment and financial literacy, and provided one-on-one employment counseling and financial coaching.

The STREAMS impact evaluation is evaluating the effectiveness of Empowering Families. STREAMS is testing whether Empowering Families’ program of integrated HMRE and intensive economic stability services will lead to effects on participants’ employment and earnings, as well as other outcomes such as relationship quality and co-parenting. The process study, the focus of this report, examines (1) the preparations for program implementation; (2) the procedures for hiring, training, and supervising program facilitators, case managers, and recruiters; (3) the extent to which *Family Wellness* was implemented with fidelity; and (4) participants’ engagement in and responsiveness to the program.

This report is based on analysis of data from the following four sources, collected to document Empowering Families’ 1.5 years of operation (September 2016 – April 2018).

1. **Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations.** We conducted a four-day site visit in April 2018 to collect qualitative data. We interviewed 25 staff from Empowering Families and its partners. We observed two *Family Wellness* curriculum sessions, and held a focus group with four participants who attended the core workshops.
2. **Staff survey.** All active program staff who facilitated *Family Wellness* or provided case management and one supervisor completed a web-based survey in April 2018. The survey asked about their work roles and experiences; feelings toward the program; and impressions of the quality of their supervision, training opportunities, and organizational climate.

3. **Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) data.** nFORM was the client management system that OFA provided to Empowering Families and other 2015 grantees. Empowering Families staff entered data on workshop and case management attendance in the system. After each *Family Wellness* workshop session, Empowering Families educators completed a short self-assessment, or adherence form, to report on their ability to deliver that day's planned content and engage participants. The addition of the adherence form was a modification to the nFORM system for sites participating in the STREAMS evaluation which was intended to capture session delivery information. We analyzed nFORM data on 344 couples who enrolled from September 2016 to April 2018.
4. **STREAMS baseline survey.** Participants completed a baseline survey that was administered during their intake appointment. We analyzed survey responses from 344 couples who enrolled and completed the survey from September 2016 to April 2018.

Findings from this process study will provide context and help interpret impact evaluation findings. Key findings are:

- ***Family Wellness* workshops were well-attended and provided useful information for couples' lives and a safe space for learning.** Couples enrolled in Empowering Families had strong initial engagement (85 percent received at least one program service) and high participation rates in the workshops (attending 70 percent of sessions, on average). Couples' viewed the classroom as a safe place to ask questions and learn new skills because they trusted the facilitators and other couples in the class. Participation supports, such as transportation assistance, meals, and on-site child care, supported attendance at the workshops.
- **Couples engaged in employment services at intended levels, but did not take up other individual services as much as expected.** Empowering Families provided employment counseling to almost 40 percent of couples, which was in line with their goals. However, fewer participants than planned engaged in case management and financial coaching. Most participants were working parents with limited time, which made taking up all of the services challenging. The program made changes during the first year to try to accommodate couples' schedules such as increasing flexibility of staff hours.
- **Participation in all Empowering Families services was particularly high for Spanish-speaking couples.** Spanish-speaking couples participated in all services at higher rates than did English-speaking couples. More dynamic Spanish-speaking facilitators and a strong sense of community among Spanish-speaking couples might have driven this success. The program also provided a mix of economic stability services that was better aligned to the services this population desired.
- **Implementing Empowering Families was complex, requiring three agencies to partner to integrate relationship skills and economic stability services.** The Parenting Center partnered with experienced organizations that brought the needed expertise to deliver the employment and financial literacy content during workshops and engage with couples in one-on-one services. During early implementation, the Parenting Center focused heavily on coordination across agencies and consistent messaging about the aims of the program. As a result, staff across agencies expressed commitment to the goals of Empowering Families and felt they were key players in helping couples get the most out of the program.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

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Since the passage of welfare reform in the mid-1990s, the federal government has promoted programs and policies to strengthen healthy relationships and marriage based on research showing that children fare better when they are raised in stable, two-parent families (Dion 2005). Beginning in the mid-2000s, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), has provided grants to agencies implementing healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programming for a range of populations, including couples, adult individuals, and youth.<sup>1</sup> In the 2015 round of funding, OFA placed a particular emphasis on programs that integrate HMRE services with services to promote economic stability (OFA 2015). Integrating HMRE and economic stability services can pose challenges, because commonly available curricula typically address either healthy relationships or economic stability, but not both.

To help build the knowledge base on this emerging approach to supporting families, ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), with funding from OFA, contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to rigorously evaluate Empowering Families, an innovative program that integrated HMRE and economic stability services in a program for low-income couples raising children together. The study is part of the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation, a five-site random assignment evaluation of HMRE programs and strategies. The Parenting Center, a community-based social service provider in Fort Worth, Texas, operates Empowering Families.

The Parenting Center developed Empowering Families by building on findings from the Parents and Children Together (PACT) study, which examined two of the first HMRE programs to offer supplemental economic stability services to enrolled couples (Zaveri and Dion 2015; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). The PACT study found that although many participating couples had low incomes, take-up of stand-alone employment services was low, perhaps because couples enrolled primarily to improve their romantic relationships. To address this potential challenge, The Parenting Center aimed to recruit couples interested in both HMRE and economic stability services, offer more-intensive employment supports, and integrate the two types of services as much as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act (P.L. 109-171), which first authorized funding for HMRE programs. The funding, administered through OFA, supports grants for programs to offer one or more of eight allowable activities. The funding was reauthorized in 2010, through the Claims Resolution Act (P.L. 111-291). Following passage of the Deficit Reduction Act, there have been three rounds of grants made to HMRE programs across the country (2006, 2010, and 2015).

### Box I.1. The STREAMS evaluation of Empowering Families

The STREAMS evaluation of Empowering Families has two components: (1) an impact study and (2) a process study.

The impact study uses a random assignment research design to examine the effectiveness of the Empowering Families program using surveys of participants that are administered at two time points: (1) during their intake appointment and (2) about a year later, either through a web survey or by telephone. Key outcomes include relationship quality, co-parenting, father involvement, employment and earnings, and economic well-being. The impact analysis will also examine effects on other potential program outcomes, such as attitudes toward healthy relationships and marriage, and steps participants have taken to find better jobs and plan for their financial futures.

The process study, which is the focus of this report, is based on four sources of data collected during Empowering Families' first year of operation:

1. **Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations.** We conducted a four-day site visit in April 2018 to collect qualitative data. We interviewed 25 staff from Empowering Families and its partners, including Empowering Families educators (facilitators), family support specialists (case managers), financial coaches, employment counselors, the program coordinator, supervisors, the program director, and the chief executive officer. We observed two sessions of *Family Wellness*, which is the HMRE curriculum Empowering Families uses—one in English, and one in Spanish—and held a focus group with four participants who attended the core workshops.
2. **Staff survey.** All active program staff who facilitated *Family Wellness* or provided case management and one supervisor completed a web-based survey in April 2018. The survey asked about their work roles and experiences; feelings toward the program; and impressions of the quality of their supervision, training opportunities, and organizational climate.
3. **nFORM data.** nFORM was the client management system that OFA provided to Empowering Families and other 2015 grantees. Empowering Families staff entered data on workshop and case management attendance in the system. After each *Family Wellness* workshop session, Empowering Families educators completed a short self-assessment, or adherence form, to report on their ability to deliver that day's planned content and engage participants. The addition of the adherence form was a modification to the nFORM system for sites participating in the STREAMS evaluation which was intended to capture session delivery information. We analyzed nFORM data on 344 couples who enrolled from September 2016 to April 2018.
4. **STREAMS baseline survey.** Participants completed a baseline survey that was administered during their intake appointment. We analyzed survey responses from 344 couples who enrolled and completed the survey from September 2016 to April 2018.

This process study of Empowering Families documents The Parenting Center's experiences designing and implementing this approach to offering integrated HMRE and economic stability services to couples raising children together. Conducted in conjunction with a rigorous impact study of Empowering Families, it will help stakeholders interpret the impact study findings and document program operations to support future replication if the programming is shown to be effective. The study relies on multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews with program staff, focus groups with participants, observations of program services, and program data on participation (Box I.1). The study examines (1) the preparations for program implementation; (2) the procedures for hiring, training, and supervising program facilitators, case managers, and recruiters; (3) the extent to which *Family Wellness* was implemented with fidelity; and (4) participants' engagement in and responsiveness to the program.

### Empowering Families

The Parenting Center designed Empowering Families for couples who were economically disadvantaged, raising children, and interested in HMRE, employment, and financial coaching services. To be eligible for the program, both members of the couple had to be (1) age 18 or older, (2) in a relationship with each other, (3) interested in participating in both HMRE and

economic stability services, and (4) not currently experiencing domestic violence. In addition, at least one member of the couple had to have a biological or adopted child younger than 18 who lived with the couple at least half time.

With support from the STREAMS technical assistance (TA) team and the *Family Wellness* developers, The Parenting Center designed Empowering Families to deliver a comprehensive set of services to couples raising children. Building on the core principles of *Family Wellness*, The Parenting Center integrated employment and financial literacy topics into an eight-session HMRE group workshop (Table I.1) and offered additional services to couples in one-on-one sessions. Empowering Families had four program components:

1. **Family Wellness workshop.** An eight-session workshop integrated the *Family Wellness* HMRE curriculum with information about employment and financial literacy. Two staff co-facilitated each workshop session, which lasted 2.5 hours, and The Parenting Center provided dinner to participants and their children 30 minutes before the session started. The program offered workshops in both English and Spanish.
2. **Case management.** Following program intake, the program assigned each couple to a case manager to help them navigate the Empowering Families program. Case managers aimed to meet with couples monthly for six months, either in person or by phone. Case managers referred participants to supportive services and reinforced concepts from the curriculum during the one-on-one meetings.
3. **Employment services.** Participants attended sessions with an employment counselor (either on their own or with their partner) to discuss their employment goals. Employment counselors also discussed training, education, and support services available to help participants reach employment goals. Employment counselors then connected participants to education and training of interest to them and provided ongoing support services such as career planning or resume preparation.
4. **Financial coaching.** The program offered four individual coaching sessions with a financial coach to help couples identify financial goals and develop a customized plan to reach those goals.

In addition, Empowering Families provided child care and transportation to support participation and financial incentives to encourage couples to attend program services.

**Table I.1. Description of *Family Wellness* workshop sessions**

Session number	Session title	Description
1	Getting started: Being a strong team	Participants learn about relationship dynamics, skills such as listening and cooperation, and patterns that appear in healthy families, such as parents having equal power and mutual respect.
2	Two worlds, one relationship	Participants learn the importance of understanding their partner. Each member of the couple discusses what he or she wants out of the relationship and hears from the other about personal expectations.

Table I.1 (*continued*)

Session number	Session title	Description
3	Building a strong team	Participants learn the skills for communicating their needs and negotiating with each other. They also learn and practice problem-solving skills.
4	Vision for your career	Participants take part in an exercise to reflect on their current employment situation, identify their future goals, and develop action steps to reach those goals.
5	Parents as leaders/Parents as models/Parents in healthy families	Participants learn the dual role of parenting: to lead and to model. Participants learn how to make rules, stick together, and stay in charge, and how to spend time with, listen to, and encourage their children.
6	Financial literacy: Money matters and goal setting and budgeting	Participants learn how to create a family budget, save money, and create an action plan to take steps toward a goal.
7	As children grow	Participants learn how to problem solve as family dynamics change.
8	Keeping the fire alive	Participants learn how to build and maintain intimacy, and the importance of scheduling time to spend together as a couple.

Note: For a limited number of workshop series, Session 6, *Financial Literacy*, occurred during Week 4, and Session 4, *Vision for your career*, occurred during Week 6.

