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#2023-042

February 2023

Daniel Friend, Avery Hennigar, Rebecca Dunn, Armando Yañez, Annie Buonaspina, Mark Ezzo, Camila Fernandez, Hannah McInerney, Alex Bauer, Scott Baumgartner, and Robert G. Wood

Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Adults:

Findings from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) Project

SIMR
Strengthening the Implementation of
Marriage and Relationship Programs

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Contents

OVERVIEW

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services for adult couples and individuals provide instruction in group workshops on topics such as communication, commitment, and intimacy (Stanley et al. 2020; Wadsworth and Markman 2012). Research on the effectiveness of HMRE services has shown some moderately positive outcomes for participants, with a larger evidence base available on the effectiveness of HMRE programs that serve couples (Arnold and Beelman 2019; Hawkins et al. 2022). To achieve their intended effects, HMRE service providers might need support to address key implementation challenges related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement (Friend et al. 2020; Markman et al. 2022; Stanley et al. 2020).

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), with funding from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) project. This project aims to identify key implementation challenges facing HMRE grant recipients and, in close collaboration with these organizations and their staff, develop and test strategies to address those challenges using rapid cycle learning techniques. This report shares lessons and insights from the testing phase of the project, focusing on the five adult-serving HMRE grant recipients that participated in SIMR.

Purpose

In the SIMR project, Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, collaborated with 10 HMRE grant recipients—five youth-serving grant recipients and five adult-serving grant recipients—to conduct iterative rapid cycle testing aimed at strengthening their services. SIMR focused on common implementation challenges related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement.

Common implementation challenges facing HMRE grant recipients

The SIMR team conducted a review of peer-reviewed literature, grant recipients' performance data, and reports on federal studies, and held discussions with federal staff, HMRE experts, interested parties and groups to identify common implementation challenges related to recruiting and retaining participants and developing engaging content for adult- and youth-serving grant recipients.

- **Recruitment challenges** included ineffective recruitment partnerships, ineffective recruitment strategies or marketing, services that did not appeal to potential participants or address their concerns, and participants' logistical barriers to enrollment.
- **Retention challenges** included participants' barriers to participation, difficulty motivating participants to attend, and ineffective structures for incentives and make-up sessions.
- **Content engagement challenges** included not tailoring the content to the service population, facilitators' difficulty connecting with and engaging participants, and facilitators' difficulty managing disruptions in the group workshop and moving conversations forward.

SIMR had two main goals:

1. to improve the service delivery of these grant recipients
2. to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges

This report describes the rapid cycle learning process and findings for the five adult-serving HMRE grant recipients that participated in SIMR (Table 1). It shares how each grant recipient addressed implementation challenges and improved services through participation in SIMR and insights that can help other HMRE grant recipients strengthen their own service delivery. A companion report (Baumgartner et al. 2023) shares findings related to the five youth-serving HMRE grant recipients in SIMR.

Table 1. Adult-serving grant recipients participating in SIMR

Grant recipients' name	Location	Service population	Strategies developed and tested	Number of learning cycles completed
Anthem Strong Families	Dallas, Texas	English- and Spanish-speaking women, as well as men without children or romantic partners; focusing on those with low incomes	Develop, enhance, and maintain recruitment partnerships Use social media to recruit participants	2
Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County	Santa Barbara, California	Primarily Spanish-speaking couples and individuals	Recruit Spanish-speaking men to participate in services for couples Coach participants using a motivation-driven case management practice	3
Gateway Community Services	West Liberty, Kentucky	Families and adult individuals in rural Kentucky	Develop, enhance, and maintain recruitment partnerships Enhance virtual facilitation	2
Montefiore Medical Center	Bronx, New York	Primarily Latino and Black couples who have low-incomes and are expecting a baby or parenting	Develop engaging virtual services	3
The RIDGE Project	McClure, Ohio	Men and women who are incarcerated and close to reentry	Use motivational interviewing to enhance case management and participant–staff interactions	1

Key Findings and Highlights

In SIMR, each grant recipient developed and tested improvement strategies tailored to their specific needs, service populations, and individual contexts, using an approach to program improvement and rapid cycle learning known as Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI^2). Through their work with the SIMR team, grant recipients:

- **Addressed pressing implementation challenges:** three grant recipients focused on improving recruitment, two focused on improving engagement in virtual services, and two focused on improving engagement in case management.
- **Increased their capacity to collect and use data to inform decision-making:** Through rapid cycle learning, grant recipient staff administered feedback surveys to participants, tracked recruitment data, and analyzed social media analytics. They reviewed these data with the SIMR team and developed insights to refine their improvement strategies.
- **Developed skills for identifying and responding to emerging implementation challenges:** At the end of each learning cycle, the SIMR team met with grant recipients to review and interpret data and determine next steps. When new challenges emerged, grant recipients were able to pivot to address them in later learning cycles.
- **Strengthened capacity and developed tools and strategies to support strong implementation through the rest of the grant period:** Grant recipients developed promising tools and strategies to improve recruitment, enhance the delivery of virtual services, enhance case management services, and deepen relationships with participants. At the end of SIMR, the grant recipients planned to continue using these tools and strategies.

Methods

Grant recipients and the SIMR team used the LI^2 framework to guide rapid cycle learning. LI^2 is an analytic and evidence-based approach to managing program improvement (Derr et al. 2017). Throughout the three phases of LI^2, researchers collaborate with practitioners to identify the root causes of a challenge (Learn); create innovative program improvement strategies that are participant-centered, informed by science, and sustainable (Innovate); and use rapid cycle learning methods to test and refine strategies (Improve). This report focuses on the Improve phase. For more information on the Learn and Innovate phases, see the report, Developing Strategies to Address Implementation Challenges Facing Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grantees (Baumgartner et al. 2022).

In the Improve phase in SIMR, adult-serving grant recipients conducted up to three learning cycles. They collected different types of data to assess the success of the strategies they were testing, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys of staff and participants, workshop observations, program data, and data from nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management), the management information system sponsored by ACF that grant recipients use to record participants' characteristics and participation in services, monitor service use, and make decisions that are informed by data.