### The Parenting Center and its partners

The Parenting Center, a nonprofit, social service agency in Fort Worth, Texas, has served the families of Fort Worth and surrounding communities since 1974. The Parenting Center offers services on parenting and relationship skills, with a particular emphasis on services designed to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. In 2015, The Parenting Center was awarded an HMRE grant by OFA to design and operate Empowering Families. To implement the program, The Parenting Center partnered with two local organizations with expertise in employment services and financial literacy:

The Parenting Center’s mission is “to provide family members and professionals with the tools, resources, and services to build successful families.”

- The **Community Learning Center (CLC)** was founded in 2000 with the goal to help dislocated workers reenter the workforce. This organization has strong partnerships with employers in the Fort Worth community, including Lockheed Martin Corporation, Bell, and Vogt. As part of Empowering Families, employment counselors employed through CLC provide employment services to couples. CLC took over as the employment partner in May 2017 from Catholic Charities, which left the partnership after providing services for the first eight months of program operation.<sup>2</sup>
- **Pathfinders** formed in 1996 to empower individuals and families to move from poverty to self-sufficiency. The organization provides financial coaching to low-income families in Fort Worth. As part of Empowering Families, Pathfinders’ financial coaches serve enrolled couples.

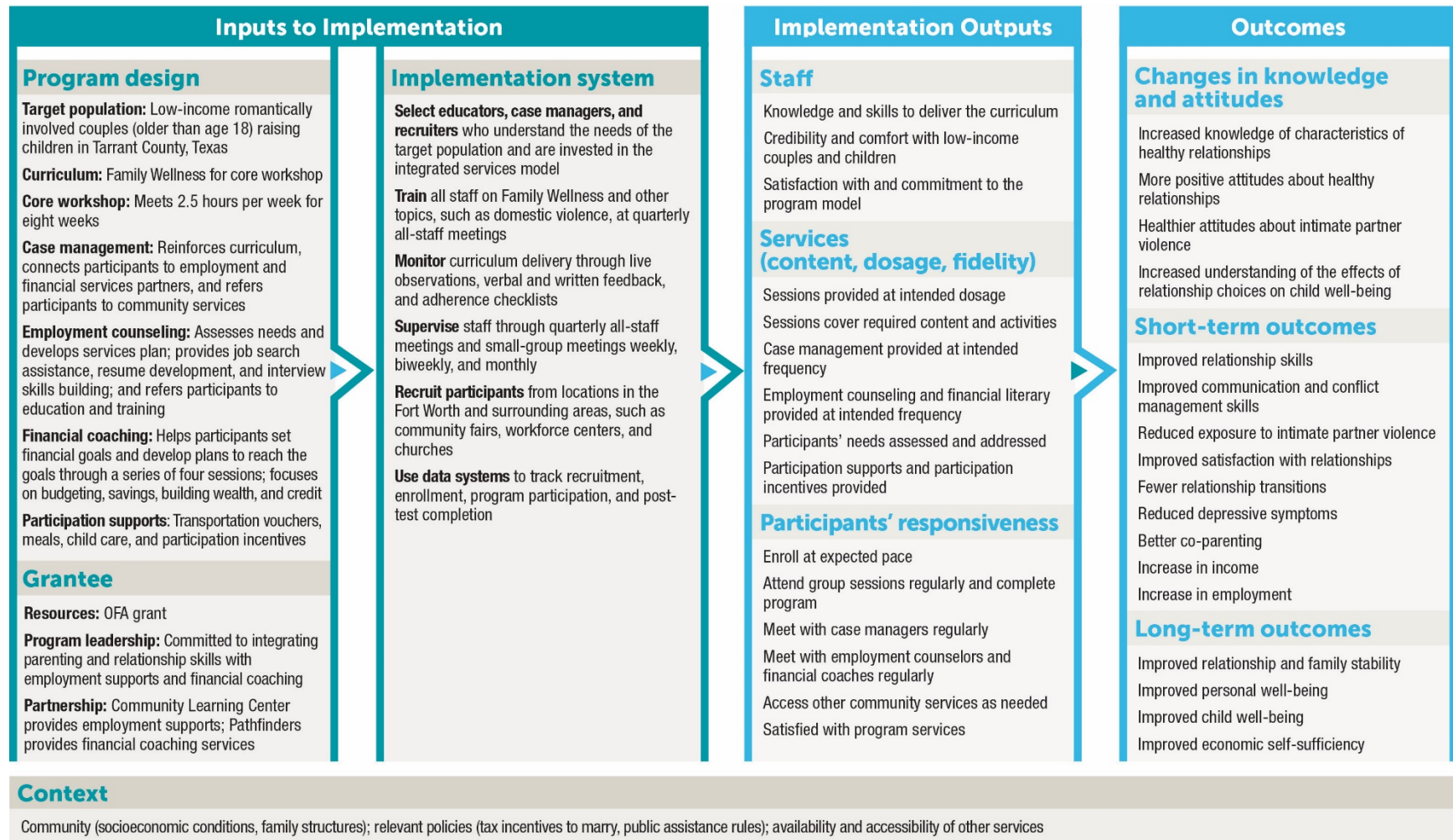
<sup>2</sup> We discuss this transition from Catholic Charities to CLC further in Chapter III.



**Report roadmap**

This process study report presents findings on Empowering Families during its first 1.5 years of operation, from September 2016 to April 2018. The report is informed by and follows the structure of an implementation framework (Figure I.1). Chapter II describes the context for implementation. Chapter III describes the program design. Chapter IV discusses the systems that Empowering Families used to recruit program participants. Chapter V discusses the implementation system and implementation outputs related to program staff. Chapter VI presents implementation outputs related to services. Chapter VII summarizes the main findings about implementing the Empowering Families program. The outcomes shown in the implementation framework are the focus of the impact study of Empowering Families, which continued to enroll sample members throughout 2018.

**Figure I.1. Implementation framework for *Empowering Families* in Fort Worth, Texas**



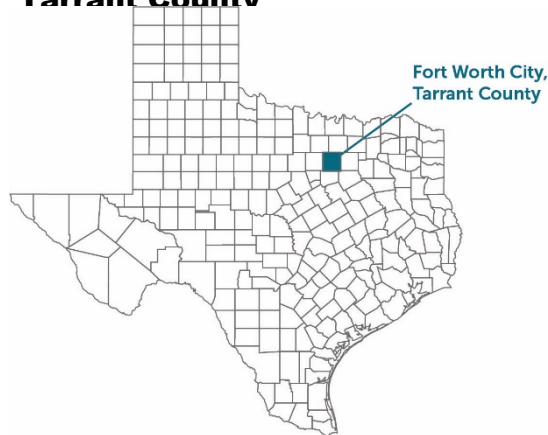
## II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT FOR IMPLEMENTING EMPOWERING FAMILIES

Where a program operates and whom it serves affects how it is implemented and how effective it is relative to other services available in the community. For example, characteristics of a program’s target population or local policies may drive decisions about how to tailor services. Community characteristics, such as the unemployment rate or the prevalence of intimate partner violence, can establish the need for a program. When examining a program’s effectiveness by conducting a random assignment impact study, the availability of similar services in the community may make it harder to distinguish the program’s effects if couples in the control group access those services. This chapter describes the context for Empowering Families in Fort Worth, Texas, as well as similar services available in the community.

### Fort Worth had a large population of low-income couples with children for Empowering Families to serve

Fort Worth, Texas, is located in Tarrant County in North Central Texas, outside of Dallas. One of the fastest growing cities in the United States, it has a current population size of 799,989. In 2016, the population was about 65 percent white and 19 percent black (U.S. Census 2016a).

**Figure II.1. Fort Worth City and Tarrant County**



Population	799,989
Demographic makeup	65.2% white 19.2% black 34.1% Hispanic
Median income	\$54,876 \$62,592 (white) \$37,073 (black) \$43,091 (Hispanic)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2012–2016 5-Year Estimates

In addition, 34 percent of the population identified as Hispanic, and 27 percent reported Spanish as their primary language at home. In Fort Worth, 60 percent of households included couples raising children; 23 percent of households included married couples with children younger than 18 (U.S. Census 2016a). The median household income in Fort Worth was slightly below the national median at \$54,876 annually, with about 2 percent of the population receiving public cash assistance. At the time of the 2016 Census, 15 percent of the Fort Worth population reported receiving food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) in the previous 12 months (U.S. Census 2016b). About 14 percent of the population lived below the federal poverty level, which was \$24,600 for a family of four. The U.S. Census, American Community Survey data also suggest that most adults have completed high school (81.9 percent), with slightly fewer than one-third receiving a bachelor’s degree or higher (27 percent).

### Most couples enrolled in the study were Hispanic or black, married, and low income

Most couples interested in participating in Empowering Families were Hispanic or black, in their early 30s, and economically disadvantaged (Table II.1). More than a third were born outside of the United States and reported Spanish as their primary language. Slightly more than half of couples who enrolled in the study were married (54 percent) and about a third were unmarried but living together (32 percent). Blended families were common, with 59 percent of couples raising at least one child from a previous relationship.

Most couples reported working. About half of mothers and 84 percent of fathers reported paid employment in the month before enrollment. However, their earnings typically fell below the federal poverty level. For this reason, public assistance receipt was common, with 74 percent of couples in the study receiving government assistance such as SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In addition, 17 percent of mothers and 40 percent of fathers reported having been convicted of a crime, potentially making it difficult for them to find higher-paying work.

**Table II.1. Characteristics of couples enrolled in the Empowering Families study**

Characteristic	Percentage (unless otherwise indicated)
<b>Average age at enrollment (years)</b>	
Mothers	33
Fathers	35
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
Both partners Hispanic/Latino	46
Both partners black, non-Hispanic	32
Both partners white, non-Hispanic	8
Both partners other, or each partner in couple is a different race	14
<b>Born outside United States</b>	
Mothers	38
Fathers	38
<b>Primarily Spanish speaker</b>	
Mothers	36
Fathers	37
Both partners	33
<b>Have at least a high school diploma or GED</b>	
Neither partner	11
Only mother	18
Only father	16
Both partners	55
<b>Couples' earnings in the past month</b>	
No earnings	9
\$1 to \$1,000	12
\$1,001 to \$2,000	24
\$2,001 to \$3,000	22
More than \$3,000	32
<b>Employment</b>	
Employed in past month	
Mothers	51
Fathers	84

Table II.1 (*continued*)

Characteristic	Percentage (unless otherwise indicated)
Not employed but actively looking for work	
Mothers	20
Fathers	10
Not employed and not actively looking for work	
Mothers	29
Fathers	6
<b>Couples' receipt of any government benefits such as SNAP, WIC, or TANF</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Ever convicted of a crime</b>	
Mothers	17
Fathers	40
<b>Couples' children</b>	
Couple only has children together	41
One partner has children from prior relationship	30
Both partners have children from prior relationships	29
<b>Couples' relationship status</b>	
Married	54
Unmarried but live together all the time	32
Unmarried and do not live together all the time	15
<i>N (couples)</i>	<b>598</b>

Source: STREAMS baseline survey.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families;  
WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

### **Other organizations in Fort Worth offered employment or HMRE services, but only Empowering Families offered integrated programming**

Empowering Families was the only organization in Fort Worth offering integrated HMRE and economic stability services. Other organizations offered employment services, such as The Parenting Center's partner agency CLC, but none of those programs provided HMRE or financial coaching services. Thirteen other free HMRE programs were available in Fort Worth (Twogether in Texas, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> Most of these programs were faith-based, less intensive, and focused on providing counseling services. None offered financial literacy or employment services. The Parenting Center was the only program in Fort Worth funded by an ACF grant.

<sup>3</sup> Twogether in Texas is a program funded by the Texas Department of Health and Human Services to connect engaged couples to relationship education service providers.