Recommendations

Through their collaboration as part of SIMR rapid cycle learning, the SIMR team and the five FRAMEWorks grant recipients that participated generated insights and lessons to inform strong service delivery that are relevant to other HMRE grant recipients. The tools and strategies that grant recipients developed provide starting points for other organizations that want to strengthen their own HMRE services. Grant recipients interested in adopting any strategies presented in this report can do so using a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to adapt the strategy to their specific context and then iteratively test it on a small scale to refine the strategy design and implementation

- **Build and maintain partnerships with other community organizations to strengthen recruitment efforts** by identifying and developing new partnerships to support recruiting efforts and by strengthening existing partnerships.
- **Be intentional about the shift to virtual services** by equipping facilitators and participants to troubleshoot technological challenges and by supporting facilitators in their efforts to deliver virtual content in an engaging manner.
- **Reinforce virtual workshop content** by providing brief skill coaching sessions outside of workshop sessions.
- **Strengthen case management practices** by leveraging and enhancing participants' internal motivation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services are designed to help participants build and sustain strong families. Since 2006, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services, has administered grants funding HMRE services to encourage the formation of healthy relationships and stable families and homes. The grants support services for couples, individual adults, and youth.

HMRE services for adult couples and individuals provide instruction in group workshops on topics such as communication, commitment, and intimacy (Stanley et al. 2020; Wadsworth and Markman 2012). Research on the effectiveness of HMRE services has shown some moderately positive outcomes for participants, with a larger evidence base available on the effectiveness of HMRE programs that serve couples (Arnold and Beelman 2019; Hawkins et al. 2022). Recent publications that took stock of progress in the HMRE field underline the need for additional research on best practices and additional support for strong implementation in order for HMRE services to achieve their intended effects (Friend et al. 2020; Markman et al. 2022; Stanley et al. 2020). In particular, HMRE practitioners might need support to address challenges related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement to ensure that participants can access and learn from the services provided (Friend et al. 2020). These implementation challenges may limit the ability of HMRE services for adults to improve outcomes of participants.

To strengthen the capacity of HMRE grant recipients to help the populations they serve, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), with funding from the Office of Family Assistance, has contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) project. This project aims to identify key implementation challenges facing HMRE grant recipients and, in close collaboration with HMRE grant recipients and their staff, develop and test strategies to address those challenges using rapid cycle learning techniques. An earlier report (Baumgartner et al. 2022) describes how grant recipients identified challenges and developed strategies to address them. This report shares lessons and insights from the testing phase of the project, focusing on the five adult-serving grant recipients that participated in SIMR. A companion report describes the testing phase for the five youth-serving grant recipients that participated in SIMR (Baumgartner et al. 2023).

What are Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs?

Since 2006, the Office of Family Assistance in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has funded the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) program. The HMRF grant program funds organizations that provide healthy marriage and relationship education services to couples, individual adults, and youth, under two funding opportunity announcements:

- **FRAMEWorks** grant recipients serve adult couples or individuals.
- **READY4Life** grant recipients serve youth (defined as individuals ages 14 to 24) in school or community settings.

The HMRF program also funds Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant recipients who offer services to fathers to promote healthy relationships, responsible parenting, family well-being, and economic security.

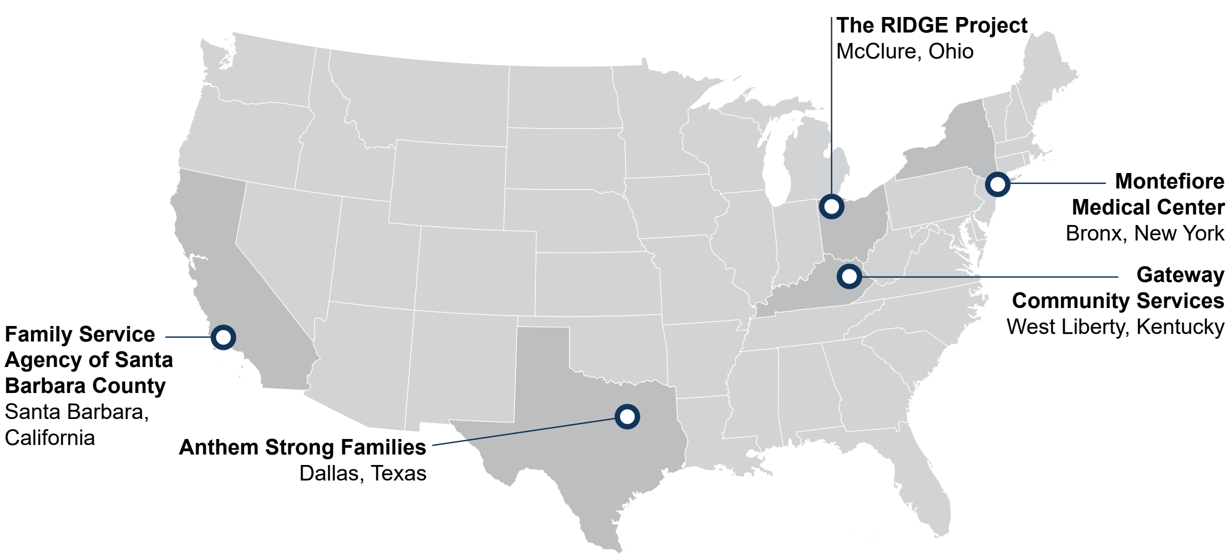
SIMR: Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs

In the SIMR project, Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, collaborated with 10 HMRE grant recipients to conduct iterative rapid cycle testing aimed at strengthening their services. SIMR has two main goals: (1) to improve these grant recipients' service delivery and (2) to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges. For more information and a list of SIMR publications, visit the SIMR project page on the OPRE website.