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### III. EMPOWERING FAMILIES PROGRAM DESIGN

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In 2015, OFA awarded The Parenting Center an HMRE grant to develop and implement Empowering Families. All OFA grantees engaged in a nine-month planning period before beginning implementation. This chapter describes how the Empowering Families' partners worked together to design and deliver HMRE and economic stability content integrated into a core workshop and provide one-on-one employment, financial literacy, and case management services to create a comprehensive program to support low-income couples.

#### **Empowering Families partnered with other community service providers to offer integrated HMRE and economic stability services**

Empowering Families served low-income, romantically involved couples raising children. The program offered these couples four core program components: (1) a series of eight group workshop sessions focused on relationship skills but also covering economic stability content, (2) employment services and referrals to training, (3) financial coaching, and (4) case management. Group workshops combined content from the *Family Wellness* curriculum with employment and financial literacy information. The Parenting Center offices served as the primary delivery location for all services. The Parenting Center initially planned to begin a workshop with a new cohort of 8 to 12 couples about every two weeks.

In an earlier OFA-funded HMRE grant cycle, The Parenting Center referred participants to employment services offered through a partner organization and did not offer financial coaching services at all. In response to OFA's emphasis on more comprehensive services in its 2015 funding opportunity announcement, The Parenting Center decided to develop a program that offered HMRE, employment, and financial coaching directly, rather than through referrals (see also Friend and Paulsell 2018).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, program leaders understood that employment or financial difficulties could affect couples' relationships, making economic stability services and HMRE services a logical and complementary pairing. In addition, they felt that the skills learned through the HMRE curriculum could extend beyond romantic relationships and could apply to workplace relationships. For example, one of the central skills of the *Family Wellness* curriculum, "Speak Up, Listen, and Cooperate," translates to the workplace because it helps participants learn to communicate with and listen to co-workers, advocate for their own needs in the workplace, and build respectful relationships with co-workers and supervisors.

The Parenting Center partnered with CLC to provide employment services and Pathfinders to provide financial coaching. The Parenting Center's first employment partner, Catholic Charities, left the partnership in March 2017 but agreed to continue providing employment services to couples until a new partner was in place. Catholic Charities realized that it could not tailor its services to the low-skilled target population served by Empowering Families. Furthermore, Catholic Charities concluded that it preferred to operate as a stand-alone organization rather than as a partner in a larger program, which did not align with The Parenting Center's goal of integrating partners under one program with a unified message. Through a competitive procurement process, The Parenting Center selected CLC to replace Catholic

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<sup>4</sup> Friend and Paulsell (2018) also describes The Parenting Center's process to integrate HMRE and economic stability services.

Charities. CLC provided work readiness services, resume preparation, interview skills, soft skills training, job skills training (in house or through referral to another organization), and job placement. In addition, CLC brought expertise in training job seekers for aerospace plastic work and strong connections to Lockheed Martin, one of the area's largest employers. Most of CLC's work for the Empowering Families program involved providing work readiness services for participants in preparation for job placement.

### **The core workshop integrated sessions on employment and financial literacy with the *Family Wellness* curriculum**

Empowering Families delivered eight weekly workshop sessions that lasted 2.5 hours each (Table III.1). Two staff from The Parenting Center co-facilitated most sessions. On Weeks 4 and 6, one CLC or Pathfinders staff co-presented the session with HMRE facilitators. Initially, the program offered the workshops only in English, but demand quickly increased for Spanish-language workshops. In October 2016, Empowering Families offered its first Spanish-language workshop. By May 2017, the program consistently offered a Spanish-language workshop every other month and a monthly English workshop. Based on this schedule, The Parenting Center offered about three workshops every two months, slightly fewer than the initial plan of two workshops per month. Classes took place on weekday evenings to accommodate participants' job schedules. In April 2018, the program also ran a condensed workshop series (with each session covering two lessons) on four consecutive Saturdays. Empowering Families ran the condensed workshop to give those couples who enrolled but never attended an opportunity to complete the workshop. Saturdays were also an ideal time to accommodate couples whose work schedules made it difficult to attend the workshop during the week. Clayton YES, a local child care provider, provided on-site child care during all group sessions. Empowering Families offered a meal before the start of each workshop and provided gas cards, bus passes, and taxi vouchers to support participants' transportation needs. In addition, to encourage regular attendance, the program offered gift cards to couples when they met specific milestones.<sup>5</sup>

**Table III.1. Core workshop sessions of *Family Wellness***

Week	Topic	Affiliation of lead presenter
1	Getting started: Being a strong team	The Parenting Center
2	Two worlds, one relationship	The Parenting Center
3	Building a strong team	The Parenting Center
4	Vision for your career	Community Learning Center
5	Parents as leaders/Parents as models/Parents in healthy families	The Parenting Center
6	Financial literacy: Money matters and goal setting and budgeting	Pathfinders
7	As children grow	The Parenting Center
8	Keeping the fire alive	The Parenting Center

To develop the core workshop, The Parenting Center worked closely with the STREAMS TA team and the *Family Wellness* curriculum developers during the planning period to integrate all content into a unified set of workshop sessions. The group decided to include sessions on employment and financial literacy in the core workshop series led by staff from the partner

<sup>5</sup> These incentives fell within the guidelines OFA established for using incentives in the HMRE grant program.



agencies, in part to encourage participants to use the individual services their partners offered. During the planning period, The Parenting Center held regular planning meetings with Catholic Charities (its original employment partner), Pathfinders, and the *Family Wellness* developers. The STREAMS TA team provided regular support and coaching. The planning process culminated in a 1.5-day, in-person curriculum planning meeting with all partners and the STREAMS TA team. The central goal of the curriculum meeting was to cohesively integrate economic stability content into the *Family Wellness* curriculum. Once the materials were fully developed, the *Family Wellness* curriculum developers reviewed them and approved the proposed adaptations. In addition, before the program began offering a regular Spanish-language workshop, the Spanish-speaking facilitators reviewed the Spanish-language curriculum for adequate translation and developed materials, such as PowerPoint slides and videos that were missing from the translated version of the curriculum. The *Family Wellness* curriculum developer reviewed these additional materials to ensure they met its standards and approved them for use.

Improvements to the integration of the curriculum continued iteratively during the first year of implementation as challenges emerged or as facilitators saw opportunities for improvement. For example, in spring 2017, a few months into implementation, staff worked on improving the employment lesson in the core workshop. To do this, The Parenting Center staff worked with the *Family Wellness* curriculum developers and the STREAMS TA team to develop a script for the employment lesson, blending the *Family Wellness* core concepts of “Speak Up, Listen, and Cooperate” with the employment messages. The HMRE facilitator’s role was to remind couples of how the skills discussed in the employment lesson related to the skills that couples learned in the previous week of the core workshop. The Parenting Center made this change with the aim of encouraging participating couples to view the employment partner and HMRE facilitator as a more integrated team. To encourage participants to use employment services, the program moved this employment session up to Week 4 from Week 6, thereby introducing participants to CLC earlier in the workshop series.

Likewise, The Parenting Center made incremental improvements to the financial coaching session to improve the integration with the curriculum. The lesson was based on a Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) curriculum called *Money Smart* (FDIC 2019). The program modified this content to integrate HMRE material from *Family Wellness*. With support from the STREAMS TA team, The Parenting Center and Pathfinders developed a script to guide the lesson and further delineate facilitator roles. After a few workshop series, the program further changed the session to better relate financial coaching back to core concepts introduced in the *Family Wellness* curriculum.

### **Employment counselors helped participants set employment goals and provided supports to reach them**

During Week 4 of the core workshop, the CLC employment counselor and one HMRE facilitator co-facilitated a session on employment. During this session, the CLC employment counselor and the HMRE facilitator discussed goal setting and communication, a job versus a career, and the role of work in couples’ lives. The session also included several interactive activities such as a mock interview and discussions of what to look for in an employer and

employer expectations. This session set the stage for the employment counselor to introduce CLC and the services it offers.

Following the employment session, the employment counselor encouraged participants to schedule an orientation session with CLC. During this session, the employment counselor worked with participants to identify which job services to pursue. Originally, CLC held this orientation session as a group session during a weekday morning. However, in early 2018, the agency transitioned to a 2.5-hour individual session with one or both members of the couple. CLC made the change to accommodate the work schedules of couples, who were often unavailable to meet for orientation during morning hours. During the orientation session, the employment counselor reviewed the participant's education and employment history and then administered the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) test to assess eligibility for training programs and job placement.

Employment counselors reported that participants who used the employment services were usually not ready for job placement but instead needed additional training or certifications. For this reason, employment counselors often suggested training programs available at CLC such as welding, machining, or manufacturing and aerospace assembly training. For example, for participants who enrolled in and completed the manufacturing and aerospace assembly training, CLC would connect them to a potential employer like Lockheed Martin. Spanish-speaking participants, in particular, wanted to pursue English as a second language (ESL) or a general educational development (GED) credential. In these cases, CLC referred participants to its partner Tarrant County College (TCC) for educational needs. The number of sessions or the period that participants could work with an employment counselor on employment needs was not limited. However, the program encouraged participants to meet with a counselor while they were still active in the workshop, which was generally the first few months after enrollment. During the planning period, the program had assumed The Parenting Center's grant would pay for no more than one year of training or education for participants. However, the few participants who took up a CLC training program like welding or machining needed more than one year to complete it; Empowering Families made exceptions and continued paying for the training in those cases.

During the first year of implementation, Empowering Families staff made three changes to improve use of individual employment services. First, CLC counselors began scheduling appointments with all couples immediately following the employment lesson instead of waiting for participants to reach out to CLC. Second, the program stopped calling CLC "a partner" and instead referred to the staff as "employment specialists" so that couples viewed them as part of Empowering Families rather than a separate entity. Third, program staff began referring to employment services as a core service rather than as optional or supplemental. In their interviews, staff noted that these changes seemed to have a positive effect by raising participants' awareness of the wide range of services that CLC offered and increasing the number of meetings participants scheduled with an employment counselor.

### **Financial coaches taught couples skills about the basics of budgeting, saving, and credit**

During Week 6 of the core workshop, a financial coach and HMRE facilitator co-facilitated a session on financial literacy. The financial coach led the session, and the HMRE facilitator helped couples connect budgeting to the HMRE content and skills learned in earlier sessions. The financial coach covered topics such as setting financial goals, budgeting, saving, and managing money through discussion and interactive activities. For example, in a mock budgeting exercise, the financial coach displayed a family budget with expenses that were higher than their income. As a class, couples worked together to balance it by deciding which discretionary activities to cut, such as dining out or entertainment. The class also assessed how couples could incorporate savings into the budget to establish an emergency fund. After the session, the financial coach approached couples about signing up for an individual financial coaching session.

Empowering Families' goal was for couples to attend four individual sessions with their financial coach. Financial coaches met with couples at The Parenting Center office, the couple's home, or a public setting, depending on what worked best for the couple. Typically, in the first meeting, the financial coaches worked with couples to identify their financial goals and develop a customized plan to reach those goals. Participants often wanted to discuss budgeting, cutting back to boost savings, and obtaining credit, especially for Spanish-speaking couples who were less familiar with the U.S. financial system. Couples who participated in all four coaching sessions were eligible for a savings match of up to \$100. Couples had 18 months to complete their four individual sessions and obtain the savings match.

The financial coaches made three changes to improve use of the financial coaching services. First, financial coaches refined their pitch to couples to more clearly explain the services and what it would cost for the same services outside of the program. Second, the financial coaches visited the core workshop in Week 3 to introduce themselves, encourage couples to sign up for the services, and give a preview of their lesson for Week 6. Finally, in response to high demand, Pathfinders added a second Spanish-speaking financial coach to meet with couples outside of regular business hours.