Adult-serving grant recipients participating in SIMR

The SIMR team collaborated with five adult-serving HMRE grant recipients funded under the "Family, Relationships, and Marriage Education – Works, or "FRAMEWorks," Funding Opportunity Announcement. The SIMR team and the grant recipients used rapid cycle learning to co-create, test, and refine promising strategies to address challenges to recruitment, retention, and content engagement (Figure 1.1). During the site selection process, these grant recipients participated in interactive activities to identify their most pressing challenges and brainstorm strategies that could address them. The strategies each grant recipient focused on were tailored to their specific needs, service populations, and individual contexts (Table 1.1). More information on the site selection process, the challenges grant recipients identified, and details about their services are in the earlier report (Baumgartner et al. 2022).

Figure 1.1. Adult-serving HMRE grant recipients participating in SIMR



Common implementation challenges facing HMRE grant recipients

The SIMR team conducted a review of peer-reviewed literature, grant recipients' performance data, and reports on federal studies, as well as held discussions with federal staff, HMRE experts, interested parties and groups, to identify common implementation challenges. Such challenges related to recruiting and retaining participants and developing engaging content for adult- and youth-serving grant recipients.

- **Recruitment challenges** included ineffective recruitment partnerships, ineffective recruitment strategies or marketing, services that did not appeal to potential participants or address their concerns, and participants' logistical barriers to enrollment.
- **Retention challenges** included participants' barriers to participation, difficulty motivating participants to attend, and ineffective structures for incentives and make-up sessions.
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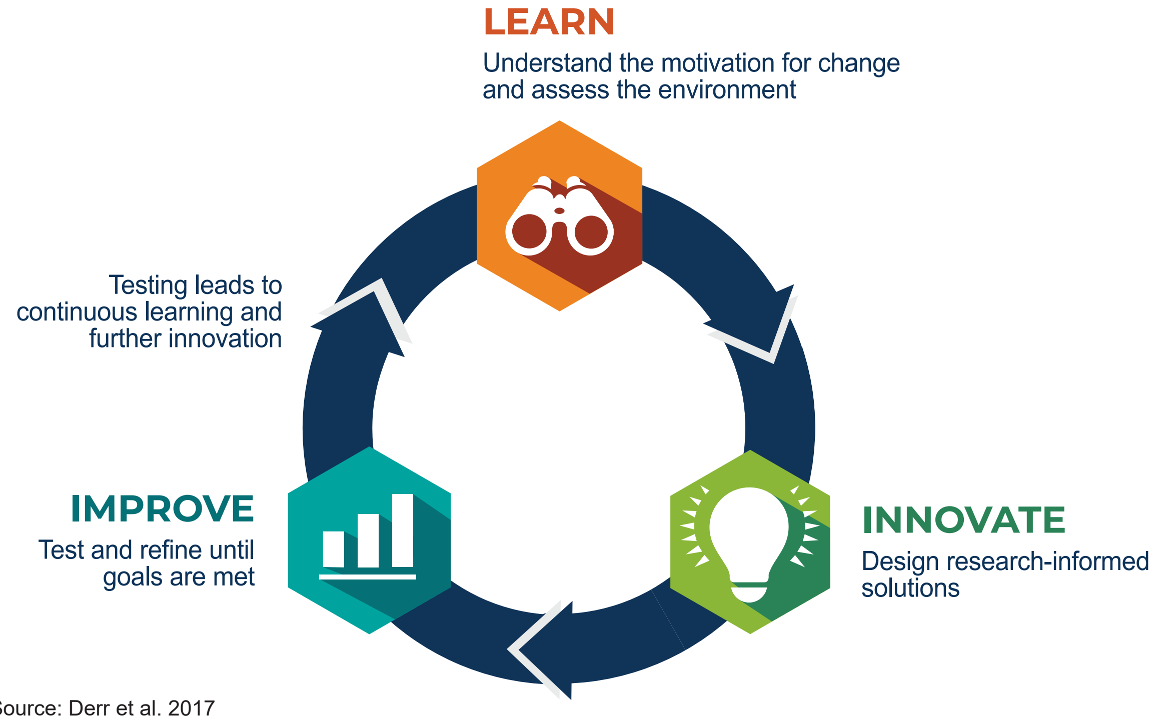
Learn, Innovate, Improve: An approach to rapid cycle learning

Grant recipients and the SIMR team used the Learn, Innovate, improve (LI^2) framework to guide rapid cycle learning (Figure 1.2). LI^2 is an analytic and evidence-based approach to managing program improvement (Derr et al. 2017). Throughout the three phases of LI^2, researchers collaborate with practitioners to identify the root causes of a challenge (Learn); create innovative program improvement strategies that are participant-centered, informed by science, and sustainable (Innovate); and use rapid cycle learning methods to test and refine strategies (Improve).

An earlier report focused on grant recipients' activities during the Learn and Innovate phases (Baumgartner et al. 2022). In the Learn phase, the SIMR team worked with participating grant recipients to systematically identify the factors contributing to the specific implementation challenge they would like to address. Our initial work with the grant recipients in the SIMR project focused on building a common understanding of each grant recipients' context and the needs and circumstances of the population the grant recipients aimed to serve. In the Innovate phase, we worked with grant recipients to develop tailored strategies directly connected to the challenges and root causes the grant recipients' staff identified during

Figure 1.2. The LI² framework



Source: Derr et al. 2017

the Learn phase. In regular calls with grant recipients' staff, we co-developed creative strategies that built on research and best practices and on grant recipients' knowledge of their service population and unique context. Grant recipients interested in adopting any strategies presented in this report can do so using a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to adapt the strategy to their specific context and then iteratively test it on a small scale to refine the strategy design and implementation.

This report focuses on the Improve phase. In this phase, the SIMR team and grant recipients' staff collaborated to iteratively test and refine strategies using rapid cycle learning methods. Rapid cycle learning was informed by four key principles.

- **Embed strategies in activities and context.** Each grant recipients' rapid cycle learning was customized to the strategy they were implementing and the service delivery context. For example, learning cycles with Montefiore focused on improving virtual workshop sessions that lasted for 12 weeks. As a result, their learning cycle was also approximately 12 weeks.
- **Engage grant recipients' staff directly in interpreting findings and refining strategies.** Throughout each learning cycle, we met with grant recipients' staff to discuss progress, identify challenges and barriers, monitor data (such as weekly recruitment or retention numbers), and fine-tune the strategy as necessary. In a debrief meeting at the end of a learning cycle, the SIMR team presented data to the grant recipients' staff and facilitated a discussion to engage them in interpreting the data and determining next steps. To help them choose their next steps, the team drew on techniques from other phases of the LI² process, such as identifying the root causes of an emerging challenge (Learn) or developing learning questions and data collection plans for another learning cycle (Innovate).
- **Iterate to refine strategies over time.** Trying out a strategy by using multiple small-scale and quick turnaround steps, as described above, promotes a culture of learning and helps pinpoint challenges with a strategy early. With most grant recipients, we used more than one learning cycle to test and refine individual strategies.

- **Incorporate low-burden data collection.** We sought to make data collection a part of the strategies that grant recipients tested. Grant recipients consequently built their capacity to collect and use data to inform program improvement. For example, Montefiore recorded their virtual workshops through the Zoom platform and shared recordings with the SIMR team for observation. Montefiore plans to continue reviewing recorded Zoom sessions as a tool for program monitoring and self-improvement.

Table 1.2. Data used in rapid cycle learning

	Staff and partners			Participants		Services and strategies		
	Interviews and focus groups	Surveys	HCD activities	Interviews and focus groups	Surveys	Observation	nFORM data	Other program data
Anthem Strong Families	✔	✔	✔				✔	✔
Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County	✔	✔	✔	✔			✔	✔
Gateway Community Services	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔
Montefiore Medical Center		✔	✔	✔		✔		✔
The RIDGE Project	✔		✔	✔				

HCD: Human-centered design, a discipline of interactive approaches to innovation and programmatic change that emphasizes the perspectives of people affected by the change at each stage of the design process (Liedtka et al. 2017).

In the learning cycles, grant recipients' staff and the SIMR team used several sources of data to understand challenges, inform strategy design, and assess the implementation and success of the tested strategy (Table 1.2). Among these data sources are the following:

- **Data from grant recipients and partner staff, including interviews, surveys, and human-centered design (HCD) activities.** HCD is a discipline of approaches to innovation and programmatic change that emphasizes the perspectives of people affected by the change at each stage of the design process (Liedtka et al. 2017). During the learning cycles, we used these activities to collect group feedback and solicit ideas to refine strategies for subsequent learning cycles from grant recipients' staff.

- **Data from participants, including interviews, focus groups, and grant recipient-administered surveys.**

- **Data on services and strategies, including workshop observations, nFORM data (Box 1.1), recruitment data, and data that grant recipients collected about services and strategies.** For example, both Anthem (Chapter 2) and the Family Services Agency of Santa Barbara (Chapter 3) shared social media analytics with the SIMR team. Gateway (Chapter 4), Anthem, and Family Services Agency of Santa Barbara shared data on recruitment activities that are not tracked in nFORM. Montefiore (Chapter 5) shared recordings of their workshop sessions along with curriculum materials.

Between September 2021 and August 2022, adult-serving HMRE grant recipients completed between one and three iterative learning cycles (Table 1.1).

In this report, we share insights, lessons, and promising strategies from the grant recipients' rapid cycle learning. Because the SIMR team tailored the work to each grant recipients' needs, each chapter focuses on findings from a single grant recipient, documenting the rapid cycle learning the grant recipient engaged in, the strategy they focused on, and how that strategy changed over the course of iterative learning cycles. In each chapter, we present findings for the primary questions that grant recipients sought to answer through rapid cycle learning. In a concluding chapter, we offer some cross-cutting themes, insights, and lessons. Key terms used across the chapters are shown in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1. Key terms

- **CQI.** Continuous quality improvement, a process of identifying, describing, and analyzing strengths and problems and then testing, implementing, learning from, and revising solutions.
- **Learning cycle.** One of the short, iterative testing periods involved in rapid cycle learning. Each learning cycle includes a period when grant recipients' staff implement a program improvement strategy and participate in data collection, followed by a period in which grant recipients' staff and researchers review data and determine changes to the strategy for the next learning cycle.
- **LI^2.** Learn, Innovate, Improve, the framework the SIMR team used to guide rapid cycle learning.
- **nFORM.** Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management, an ACF-sponsored management information system that grant recipients use to record participants' characteristics and participation in services, monitor service use, and make data-informed decisions.
- **Rapid cycle learning.** An iterative process in which data on short-term outcomes are collected and used to implement and repeatedly refine a strategy until co-created goals are met.
- **SIMR team.** Mathematica and Public Strategies staff who worked closely with grant recipients' staff to develop and test program improvement strategies.

STRENGTHENING RECRUITMENT THROUGH REFERRAL PARTNERSHIPS AND SOCIAL MEDIA WITH ANTHEM STRONG FAMILIES

Spotlight on: Anthem Strong Families

- HMRE grant recipient from 2006–2011 and 2020–present; Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant recipient from 2011–present
- Also funded by OFA in 2020 to continue providing RF services, Anthem has a reputation in the community for serving fathers and needed to create a strong, distinct identity for their new HMRE services
- Family Champion serves primarily Hispanic and Black men and women in 7 counties in the Dallas, Texas, area. It primarily serves (1) women and (2) men who are not in relationships and do not have children. The program can also serve couples. However, the program did not serve couples during the period of SIMR rapid cycle learning.
- Uses *TYRO Family Champion* and *CORE Communications* curricula, which consist of an 18-hour core workshop offered in Spanish and English.

Learning question for Anthem Strong Families:

What are the best strategies for recruiting and enrolling participants into Family Champion? To explore this question, the SIMR team interviewed and surveyed Anthem staff, surveyed partner staff, conducted a focus group with participants, and reviewed social media analytics and nFORM data on recruitment.

Anthem Strong Families (Anthem) is a multiservice agency serving communities in Dallas, Texas, and surrounding counties. Anthem operated federally funded HMRE services from 2006–2011. Beginning in 2011, Anthem paused their HMRE program and focused on establishing its federally funded responsible fatherhood (RF) services. In 2020, Anthem received funding from ACF to restart their HMRE services and began delivering the TYRO Family Champion Program (hereafter referred to as Family Champion). Family Champion serves populations that are not served through their RF services: English- and Spanish-speaking women, and men who do not have children and are not in relationships.