### **Case managers connected couples to employment counselors, financial coaches, and other support services throughout the program**

After enrolling in the program, participants were assigned a case manager, who served as the main contact for the couple throughout the program. Typically, the program assigned the same case manager to all the couples attending the same workshop series. The program used this strategy so couples had more opportunities to interact with their case manager, such as during workshop sessions. They attended each of the eight workshop sessions and worked to build relationships with couples during both the dinner portion of the session and the session itself. Case managers connected couples to all of the program services and aimed to reinforce the *Family Wellness* curriculum during one-on-one meetings.

Case managers aimed to have their first meeting with couples during Week 4 of the group workshops. They then aimed to meet one on one with each couple monthly for six months, either in person or by phone. Typically, case managers met with both members of the couple, but

would meet with only one member if the other member was not able to attend. The case managers were also available to participants each week during the workshop session to address any issues or answer any questions.

During one-on-one meetings, case managers connected couples to the employment and financial partners; referred couples to supportive services in the community (such as housing, food assistance, counseling); and helped couples set goals for their relationship, employment, and finances. Although the case managers did not follow a curriculum for these meetings, they used a reference sheet to guide the conversation and tried to reinforce the key principles of the *Family Wellness* curriculum. Case managers aimed to tie discussions with participants back to the lessons in the workshop series. They encouraged participants to apply the skills they had learned in class to address issues, disagreements, or concerns occurring in the couple's relationship. Because most case managers were not fully trained on the curriculum, they did not provide one-on-one makeup sessions for workshop lessons the couples missed. The program was working toward building that capacity by training the case managers to provide one-on-one makeup sessions to couples but as of spring 2018, this feature had not been implemented.

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## IV. RECRUITING AND ENROLLING PARTICIPANTS

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Developing effective outreach strategies for reaching a target population is essential for implementing programs as intended. Previous research on HMRE programs has documented the challenge of recruiting people into voluntary programs and emphasized the need for sustained effort (Dion et al. 2008; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). HMRE programs must generate a steady stream of eligible and interested potential participants to fill planned workshop series and deliver the curriculum with fidelity. Many HMRE curricula, including *Family Wellness*, include group discussions and activities. Programs must maintain adequate enrollment to ensure these group activities function as intended.

The context of a rigorous impact study increases both the challenge and the importance of steady and successful recruitment. Because study enrollees are randomly assigned into program and control groups, the program must enroll almost twice as many people as it will ultimately serve. Empowering Families aimed to recruit couples who were interested in both relationship skills and economic stability services, which shaped their recruitment efforts. This chapter describes the strategies Empowering Families used to recruit couples into the program and the enrollment trends over time.

### **Empowering Families' initial recruitment strategies yielded fewer enrollments than planned**

During the early months of program enrollment, case managers primarily recruited participants by dropping off flyers at local social service agencies, churches, and libraries. To be eligible for the program, couples had to be older than 18, in a romantic relationship, not currently experiencing domestic violence, and interested in both HMRE and economic stability services. In addition, at least one member of the couple had to have a biological or adopted child younger than 18 who lived with the couple at least half time. Interested couples were instructed to call The Parenting Center for an intake appointment. Because this strategy yielded relatively few enrollments, The Parenting Center worked with the STREAMS TA team to hire recruiters for the program. By September 2016, when sample enrollment and random assignment began for the study, Empowering Families had hired two full-time staff members focused only on recruitment for Empowering Families.

During the first year of the study, enrollment remained well below the targeted number of 42 couples per month (Figure IV.1). Initially, recruiters focused on conducting outreach at WIC offices. However, WIC and other social service providers asked recruiters not to approach their clients about the program directly. Although WIC staff handed out flyers about Empowering Families to interested women, this approach yielded few enrollments. In addition, when recruiters pitched the program to potential participants in the early months of the program, they did not screen for eligibility. As a result, case managers turned some recruited individuals and couples away at their intake appointment because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. For example, some recruited parents were not in a relationship and some couples did not have a child or did not have contact with their child. During the first year of study enrollment, recruiters sometimes recruited couples who appeared uninterested in receiving program services when they were approached by program staff. Case managers viewed this pattern as evidence that recruiters were not being as attentive as they should be to recruiting couples who were a good fit for the

program. To address this issue, the STREAMS TA team and the project leadership worked with the recruiters to help them better understand the program eligibility criteria and identify couples who were interested in both relationship education and economic stability services. The STREAMS TA team made recommendations about the types of places where recruiters were likely to find couples interested in the program's mix of services, as well as how to reach out to and what to say to interested couples. The program worked with the two recruiters to implement these strategies and identify couples interested in program services.

Despite these efforts, the program experienced turnover in recruiters during the first year of random assignment, which slowed recruitment. One of two recruiters left the program in late 2016, and a new recruiter hired to fill that position left in early 2017. Recruitment remained slow through winter 2017, despite case managers filling in to recruit for the program while The Parenting Center sought candidates to fill the vacancy.

### **Empowering Families boosted enrollment by hiring a new recruiting team, using new recruitment strategies, clarifying messaging about the program, and streamlining intake**

To boost recruitment and enrollment, the program made several adjustments including hiring a new recruiting team, finding more productive places to recruit couples, improving the recruitment pitch, and scheduling intake appointments on the spot. In spring 2017, The Parenting Center hired two new recruiters, both of whom were bilingual, in addition to the one recruiter already in place, to form a team of three recruiters. The Parenting Center took time to find recruiters whose personalities, dedication to the mission, and connection to the community aided them in finding and recruiting the appropriate target population. Turnover among recruiters stabilized, which allowed the program to examine and improve its recruitment process.

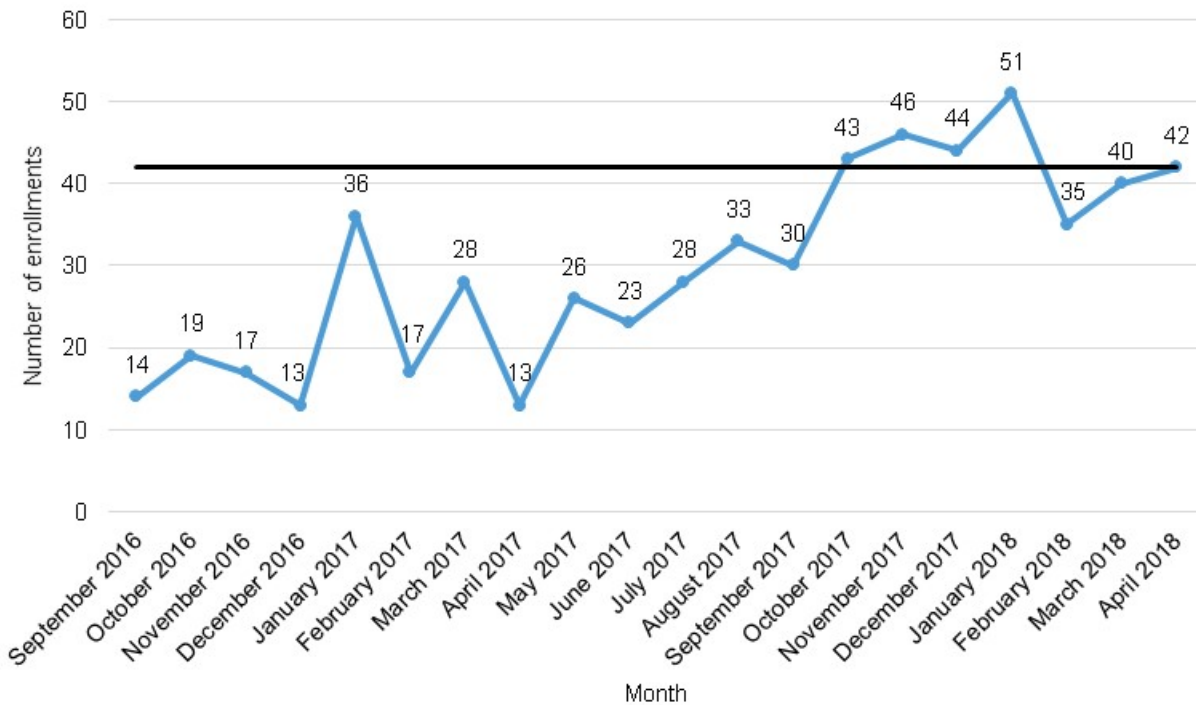
The new recruiting team expanded the locations it targeted for recruitment. Recruiters sought out interested couples at elementary schools, malls, health or job fairs, churches, health facilities, food banks, workforce centers, community centers, day care centers, and a library program for mothers. Recruiters identified these places as locations where they were likely to find eligible couples who would be interested in both HMRE and economic stability services. In contrast to earlier efforts, recruiters approached couples directly about the program. In addition, the recruiters formed a partnership with the local schools and began working closely with school counselors to identify families that might benefit from the program. This partnership, in particular, yielded many enrollments and helped the program to begin achieving monthly enrollment targets beginning in September 2017.

In addition to identifying new places to recruit, the recruiters also reported improving their “elevator speeches” to cover the entire program and its benefits and learning to customize it based on couples' needs. The STREAMS TA team assisted the recruitment team in refining recruitment messages, ensuring that the elevator speeches emphasized the integrated content of Empowering Families—relationship skills and economic stability. For example, when recruiting at job fairs, recruiters emphasized the employment services but also discussed the HMRE content as well as financial coaching services. Recruiters also began screening potential applicants for eligibility during the first interaction to avoid turning ineligible couples away at intake, such as single parents or those with no children, an issue that occurred during the first year.

Finally, The Parenting Center made changes to the intake process to simplify enrollment. Implementing a web-based system enabled recruiters to schedule intakes at first contact with the couple, instead of waiting for the couple to contact them or trying to reach an interested couple over the phone later to schedule an intake. The Parenting Center also expanded intake appointment hours to evenings and weekends and away from the business-hours-only model used during early implementation. Case managers conducted intake appointments, which typically lasted about 90 minutes. At that time, the case manager would connect each member of the couple to a phone interviewer who administered the baseline survey for the STREAMS study. Then, the case manager informed the couple about its assignment to the program or non-program group. If the participants were assigned to the non-program condition, the case manager completed the required fields in nFORM and filed their paperwork. Non-program couples were not eligible for Empowering Families but could access other services in the community if they desired. If the couple was assigned to the program group, the case manager scheduled the couple into the next workshop series, introduced the couple to the case manager assigned to its cohort, and recorded the couple's needs for child care and transportation assistance.

During the eight months from September 2017 to April 2018, the program enrolled 41 couples per month, on average, close to its target of 42 couples per month (Figure IV.1). To monitor progress toward enrollment goals, The Parenting Center and the STREAMS TA team developed a reporting template to track and review recruitment sources and recruitment targets. The tool helped the team map out a monthly plan to reach its enrollment targets by using a mix of recruitment strategies, such as having a booth at a health fair or approaching couples directly at community centers or churches. The recruiters could then use the tool to track the success of each recruitment strategy or location for the month and compare the actual number of couples recruited with their monthly goals.