During the first year of the grant, Anthem staff struggled to recruit and enroll participants into Family Champion. Anthem is well known in the community for its work serving fathers, but it had been nearly 10 years since the organization provided HMRE services. Because of this long-term focus exclusively on fathers, as well as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Anthem leadership saw a need to strengthen existing community partnerships to boost HMRE recruiting. Accordingly, at the beginning of SIMR, Anthem leadership and the SIMR team identified the need to build new recruiting partnerships and enhance or "level up" existing ones as a top priority for the agency's SIMR rapid cycle learning work. To support this effort, Anthem staff and the SIMR team planned to work together to develop an identity for Family Champion that was separate and distinct from that of Anthem's RF services.

As part of SIMR rapid cycle learning, Anthem chose to test and refine more intensive and purposeful strategies for recruiting participants to Family Champion by bolstering referral partnerships and using social media. In collaboration, the SIMR and Anthem team conducted two learning cycles—the first on developing partnerships, and the second on social media.

What did rapid cycle learning look like at Anthem?

The SIMR team and Anthem staff conducted two learning cycles, each focused on bolstering their recruitment efforts. The first learning cycle tested new recruitment materials and a structured process to develop referral partners. The second tested different social media posts on Anthem's Instagram account.

Learning Cycle 1: October 2021–February 2022

The purpose of the first learning cycle was to test strategies for community partner outreach with the goal of increasing the number of referrals from partner organizations. To bolster recruitment for their HMRE services, the SIMR team developed an intensive two-day, in-person training on partner development (Box 2.1). This training, delivered in October 2021, was based on documented best practices and guidance for recruitment (for example, Atouba 2019; Friend and Paulsell 2019; Hogue et al. 1999). The training featured a discussion of strategies designed to help community partners understand key components of Family Champion, establish clear expectations for the partnership, and ensure regular communication with partners (for example, by sharing important updates on their HMRE services and participants). The same training was conducted with two other grant recipients, Gateway and Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County.

Learning Cycle 1

October 2021 – February 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Develop and implement a process for establishing and maintaining referral partnerships
- **Purpose:** Increase the number of referrals from partner organizations

Data

- Biweekly coaching calls (3 staff)
- Pre- and post-training survey (up to 10 staff)
- Interactive debriefing activity (7 staff)
- Partner survey (8 partner staff)
- nFORM referrals and enrollments

Key Takeaways

- Staff felt confident in their ability to develop relationships with new partners.
- Partners thought Anthem was strong at initial communication and establishing clear roles of the partnership, but could improve its ongoing, consistent communication.

Following this training, Anthem and SIMR staff used the principles taught in the training to work closely on developing two strategies:

- **Developing a cohesive brand.** This strategy focused on developing a brand for their HMRE services and creating marketing materials that describe Family Champion's focus, format, and service population (for example, an informational flyer for partners, outreach emails for initial contact with partners, and an elevator pitch or succinct speech for new partner outreach). Anthem staff worked closely with the SIMR team to develop a series of marketing materials for potential and current partners. For example, their informational flyer for partners (Figure 2.1) covered eligibility and workshop structure, the benefits of Family Champion, and specific information on how to make a referral.
- **Identifying and engaging partners.** Anthem staff worked with the SIMR team to develop a process for reaching out to potential partners. They focused on establishing clear expectations for community partnerships and developing a process for regular communication with partners (such as sharing important updates, including dates of upcoming classes). The SIMR team also worked with Anthem leadership to categorize their existing partnerships based on their current engagement levels (Box 2.2). Anthem used this categorization to set priorities about which potential partners to reach out to and talked to the SIMR team about strategies to enhance or improve the relationship with the referral partner.

Box 2.1. Topics for partnership development training in Learning Cycle 1

- Understanding and categorizing existing partnerships
- Developing an understanding of your ideal partnership
- Identifying and prioritizing partners
- Approaching potential partners and their staff
- Solidifying partnerships
- Maintaining partnerships and communication practices

Box 2.2. Types of partnerships

- **Potential.** Partners in your community whose participant population is similar to the population of your own program, but who do not have an existing relationship with your organization or HMRE program
- **Resource only.** Partners who do not typically send referrals, but do support your program in other significant ways— for example, by providing a service to your HMRE program participants
- **Willing.** Partners who are interested in your program and send referrals occasionally
- **Supportive.** Partners with a vested interest in what your program does who regularly refer participants
- **Engaged.** Partners who have an advanced understanding of your program and regularly refer participants who are a good fit

Source: SIMR recruitment training

The first learning cycle included seven Anthem staff involved in developing and maintaining partnerships, and eight staff from partner organizations.

The learning cycle was designed to answer the following question:

What are the best strategies for developing community partners to enhance recruitment into Anthem's HMRE services?

Throughout the learning cycle, Anthem staff gave the SIMR team feedback on how these efforts were going. The SIMR team collected this information through a staff survey, biweekly coaching calls, and a focus group with program staff. To get the partners' perspective on Anthem's outreach and communication strategies, the SIMR team collected survey data from eight employees at partner organizations. The survey was sent to all partners (both existing and new) toward the end of the learning cycle. To explore how enrollments changed over the course of the learning cycle, the SIMR team reviewed nFORM enrollment numbers with Anthem staff.

Based on Anthem's experience and the data gathered during this learning cycle, the SIMR team and Anthem staff observed five key lessons:

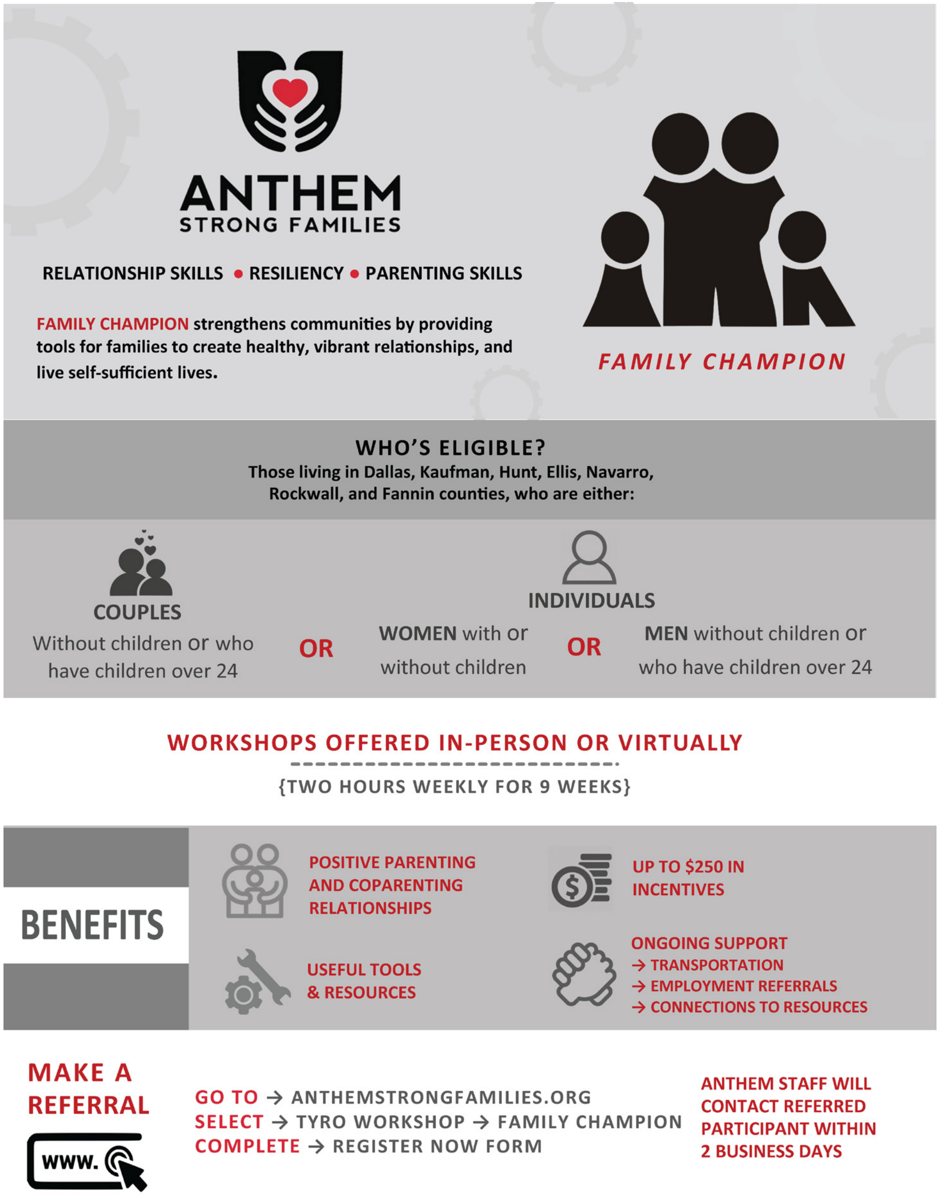
1. **Anthem staff developed greater confidence and the skills they needed to forge new relationships with prospective community partners.** In staff surveys administered before and after the October 2021 training, Anthem staff reported that the knowledge and strategies they learned brought about a slight increase in their confidence in developing relationships with new partners. During the staff debriefing focus group, staff reported that the training and several of its accompanying tools and strategies were useful in Anthem's work to form and maintain partnerships with organizations in the community. Staff also thought their meetings and communication with partners were more productive and organized when they used these tools.

2. **Anthem applied the techniques taught in the training to establish new partnerships.** In the coaching calls and a debrief session, Anthem leadership reported engaging about 10 new organizations during the first learning cycle – solidifying partnerships with some of them and continuing development discussions with others. By the end of the first cycle, Anthem listed 37 partners in its tracking sheet—22 prospective partners, and 12 supportive or engaged partners.

   These partners represented a range of organizations, from social service organizations (for example, food banks and other family-serving organizations) to governmental agencies (for example, Head Start or the Mexican Consulate). During the debrief session, Anthem staff said they were benefitting greatly from building strong relationships with individual staff at community partner organizations. Often when staff left jobs at current community partners and began new positions at other community organizations, they often opened the door for Anthem to form partnerships with their new employer. Anthem staff were able to leverage these existing staff relationships to expand the organization's network to organizations and agencies previously unknown to them.

3. **Anthem improved its engagement with existing partners.** During the debrief session, leadership expressed confidence that relationships with their current partners improved by applying the strategies learned through the rapid cycle work. Their partnership with Child Protective Services (CPS), a key partner, was enhanced by talking directly with CPS judges and developing a testimonial video featuring former participants and partner staff. This helped Anthem staff get its message about their HMRE services out to judges, lawyers, and others in the CPS legal community. CPS was an advantageous partner for Anthem because the family court coalition connects many other organizations in the community, and they could tap into those connections. Anthem staff started two new cohorts of classes with an organization they met through a connection forged by a CPS case manager.

Figure 2.1. Anthem partner flyer



Box 2.3. Strategies from the training that Anthem staff found helpful for developing partnerships

- Being intentional and strategic about selecting prospective referral partners
- Having an informational flyer for partners
- Using a QR code on informational flyers so partners could make a referral by sending potential participants directly to the Family Champion sign-up page
- Preparing a tailored program pitch for informational meetings with prospective partners
- Categorizing and tracking levels of partnership engagement