**Figure IV.1. Enrollment into the STREAMS Empowering Families study, by month**



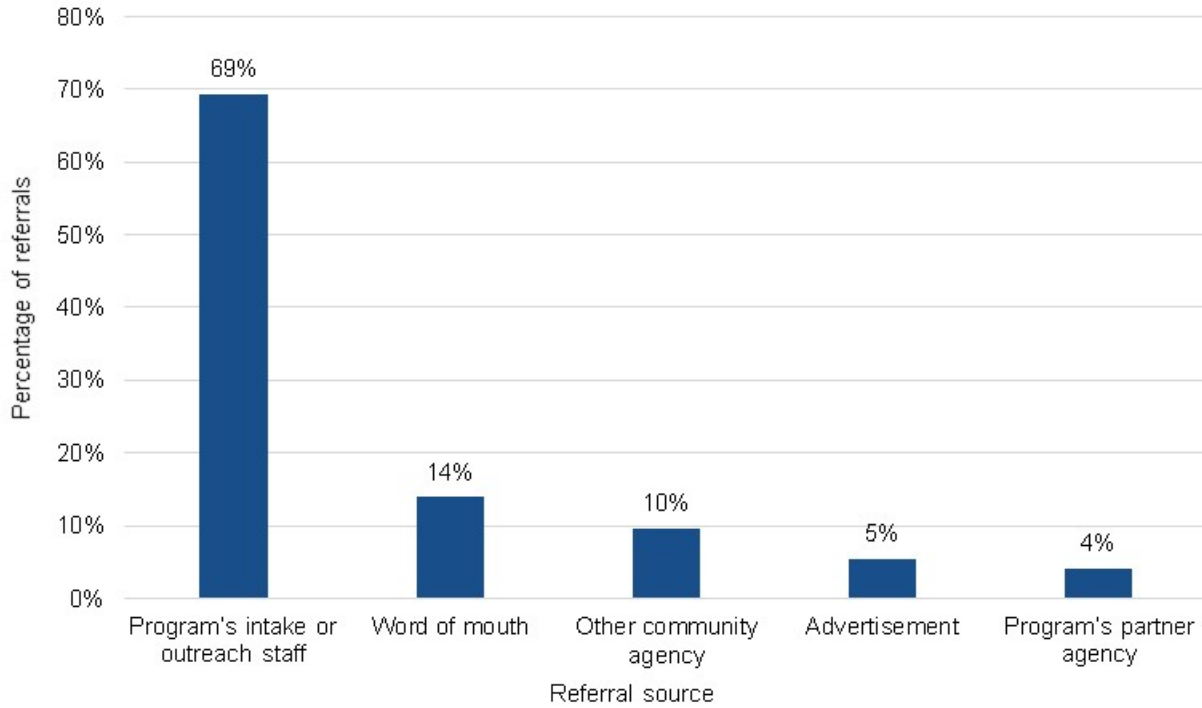
Source: nFORM.

Note: Enrollment numbers include members of the treatment and control groups.

### **Most enrolled couples learned about Empowering Families from program recruiters**

Information gathered from couples at study enrollment provided additional detail on Empowering Families' recruitment sources. According to these data, direct community outreach by dedicated recruiters was the primary source of applicants for Empowering Families. Most couples (69 percent) who enrolled in Empowering Families reported learning about it through outreach efforts in the community (Figure IV.2). Another 14 percent reported learning about the program through word of mouth. Recruiters reported that they worked to increase word-of-mouth referrals by visiting the last session of each workshop series and asking couples to tell their friends or family about the program. Ten percent of enrolled couples reported that they were referred by another community organization. Throughout the early study enrollment period, recruiters continued to build referral relationships. To bolster referrals, recruiters developed testimonial videos to share with potential partners to highlight the program's services and benefits. According to participant reports, a small number of referrals came from advertisements (5 percent), such as the program's Facebook page. About 4 percent of couples reported that they were recruited through The Parenting Center's partners for economic stability services.



**Figure IV.2. Primary referral sources for couples in the Empowering Families study**

Source: nFORM.

Note: The sample included 344 couples.

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## V. SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPOWERING FAMILIES

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In the 2015 HMRE funding opportunity announcement, OFA emphasized the importance of using a curriculum with evidence of effectiveness and implementing it with fidelity. OFA urged grantees to strive to adhere to the curriculum's guidelines for delivering content. Fixen et al. (2005) suggests that to implement a program with fidelity, grantees must ensure that strong systems are in place for hiring, training, and supervising staff. Assessing fidelity is important for the impact study. To accurately assess whether a program model has effects on the outcomes of interest, researchers must determine whether it was implemented as intended.

This chapter describes Empowering Families' system for supporting implementation, including its organizational structure and hiring processes, as well as how the organization set expectations for high-fidelity implementation, trained staff, and monitored fidelity. In the final section, we discuss staff satisfaction with these systems.

### **Empowering Families integrated staff from The Parenting Center and community partners to carry out program activities**

The Parenting Center's executive director and the project director led the Empowering Families Program (Figure V.1). In April 2018, at the time of the site visit, the executive director had worked at The Parenting Center for about 2.5 years. He started about the same time The Parenting Center received its grant and was not involved in the grant application. For Empowering Families, his responsibilities included program design, fiscal management, and continuous quality improvement. The executive director supervised the Empowering Families project director and was ultimately responsible for executing the OFA grant. The project director had been at The Parenting Center for four years, working as a case manager for another program at the organization for two years before Empowering Families began. She oversaw the day-to-day operations of Empowering Families, including supervising all staff and partners, managing the budget, and reporting on program data.

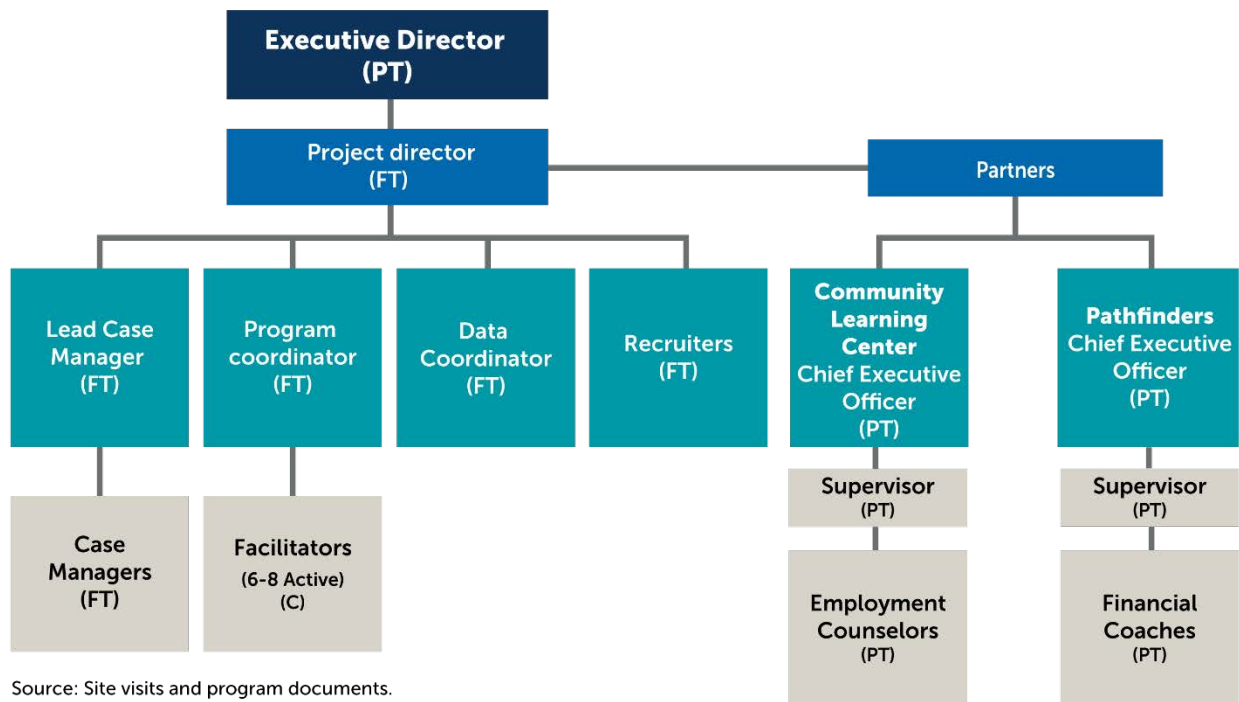
The leadership team also included the lead case manager, program coordinator, and data coordinator. The lead case manager supervised the case managers. She scheduled the case managers' intake appointments, reviewed nFORM data, and supported case managers in following up with participants who were not engaged in services. The program coordinator oversaw workshop operations, including assigning facilitators to each workshop series, coordinating with partner organizations, monitoring the child care provider, and managing the food caterer. The data coordinator managed incentives and transportation assistance, and prepared data reports. During early implementation, the program had a lead recruiter, but after that person left the program, the team did not fill the position. Although not formally named to the position, one of the three recruiters acted as the lead recruiter.

Empowering Families employed about 20 staff at any given time, including about 15 at The Parenting Center and 5 across the two partner agencies, CLC and Pathfinders. According to the staff survey, more than three-quarters of staff were women. Half were white, one-quarter were black, and one-quarter were Hispanic. Almost all facilitators and case managers reported experience working with adults or adult couples, and more than three-quarters had relevant experience such as providing case management, relationship and parenting education, or

coordinating services with partner agencies. Empowering Families staff carried out the following roles:

- **Family Wellness facilitators (six to eight staff).** The facilitators conducted the *Family Wellness* workshops. The Parenting Center hired facilitators as contract staff, and they often had other jobs. Although the program had a larger pool of trained contractors who were available to facilitate workshops as needed, only six to eight contract facilitators actively led workshops at any given time. Two contractors co-facilitated each workshop.
- **Case managers (five staff).** These staff conducted intake, assessed participants' needs, made referrals, and coordinated services with partner agencies. The Parenting Center assigned a single case manager to all couples in each workshop series. This case manager typically attended all workshop sessions to support the facilitators and connect with the couples in their caseload. Two case managers were bilingual.
- **Employment counselors (two staff).** The partner staff from CLC co-facilitated the *Family Wellness* session on employment and met with couples individually for employment counseling sessions. The job developer and manager from CLC supervised the employment counselors, one of whom was bilingual.
- **Financial coaches (three staff).** The partner staff from Pathfinders co-facilitated the *Family Wellness* session on finances and met with couples individually for financial coaching sessions. Initially, Pathfinders employed one bilingual coach. After two years of implementation, the program added a second bilingual coach in response to demand from Spanish-speaking couples. A Pathfinders staff member supervised the financial coaches.
- **Recruiters (three staff).** These staff, whom the project director supervised, conducted outreach to identify eligible program applicants and sign them up for intake appointments. Two recruiters were bilingual.

The project leadership team prioritized hiring staff with strong communication skills, the ability to connect and build relationships with couples, and adaptability to changing circumstances. They also sought staff who felt passionate about their work and compassion toward enrolled couples. Empowering Families had some turnover since the start of the planning period to the time of the site visit in April 2018, including one case manager, two data coordinators, and two recruiters. In addition, as discussed previously, the employment partner changed within the first year of implementation from Catholic Charities to CLC.

**Figure V.1. Empowering Families organizational chart**

### Most staff received training on *Family Wellness* and a range of other topics

During the planning period, all staff participated in an in-person, three-day training on *Family Wellness* led by the curriculum developers. The training included video and interactive demonstrations of facilitation strategies such as role-playing and coaching. For example, facilitators learned a role-playing activity in which parents formulate a response to their child who is acting out or pushing the limits of the rules. The training also covered topics such as classroom management, presentation style, facilitation techniques, and curriculum content. Staff reported high levels of satisfaction with the training and found it helpful for learning the curriculum.

Staff from CLC (which was brought on as a partner after the initial training), as well as staff in positions that were added after this initial training, did not receive intensive *Family Wellness* training from the developers. Instead, Empowering Families provided training on their specific job duties and information about *Family Wellness*. For example, because they joined the program after early implementation, CLC staff missed the *Family Wellness* training. However, they received training on the employment session they co-facilitated and a copy of the *Family Wellness* manual. According to the program director, new staff hired after the training, such as a case manager and recruiters, also shadowed experienced staff and reviewed program processes with their supervisor.

Empowering Families also offered ongoing training during quarterly staff meetings. Speakers from the community provided training on topics such as domestic violence, gender inclusion, suicide prevention, and cultural competency. An experienced facilitator provided an annual refresher training to contract facilitators on the *Family Wellness* curriculum. In addition,

the STREAMS TA team conducted five in-person trainings for staff on the following topics: (1) fidelity and facilitation techniques, (2) recruitment strategies, (3) working with partners to form an integrated team, (4) encouraging participants to use one-on-one services offered by partners, and (5) encouraging participation in the workshops.