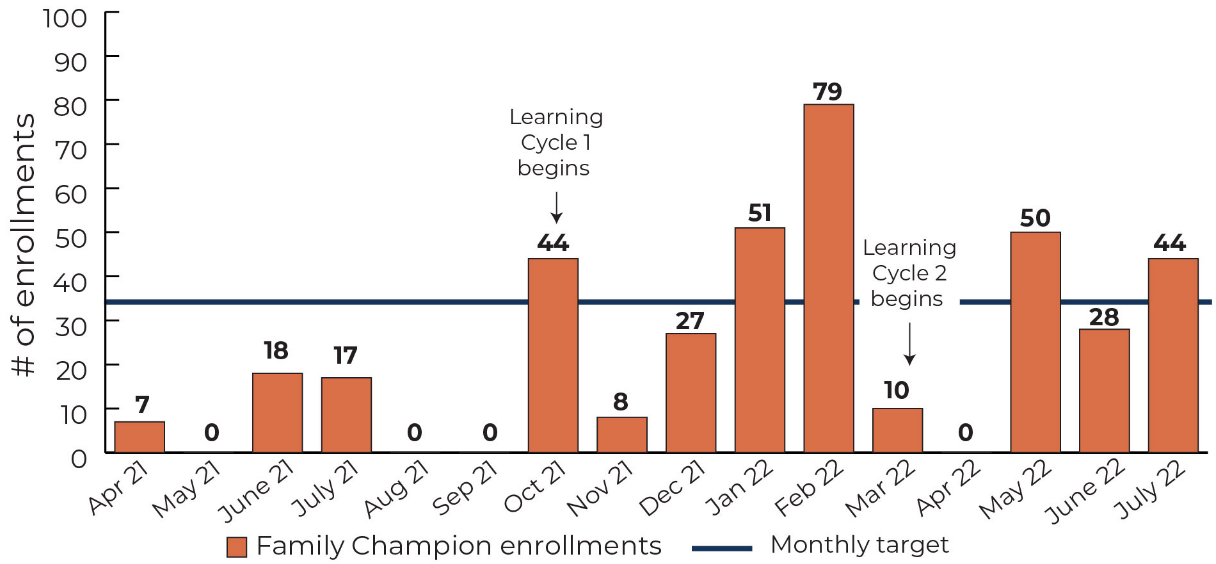
Source: Interactive debriefing activity with Anthem staff

4. **Partner staff thought highly of their partnership with Anthem.** Most of the eight staff members at community partners who participated in the survey of partners were satisfied with their partnership with Anthem. Most reported favorable initial communication with Anthem and noted Anthem's efforts to establish clear roles and responsibilities for the partnership. The survey also revealed areas for improvement in Anthem's work with partners. For example, partners indicated that Anthem could improve at maintaining ongoing, longer-term communication with partners. Partner staff thought communication and contact with Anthem at the beginning of the partnership were strong, but became less consistent as the partnership progressed. Partner staff suggested Anthem work to strengthen its communication with partners and provide more frequent and clearer communication to clients after they are referred.

5. **Enrollments increased during the learning cycle.** Anthem staff and the SIMR team monitored enrollment trends over the learning cycle. To meet the overall enrollment targets for their HMRE services, Anthem leadership set a goal of enrolling 35 participants into services each month. Enrollment increased steadily during the first learning cycle, to a level well above that target (Figure 2.2). Anthem staff attributed this increase, at least in part, to their efforts to strengthen partnerships. However, Anthem did not maintain data on referral sources for their newly enrolled participants, making it difficult to directly tie this increase to their efforts to strengthening partnerships. Staff also noted an improvement in consistently serving both men and women, whereas before SIMR began, Anthem's HMRE services were serving almost exclusively women. In past grant cohorts, grant recipients have often struggled with program enrollment during November and December due to the holidays, but Anthem remained not far off from their monthly enrollment target during the month of December. Enrollments dropped off substantially in the months immediately after the learning cycle. Staff attributed this decline to a COVID surge within their organization and community in the spring of 2022. Once that COVID surge had passed, enrollments into their HMRE services picked up again to a level near or above their target of 35 enrollments per month.

At the end of the learning cycle, Anthem leadership and staff were satisfied with their partnership development efforts and thought they could leverage the lessons from the training and their partnership development process to continue this work their own. During the interactive debrief session, leadership indicated that, with the surge of COVID-19 cases at the end of the learning cycle, it was important for the program to focus on recruiting participants using virtual methods. For this reason, they decided to focus their second learning cycle on testing a new strategy focusing social media posts to reach young adults who might be interested in their program.

Figure 2.2. Family Champion enrollments from April 2021 to July 2022



Source: nFORM

Learning Cycle 2: March–June 2022

This learning cycle was designed to answer one learning question:

What are best practices for using social media for engaging young adults as potential enrollees in HMRE services?

The purpose of the second learning cycle was to explore the feasibility of using social media to recruit participants ages 18 to 24 — a group that Anthem had challenges recruiting in the past. Anthem decided to focus its second learning cycle on using social media to reach young adults. The interest in social media as a recruitment tool emerged in response to a surge in COVID-19 cases in the area in spring 2022. Anthem staff had begun offering more in-person services up until this point, but went back to virtual services following the surge. Consequently, Anthem staff wanted to explore ways they could recruit participants virtually—particularly through social media. Anthem's RF services already had a prominent social media presence, but Anthem leadership thought their HMRE service's social media approach could be enhanced. Anthem staff observed they had difficulty recruiting young adults from ages 18 to 24 and thought they might reach this younger population more effectively through social media. Anthem decided to focus on Instagram during this learning cycle. Instagram is a photo- and video-based social media app primarily used on smartphones and is the most popular social media app for Americans between the ages of 18 and 29, eclipsing Facebook (Schaeffer 2021).

To address these challenges, the SIMR team developed a training on outreach messaging and social media (Box 2.4). Like the earlier training on partner development, the training was based on suggested best practices for recruitment (for example, Carlson et al. 2014; Friend and Paulsell 2019; Sanchez et al. 2020). The training covered strategies aimed to help Anthem staff define a profile of their ideal participants, distill the components and benefits of Family Champion that resonate most with their potential participants, and develop a compelling message or "hook." In the training, Anthem staff were asked to apply these principles to social media and in leveraging the help of program champions such as former participants or advocates within the community to amplify marketing messages. The SIMR team delivered the training to Anthem staff in March 2022.