### **Coordinating a large team required frequent communication**

To coordinate the work of 20 staff across three agencies, Empowering Families held a series of weekly, monthly, and quarterly meetings with different groups of staff (Table V.1). The project director attended all of these meetings, which were the primary vehicle for staff communications across program functions.

**Table V.1. Coordination meetings held by Empowering Families**

Meeting	Attendees	Frequency	Topics discussed
Leadership meetings	Project director, lead case manager, program coordinator, data coordinator, and (acting) lead recruiter	Weekly	Program operations including workshops, child care case management, and recruitment
Team meetings	Project director, lead case manager, program coordinator, data coordinator, recruiters, case managers	Weekly	Program operations including child care, workshops, case management, and recruitment; review of referral numbers, completed intakes, and scheduled intakes
Partner/ frontline staff meeting	Project director, lead case manager, program coordinator, data coordinator, recruiters, case managers, employment counselors, financial coaches	Monthly	Policy or procedure changes; emerging program or partner coordination challenges; review of each enrolled couple's progress on core program components
Quarterly staff meeting	Project director, lead case manager, program coordinator, data coordinator, recruiters, case managers, facilitators, employment counselors, financial coaches	Quarterly	Training, program issues, and updates
1 p.m. "hallway huddle"	Project director, lead case manager, program coordinator, case managers	Weekly	Check-in to resolve any quick issues, Identify more substantive issues for weekly team meeting agenda
Recruitment meeting	Project director and recruiters	Weekly	Planned recruitment events and targeted locations

According to staff, these meetings helped them keep track of progress toward program goals, share information about enrolled couples, and troubleshoot emerging issues. Program leaders regularly shared progress toward program goals, such as targets for enrollment, referrals, attendance, and post-test completion. Employment counselors and financial coaches reported that monthly meetings facilitated information sharing across organizations, including updates about specific couples and their use of different program services. For example, case managers and staff from partner organizations sometimes obtained new contact information for hard-to-reach couples and shared these updates at the meetings. In addition, facilitators and case managers gave feedback directly to program leadership during monthly and quarterly meetings about how to streamline processes during workshop sessions. For example, they provided ideas about how to ease the transition from dinner to child care for children.

### **The program coordinator and an experienced facilitator monitored fidelity to *Family Wellness* and provided feedback to facilitators**

Empowering Families took several steps to support facilitators' fidelity to the adapted version of *Family Wellness* the program used. First, the program coordinator paired experienced facilitators with facilitators who were newer or less compliant with curriculum guidelines. For example, the program coordinator paired an experienced facilitator with another who sometimes strayed away from program content, with the goal of limiting off-topic discussions during the workshop sessions. In addition, the STREAMS TA team provided support to monitor fidelity.

Second, the program coordinator and an experienced facilitator monitored fidelity by observing facilitators and partner staff for an entire session, from dinner through the end of the workshop. During early implementation, these staff observed sessions 3 and 7. Later, they shifted to observing the full range of sessions. The goal was to observe two sessions of each workshop series; however, facilitators reported that sometimes fewer observations were conducted. The observers used a form developed by the STREAMS TA team, which included items on classroom management and adherence to the curriculum materials. Observers typically identified relatively minor issues, such as facilitators failing to greet couples by name at arrival or forgetting to distribute handouts during specific activities. Occasionally, observers identified more significant issues, such as facilitators using examples from their own relationships rather than the *Family Wellness* tools and materials or inadequately covering all content in a session.

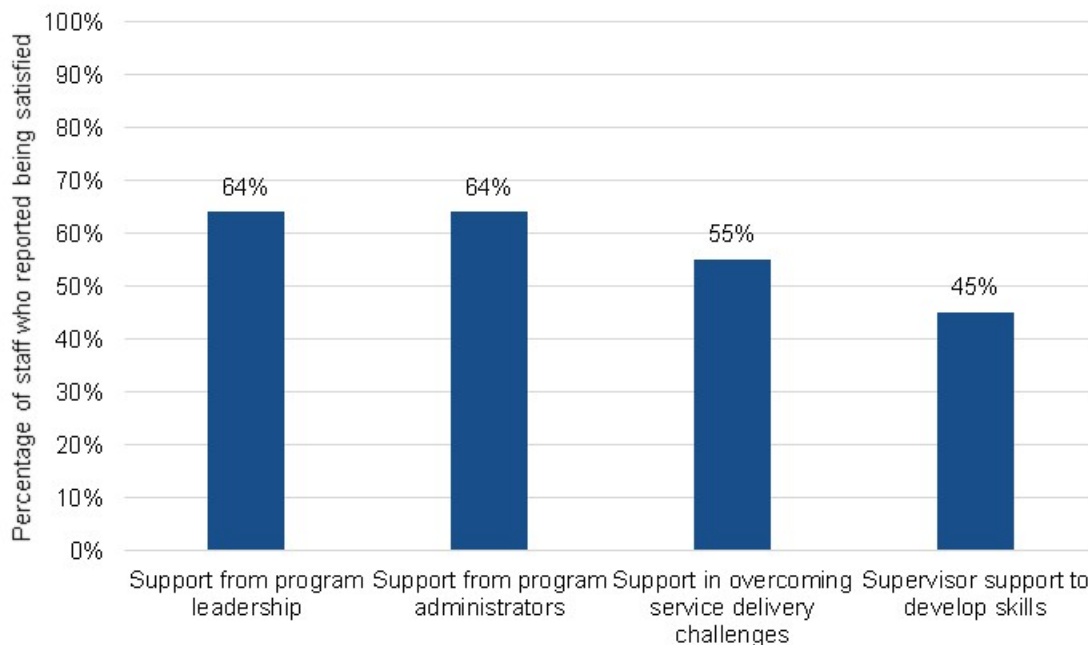
Facilitators received feedback from the observers in a 20- to 30-minute debriefing session immediately following the workshop. Observers also followed up with an email summarizing the feedback in writing. Typically, observers checked on whether the suggested changes had been implemented during the next observation. If a problem persisted, an experienced facilitator worked individually with the facilitator to address the problem and achieve adherence to the curriculum tools and materials. In October 2016, when the program began offering Spanish-language workshops, they did not have a dedicated bilingual staff member to observe workshops conducted in Spanish, so the program used the same staff members to observe the Spanish workshops, even though they were not Spanish speakers. The observers felt this was not a problem because the Spanish curriculum follows the same order and has the same goals as the English version. Beginning in fall 2017, the program contracted with an experienced Spanish-speaking facilitator who observed and provided feedback to facilitators of the Spanish-language workshops he did not co-facilitate. Finally, the STREAMS TA team supported fidelity monitoring through the first year of implementation. The TA team watched a set of video recorded sessions of *Family Wellness* to assess facilitation skills and adherence to the intended content. In particular, the TA team paid attention to the sessions that involved the co-facilitators from the partner organizations to ensure that the economic stability content was integrated closely with the HMRE content. The TA team also continuously monitored the fidelity checklist entered into nFORM and then trained the project coordinator to use the tool. During regular weekly calls with The Parenting Center, the STREAMS TA team provided feedback on video recordings of workshops, discussed curriculum fidelity, and offered suggestions for possible improvements.

### Most supervision occurred during staff meetings; program staff indicated they would like more one-on-one supervision and feedback

Most supervision occurred in weekly, monthly, and quarterly staff meetings among The Parenting Center, CLC, and Pathfinders staff. Empowering Families staff used these meetings to connect with their supervisors and other staff, as well as share any concerns or suggestions with project leadership. On the staff survey,<sup>6</sup> facilitators and case managers reported satisfaction with the support they received to implement the program and overcome service delivery challenges (Figure V.2). *Family Wellness* facilitators felt they received adequate observations during their workshop sessions and received sufficient feedback. However, case managers expressed a desire for more regular one-on-one meetings with their direct supervisors; more feedback on their performance, such as an annual performance review; and more support to further develop their skills.

On the survey, most staff reported meeting individually with their supervisor at least once a month, but more than one-third said they had never had an individual supervision meeting. According to staff employed by The Parenting Center, most one-on-one supervisory meetings occurred as needed. Staff could reach out to their supervisor at any time if an issue came up. During the site visit, program leaders expressed desire to provide more individual supervision but noted that scheduling challenges and time constraints got in the way.

**Figure V.2. Satisfaction among program staff with organizational support for implementing *Family Wellness* curriculum**



<sup>6</sup> The staff survey only included HMRE facilitators actively leading workshops at the time of the survey, case managers, and one supervisor employed by The Parenting Center. Partner staff from CLC and Pathfinders were not surveyed because they had a supervisory structure within their own organization and were not trained in the *Family Wellness* curriculum.



Source: STREAMS staff survey.

Note: The sample included 11 staff. These include all Empowering Families staff providing facilitation and case management. Survey did not include staff from partner organizations. The percentages reflect those staff who reported they were very or slightly satisfied with the organizational support.

### **Staff strongly supported Empowering Families' mission and comprehensive service delivery approach**

Program staff strongly believed in Empowering Families' overarching mission to integrate employment supports, financial coaching, and relationship education to improve outcomes of children. Everyone on the team, from frontline staff to partners, reported a strong commitment to the goals of the program and felt like they could contribute to couples' well-being and economic advancement. The project coordinator said, "I feel like individually everyone on this team is here for this program because we believe in what it does. We believe in our clients. We advocate for our clients. This is something that we all really, really enjoy, being with the clients." Staff felt that the comprehensive nature of the program offered couples services that could make them better parents and better partners, and have lasting effects on their lives.

*[Couples have] the opportunity to not only learn to communicate better within their family and parent better, be a better spouse, which so often is tied to being a better parent. [But we also] bring the employment piece so people can get a job at a living wage. And the financial coaching piece, so they will not only gain employment and have a living wage, they'll gain skills through financial coaching to make positive financial behavior changes. Those two things, you go to have those two things working together, for somebody to really move forward and make changes that are lasting.*

- CLC employment counselor

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## VI. DELIVERING CONTENT AND ENGAGING COUPLES IN EMPOWERING FAMILIES

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In addition to developing systems for supporting implementation, the Empowering Families program had to engage couples and deliver the expected dosage of services to achieve intended outcomes. This chapter presents the findings on couples' initial engagement in program services, their attendance and exposure to the *Family Wellness* workshops, the amount and content of programming offered, the disruptions experienced during the group workshop sessions, and each of the individual services offered. It also discusses overall program engagement and participation in the workshop series.

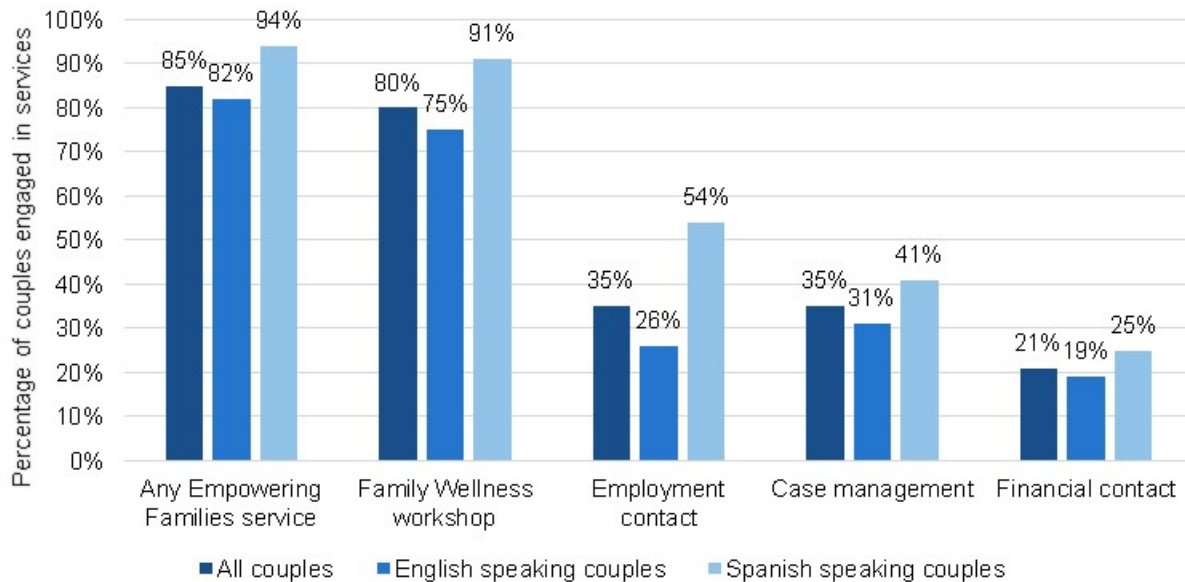
### **Initial engagement in Empowering Families was high; it was especially high for Spanish-speaking couples**

Program staff aimed to engage couples as soon as possible after enrollment. Empowering Families launched a *Family Wellness* English-language workshop about every month and Spanish-language workshops about every other month. This schedule for starting new classes typically meant that couples did not have to wait long after enrolling in the program to begin attending a workshop. Staff encouraged couples to participate in other program activities while waiting for their workshop to begin, such as meeting with an employment counselor, financial coach, or case manager.

Of the couples who enrolled in Empowering Families from September 2016 to April 2018, 85 percent engaged in at least one program activity within four months of enrollment (Figure VI.1). Most couples attended at least one *Family Wellness* workshop session (80 percent) during these first four months. A smaller proportion engaged in employment services (35 percent), case management (35 percent), and financial coaching (21 percent) during this initial period.

Spanish-speaking couples participated in all services at higher rates than English-speaking couples. More Spanish-speaking couples attended at least one *Family Wellness* workshop session (91 percent) during these first four months (Figure VI.1). These couples also engaged in the individual services at higher rates, particularly employment services (54 percent). During interviews, staff reported their impressions that Spanish-speaking couples seemed more engaged and felt stronger bonds to the other couples in their workshop series. Relationships with other couples in the class made for a stronger sense of community and kept them coming back to the workshops. One financial coach explained, "The Spanish speaking classes, they're very faithful to the classes and they'll come to all of them or make up one of them, because they form a bond [with other] couples [...] even after the classes are all over...they still communicate with each other." The employment counselors said that Spanish speakers were more likely to follow through on referrals from the counselors to English classes or GED courses to gain the skills needed to obtain a better job or increase earnings. One financial coach noted that this population was particularly interested in the services because "Spanish-speaking clients or couples may not be familiar with the credit financial system here in the United States." Many wanted to learn about credit and savings so they could eventually purchase a home.

**Figure VI.1. Initial engagement in program services, by couples' primary language**



Source: nFORM.

Note: The sample includes 344 couples. This includes all participants who enrolled from September 2016 to April 2018 and who had four months in which to participate in services. Engagement figures are as of August 2018.

### **On average, couples attended 70 percent of workshops; attendance by Spanish-speaking couples was particularly high**

Each *Family Wellness* workshop series included 20 hours of content delivered across eight workshop sessions. Based on data entered into nFORM, facilitators offered couples the intended number of hours of *Family Wellness* content. Across all couples enrolled for at least four months, couples received 14 hours of content on average (Table VI.1), or 70 percent of the content offered. Slightly more than 60 percent of couples attended six or more of the eight workshop sessions, somewhat below the program's goal of 80 percent of couples attending this frequently. Of those couples who attended at least one workshop session, close to 80 percent attended six or more sessions of the *Family Wellness* workshop within four months of enrollment.

Spanish-speaking couples attended group workshops at substantially higher rates than English-speaking couples. Spanish-speaking couples received 18 hours of content, on average, compared with 12 hours for English-speaking couples. Similarly, a high proportion of Spanish-speaking couples (85 percent) attended six or more sessions of *Family Wellness*, compared to just more than half (55 percent) of English-speaking couples. Of those couples who attended at least one session, Spanish-speaking couples received almost all the hours of content offered (19 hours) and nearly all couples completed more than six sessions (93 percent).

**Table VI.1. Participation in Empowering Families *Family Wellness* workshops, by couples' primary language**

Participants	Workshop hours		Workshop sessions completed (percentage)		
	Total offered	Average received	None	1 to 5	6 to 8
All couples	20	14	19	17	64
All English-speaking couples	20	12	24	21	55
All Spanish-speaking couples	20	18	8	7	85
Couples who attended at least one session	20	16	0	21	79
Couples who attended at least one session in English	20	14	0	28	72
Couples who attended at least one session in Spanish	20	19	0	7	93

Source: nFORM.

Note: The sample includes 344 couples. This includes all participants who enrolled from September 2016 to April 2018 and who had four months in which to participate in services. Participation figures are as of August 2018. Figures may sum to more than 100 due to rounding.

### **Facilitators offered the intended amount of *Family Wellness* content in the intended order**

The developers of *Family Wellness* intended for all six core curriculum lessons to be delivered in order. In interviews, facilitators discussed adhering to the intended order and content of the core curriculum. Facilitators said they only recalled changing the order of the non-core curriculum sessions on employment and financial literacy. However, these changes occurred rarely, such as if partner staff were unavailable on the day of the session. According to nFORM data, facilitators delivered almost all (99 percent) of the intended six core workshop sessions. Facilitators consistently delivered the financial literacy session (98 percent) and delivered the employment session 80 percent of the time. These missed employment sessions occurred around May 2017, when the program was transitioning between employment partners, from Catholic Charities to CLC, and did not have staff in place to provide the employment content. Box VI.1 describes a typical workshop session.

Facilitators reported that they followed the curriculum closely. Facilitators completed short adherence forms after each *Family Wellness* workshop session. On the forms, they reported how much of the curriculum materials they used and the degree to which they followed the instructor's manual. These reports indicated that facilitators used most or all of the curriculum materials and followed most or all of the curriculum as written in the instructor's manual more than 95 percent of the time. Sometimes facilitators provided the content intended for a session but had to make changes because they ran out of time or because couples became very engaged in a topic. According to nFORM data, facilitators changed planned content in 17 percent of all sessions. However, changes to content occurred in more than twice as many Spanish-language sessions (40 percent). The Spanish-language facilitator discussed that some changes to the curriculum occurred early on in consultation with the developer, such as developing different examples or PowerPoint slides that were more culturally appropriate. However, some changes occurred after the initial design phase, as the facilitators saw what worked with couples in class.

The most common reason for changes in the Spanish-language sessions was that the information did not fit with the couples' culture or background. For example, the information on cooperation in the relationship was withheld from Week 1 and presented together with the concept of teamwork in Week 3, because the Spanish-language facilitator felt the concepts were similar in Spanish. The facilitator also added some brief information about the concept of love and falling in love to session 8, which was about intimacy in the relationship.

### **Box VI.1. A typical Empowering Families *Family Wellness* workshop session**

The Parenting Center front desk staff greet couples when they arrive to The Parenting Center office before they enter the classroom, which is located near the building's entrance. All workshop sessions take place in a large classroom with windows lining one wall. The staff—including the facilitators, program coordinator, and often their case manager—greet participants warmly as they enter the space. The workshop session is preceded by a dinner for couples and children, referred to as a *fellowship* time. This is a time of informal sharing and community building, and allows Empowering Families staff to build bonds with couples and their children as they share a meal together. Following the fellowship, Empowering Families child care staff escort the children into the child care room down the hallway, which has developmentally appropriate toys and is painted bright blue. If many children attend, staff convert another conference room into an additional child care space.

Couples sit around tables in groups of three couples per table. Facilitators stand in the front of the classroom so that every participant can see them, but often move around the classroom throughout the workshop session. The workshop session begins with a short review of the previous session and the workshop rules developed at the first session jointly by the couples and facilitators. Then, facilitators present the new workshop content using a slide presentation prepared by the curriculum distributor. Workshops are dynamic and include a mix of presentations, small-group work, full-group activities, and discussions. The two facilitators take turns presenting content and facilitating group discussions. Typically, while one facilitator delivers content, the other facilitator interjects with examples or to bolster statements from the other facilitator. One common type of activity is a *continuum*, in which participants stand along an imaginary line according to their response to a prompt. For example, facilitators asked participants whether they want to be strict or lenient disciplinarians with their children. Participants stand on one side of the classroom for strict, the other side for lenient, and in the middle for a mix of both approaches. Both facilitators circulate the room and talk with participants about the activity during small-group and individual activities.

Couples can come and go freely from the conference room to take breaks or handle situations with their children. Facilitators are careful to minimize disruptions. If someone arrives late, his or her partner will fill the person in on what the other missed and what the group is doing at the moment. The case manager or facilitator will also make sure that the latecomer eats dinner, which has been set aside for the person. During planned breaks, cameras from the child care rooms are projected onto the screens in the classroom so that parents can see how their children are doing. After the workshop session, couples can check in with their case managers and pick up their participation supports, such as gas cards.

### **Reported disruptions during workshop sessions were rare**

In nFORM, facilitators reported disruptions in only 10 percent of workshop sessions. These were most common in the English-speaking groups. Facilitators were skilled in managing the classroom and could address most disruptions swiftly. The following were the most common disruptions:

- **Late arrivals.** Occasionally, one member of the couple arrived late, usually due to his or her work schedule. Latecomers needed to eat their meal and check in with his or her partner to catch up on content being presented.
- **Participants engaged in side conversations.** Couples could become engrossed in conversation with each other or with other couples if a certain topic struck a chord. This most often occurred during the small breakout activities as couples would digress into their own conversations and facilitators worked to keep them on topic.
- **Couples' children joined their parents in the classroom.** Facilitators encouraged couples to use on-site child care available during the group sessions. Sometimes, children did not want to stay with the child care providers. When this happened, caregivers asked parents to encourage their children to stay in the child care room. However, sometimes children joined their parents in class, hindering parents' ability to focus on the content.

### **A safe and supportive environment, useful information, and participation supports encouraged workshop attendance**

According to facilitators, participants were engaged in most or all of the content in nearly all of the workshop sessions. Focus group participants said the facilitators were key in keeping them interested in the program by keeping the class lively—combining presentations with interactive activities. In particular, couples liked how the classroom was a safe place to ask questions and learn new parenting skills, such as how to interact with their partner to discuss discipline and rule setting, because they not only trusted facilitators but also other participants in the class. One focus group participant explained that “nobody judged each other [...] we all were connected and a tight-knit group.” Staff reported that couples kept coming to the program because they enjoyed the camaraderie built up in the classroom with other couples.

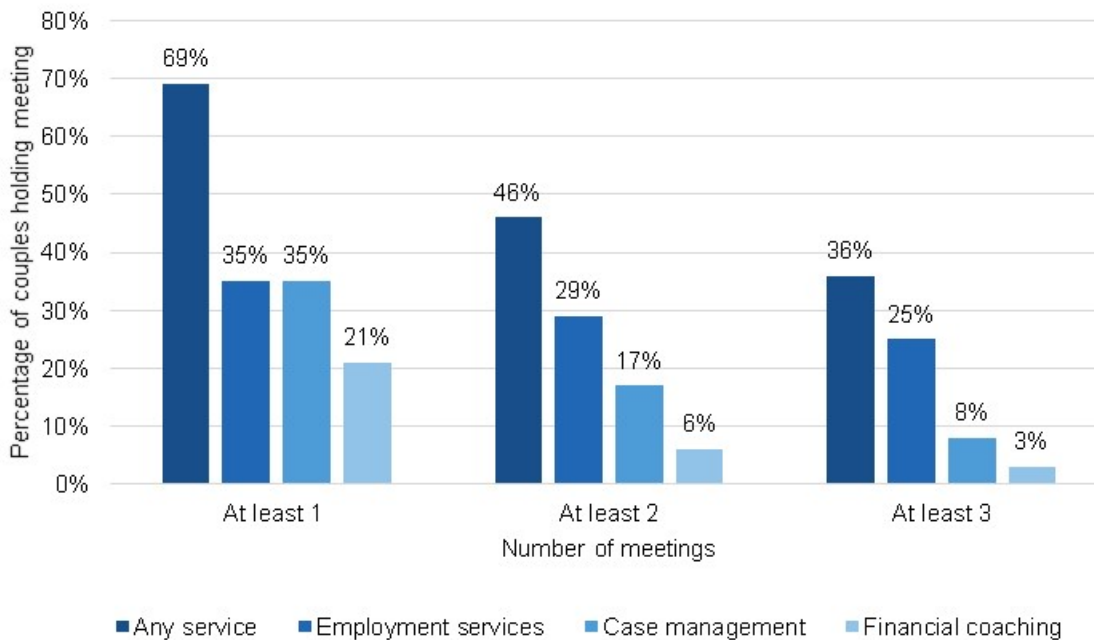
Participation supports such as gas cards, meals, and on-site child care also helped couples' attendance. One focus group participant explained gas cards were critical in helping the couple get to class every week because driving was their only transportation option. Focus group participants felt that beyond these monetary supports, the availability of child care and a meal made attendance in class feel more like a date night than an obligation.

### **Two-thirds of Empowering Families participants received a one-on-one service from the program; employment support was the most common**

Across all couples, 69 percent engaged in at least one individual service. On average, couples received about three contacts, with half typically occurring in the first two months. Thirty-five percent had at least one meeting with an employment counselor and one-quarter of couples met at least three times (Figure VI.2). Thirty-five percent of couples also met at least once with their case manager and 8 percent completed three or more meetings. Of all couples

who engaged in at least one of the individual services, financial coaching was the least-used service, with 21 percent of couples holding at least one meeting and only 3 percent of all couples meeting at least three times.

**Figure VI.2. Number of one-on-one service meetings, by service type**



Source: nFORM.

Note: The sample includes 344 couples. This includes all couples who enrolled from September 2016 to April 2018, who had four months in which to participate in services, and for which at least one member of the couple attended the meeting. Participation figures are as of August 2018. Figures may sum to more than 100 due to rounding.

Employment counselors and financial coaches discussed a range of topics with couples during meetings. Employment counselors most often discussed career planning, skills assessment, and education. Career planning included discussions about seeking a better job and developing a plan to reach that goal. Employment counselors administered assessments such as TABE to better understand the participant's skill level for job placement and educational opportunities. During one-on-one sessions, financial coaches talked to couples about concepts on basic financial literacy, including savings and credit or making a budget.

Case managers focused most of their service contacts on providing HMRE services, such as reinforcing curriculum, discussing couples' social service or emergency needs, and referring couples to family therapy or counseling. Occasionally, case managers also covered employment topics such as career planning and employment. Very few service contacts involved referrals (less than 1 percent) because Empowering Families was already a comprehensive program with services addressing a broad range of issues. In addition, the program included three different organizations that offered other services in addition to those that are directly part of Empowering Families. The services offered through the program and its partners led to a lower need for outside referrals.



Empowering Families came close to its goal of engaging 40 percent of participants with employment supports, but fell short of its goal of engaging all couples in at least one case management and one financial coaching meeting. The Parenting Center designed the employment services with the expectation that not all couples would use the service, because some participants would be satisfied with their jobs or not interested in looking for a job because they were caring for children. Lower-than-expected participation in case management was due in part to scheduling constraints. Couples often wanted to meet with case managers in the evening to accommodate their work schedules. Although case managers regularly worked past their normal 9-to-5 hours, offered times before or after workshop sessions, and offered phone meetings on a limited basis, these changes were not sufficient to meet demand for evening appointments. Lower participation in the financial coaching stemmed in part from participants' lack of engagement with the partner agency following the *Family Wellness* session on financial management. Pathfinders did not offer services in Spanish until it hired its first bilingual coach in May 2017, limiting the services to English speakers only. As of April 2018, the demand for Spanish-language services was quickly increasing and Pathfinders hired another part-time bilingual coach to meet the demand.

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## VII. CONCLUSIONS

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The Parenting Center developed the Empowering Families program to serve low-income couples with children by integrating HMRE and economic stability services. Extending earlier approaches documented in the PACT study, in which grantees provided HMRE workshops with supplementary economic stability services (Zaveri and Dion 2015), Empowering Families took an innovative approach by integrating employment counseling and financial coaching with HMRE content. To increase the likelihood that couples used these services, The Parenting Center worked to recruit couples who were interested in receiving both HMRE and the economic stability services offered by the program. The Parenting Center forged relationships with two partner agencies to embed employment topics and financial literacy into the *Family Wellness* curriculum and provide individual services to couples as part of one cohesive program. This report presents findings about implementation of Empowering Families during its first year-and-a-half of operation, including strategies that staff used to enroll couples in the program, engage them in program activities, and tailor services to their needs.

Limited research exists on HMRE programs with integrated economic stability services. The findings from the STREAMS evaluation of Empowering Families will build on findings from the PACT study, which found that two HMRE programs offering light-touch employment services had limited success in improving employment and earnings outcomes (Moore et al. 2018). STREAMS is testing whether the Empowering Families' program of integrated HMRE and intensive economic stability services will lead to effects on participants' employment and earnings, as well as other outcomes such as relationship quality and co-parenting. This process study sought to assess how closely Empowering Families followed the implementation framework introduced in Chapter I, Figure I.1. This chapter reviews four key findings that demonstrate the quality of Empowering Families' implementation and how well the integrated program design met the needs of the couples served.

### ***Family Wellness* workshops were well-attended and provided useful information for couples' lives and a safe space for learning**

Couples enrolled in Empowering Families had strong initial program engagement, with 85 percent attending at least on program activity. Workshop participation was also strong, with couples attending 70 percent of sessions offered, on average. In a focus group, couples reported that the facilitators' style of mixing presentation and interactive activities made the workshop interesting for couples. Participants also appreciated the rapport and comradery they formed with other couples in the workshops. Couples described how they formed bonds with one another and one participant noted how they "got a lot of stuff done, but we laughed," making the class informative and enjoyable. Couples' viewed the classroom as a safe place to ask questions and learn new skills, such as how to interact with their partners to discuss parenting styles or rule-setting, because they trusted the facilitators and other couples in the class. Participation supports, such as transportation assistance, meals, and on-site child care, supported attendance at the workshops. In addition to gas cards, providing a meal and child care made it easier for one or both partners to come to class directly from work and not worry about making dinner or finding someone to care for their children.

### **Couples engaged in employment services at intended levels, but did not take up other individual services as much as expected**

The purpose of the Empowering Families implementation study was to assess whether an HMRE program could deliver integrated HMRE and economic stability programming, including more intensive employment services that went beyond the light-touch approach used by programs in PACT. Empowering Families aimed to provide employment counseling to 40 percent of couples and almost met that goal. The program did not expect that all participants would take up the employment services because many would already have jobs or would not be looking for a job.

Fewer participants than planned engaged in case management and financial coaching. About one-third of couples connected with a case manager, and close to one-quarter engaged with a financial coach. Most participants were working parents with limited time, which made taking up all of the services challenging. Many participants needed to meet with staff outside of working hours, but evening and weekend appointment times were limited. The program made changes during the first year to try accommodate couples' schedules by increasing flexibility of staff hours and assigning to all couples in a cohort a single case manager who was available at the group sessions for informal interaction. In addition, Pathways hired a bilingual financial coach to meet the demand from Spanish-speaking participants. The program also decided to introduce financial coaching earlier in the session series and change the content to make the session on finances more engaging and interactive for the couples.

### **Participation in all Empowering Families services was particularly high for Spanish-speaking couples**

Spanish-speaking couples participated in all services at higher rates than did English-speaking couples. For example, 85 percent attended at least three-quarters of *Family Wellness* sessions and half had at least one contact with an employment coach or case manager. More dynamic facilitators whose efforts to create community among couples were more successful with this population might have driven these successes. Facilitators reported that Spanish-speaking facilitators were more engaging than English-speakers, and they felt the Spanish workshop was more fun compared to those sessions held in English. A financial coach explained that Spanish-speaking “facilitators are very engaging, they’re very dynamic and they keep [couples] interested.” The program staff also felt that there was a stronger sense of community among the Spanish-speaking couples because of commonalities shared, such as a common language and shared values, which fostered stronger bonds during the workshop and relationships among couples that lasted well after the program ended.

The program also provided a mix of services that was more salient for this population, and aligned better with the services they were looking for, such as employment counseling and financial coaching. The employment counselors noted that Spanish-speakers were very interested in the offerings and wanted to know how to get on the path to secure a better job or improve earnings. Spanish-speakers typically knew what kinds of services they wanted to pursue to prepare for seeking a job, such as learning English or completing a GED. Similarly, the Pathfinders staff reported that Spanish-speaking couples tended to be very interested in financial coaching because, particularly if they were born outside the United States, they were not as

familiar with the workings of the financial and credit systems. A financial coach said couples wanted to know how to get and use credit so they could work toward purchasing a home.

### **Implementing Empowering Families was complex, requiring three agencies to partner to integrate relationship skills and economic stability services**

The Parenting Center designed a program to deliver relationship skills education and economic stability services within a single program. Bringing these two pieces together was the central goal of Empowering Families. However, community agencies often do not have experience in both of these areas. Partnering with other community agencies to provide integrated, on-site economic stability services was also an innovative and untested strategy. Overall, the partnerships succeeded, even though The Parenting Center had to change employment partners early in the program.

Empowering Families successfully integrated HMRE and economic stability content in its core workshop and built a committed team of staff with the expertise to deliver both types of services. The Parenting Center staff and partners engaged in a thoughtful planning process to integrate the economic stability content with the *Family Wellness* curriculum. Staff from all three partner agencies engaged in an iterative planning process to ensure that the economic stability content aligned with the key principles of the HMRE curriculum and was interactive and interesting for couples. Ultimately, the developers approved the adapted *Family Wellness* curriculum and it contributed to the strong workshop participation rates. Moreover, The Parenting Center partnered with experienced organizations that brought the needed expertise to deliver the employment and financial literacy content during workshops and engage with couples in one-on-one services. When the original employment partner, Catholic Charities, left the partnership, The Parenting Center quickly recruited CLC and engaged staff in team building to integrate the new staff.

During early implementation, The Parenting Center focused heavily on coordinating across agencies and creating a consistent message all staff could share about the aims of the program. Program leadership constantly communicated with all three agencies, holding weekly, monthly, and quarterly meetings for the Empowering Families team. As a result of this effort, in staff interviews everyone across agencies expressed commitment to the goals of the program and felt they were key players in helping couples get the most out of the program. Although The Parenting Center worked successfully with partners toward a common mission, this collaboration required extensive effort and time from program leadership. CLC and Pathfinders had their own supervisory structures and leadership; thus, changes to roles for staff from partners required consulting with supervisors from those partner agencies. This sometimes made Empowering Families less agile in its ability to address program issues and implement changes quickly, because changes involved more than 20 staff from three agencies.

### **Next steps**

This study of Empowering Families implementation from September 2016 to April 2018 was conducted in conjunction with a rigorous impact study based on a random assignment research design. The impact evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the Empowering Families program on a range of outcomes one year after random assignment. The report on the impact evaluation will provide new evidence on the effectiveness of HMRE programming for adult

couples and specifically an approach that offers fairly intensive economic stability services in conjunction with HMRE services. Findings from this process study will provide context and help interpret the impact evaluation findings.

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