Following the training, Anthem staff and the SIMR team engaged in an intensive three-step process to develop the social media strategy:

1. **Drafting initial social media posts.** Together the SIMR team and Anthem developed social media content, focusing on Instagram posts, for Anthem to post to their Instagram account. An Instagram post is an image or video that appears on a user's account page, often accompanied by a text caption. An Instagram story is a vertical photo or video that appears at the top of the Instagram feed and disappears 24 hours after it is posted; as the name implies, it is designed to tell a story and is generally accompanied by narrative text.

   To draft the initial Instagram posts, the SIMR team and Anthem staff held several brainstorming meetings to discuss the main message of the posts, the images to feature, and potential hashtags (that is, metadata tags added to social media posts that allow for cross-referencing of content by a topic or theme) to include. The SIMR team and Anthem began by developing the content for the posts, with the intention of also having the posts appear as a story on Anthem's Instagram account. Anthem shared testimonials from past participants on the power of the Family Champion program, which provided quotes to use as captions for each of the posts. The SIMR team conducted a targeted review of literature on using social media to recruit participants and examined other organizations' social media accounts to ensure the posts employed best practices in the field. For example, social media research recommends keeping messages short and simple; including a call to action; creating personalized visual materials through online design platforms, such as Canva; and using hashtags and geotags (linking a post to a geographical location) to boost an Instagram post's visibility and reach (RTI International 2017). Mathematica researchers who worked on social media strategies in past studies suggested using tactics such as sponsoring ad(s), linking participants directly to eligibility pages, using QR codes on flyers and posts, pinning stories (that is, making a story permanently visible at the top of your account page) to detail program offerings, and using influencers or partners to share content (that is, partnering with another social media account to repost your information as their own post or story).

Learning Cycle 2

March – June 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Recruit young adults using Instagram posts and advertisements
- **Purpose:** Identify best practices for recruiting young adults through Instagram

Data

- Biweekly coaching calls (5 staff)
- Participant focus group (9 participants)
- Social media analytics (3 posts)
- Interactive debrief session (7 staff)
- nFORM referrals and enrollment data

Key Takeaways

- Staff thought that holding a focus group was a good way to get feedback on which social media posts and messages resonated with young adults.
- Sponsoring posts and using videos (as opposed to static images) boosted young adult engagement with Instagram.
- No young adults who enrolled said they learned about HMRE services through Instagram.

Box 2.4. Training topics for Learning Cycle 2: Direct outreach and social media

- Defining your ideal participant
- Distilling program elements that matter to participants
- Developing an enticing message or "hook"
- Using refusal conversion and motivational interviewing techniques
- Developing effective advertising messages and using marketing tools
- Using program champions and word-of-mouth practices

Based on the design sessions and research, the SIMR team created four sample Instagram posts. Anthem provided feedback on the posts and selected three of them. One is shown in Figures 2.3 and 2.4 in its original and revised version.

Figure 2.3. Example of Anthem's original social media post

Figure 2.4. Example of Anthem's revised social media post

2. **Obtaining input from participants.** To gather feedback on potential social media posts, Anthem hosted a focus group in May 2022 for their current, younger participants. The focus group generated helpful feedback about young adults' social media preferences, including the types of messages, images, and style of engagement they found most appealing. Overall, they preferred when posts had shorter videos or fewer images to swipe through, bright colors, and descriptive captions with emojis. They also suggested creating messages around topics younger participants might care about—such as self-esteem, career pathways, anxiety and other mental health issues, well-being, and the effects of social media. Focus group participants disliked the posts with stock photography and suggested including images of real program participants, staff, and/or families together. Anthem and SIMR staff refined the initial posts based on this feedback (Box 2.5). Figures 2.3 and 2.4 show two iterations of one of the refined posts, which contains images of real families in Anthem's program — who consented for their images to be used for media purposes— and is revised from an image of a male participant from their RF services.

3. **Developing a plan.** Once the posts were finalized in late May 2022, the SIMR team worked with Anthem staff to create a social media plan—including information such as who should post and how often—and brainstormed an amplification strategy. Out of a few potential strategies, Anthem staff decided to: (1) ask past participants and Anthem staff and leadership throughout the organization to like and share the posts; and (2) boost certain posts. Boosting an Instagram post is a way to get more people to see the post by paying Instagram to select and share with Anthem's posts with other accounts that fit the geographic and demographic information provided. Anthem decided to boost the post for participants that live in the zip codes Anthem serves. Posting began in June 2022.

Box 2.5. Types of social media posts developed by Anthem

- "What Defines a Champion?" video. This post was a video showing people engaged in a range of activities, such as playing sports or caretaking for a child, with the caption "What Defines a Champion?"—a key theme in the program's curriculum. The video ends with a request to click the link in Anthem's bio to learn more.
- Family Champion Collage post. This was a photo collage of graduates of Anthem's Family Champion program. The post's caption is: "The Family Champion program is a free program that helps individuals and couples become the champions they want to be. Learn more at [website link]."
- "Stand in your power" video: This post was a video of photos from Anthem participants with captions about how Anthem's program helped participants believe they can do anything. The video ends with the phrase: "Let us help you stand in your power. Click link in bio."

The second cycle included six staff—three leadership team members and three members of Anthem's marketing team—and nine young adults who participated in a focus group.

To examine the effects of the amplification strategy, Anthem and the SIMR team decided to amplify one out of their three social media posts ("Stand in your power"; Box 2.5) and then compare social media metrics across the three posts. To monitor the performance of each of the posts, Anthem staff and the SIMR team tracked social media analytics, such as the views, likes, shares, and comments on each post. To hear staff perspectives on the process overall, the SIMR team held a final focus group with all staff involved in the learning cycle.

Anthem staff launched this effort towards the end of SIMR, leading to a shortened timeline for data collection and refinements. However, Anthem staff and the SIMR team observed two key learnings from this cycle.

1. **Amplified posts were effective in gaining more views, but did not necessarily foster more active engagement with comments on the posts.** The performance metrics provided by Instagram showed that the amplified social media post (the post Anthem paid to boost and had program participants and staff share) was able to attract more than three times as many views and clicks as the two non-amplified social media posts. The amplified social media post also attracted slightly more likes and shares than the non-amplified posts. Anthem staff also found that boosting a post attracted more spam accounts, or accounts from people who comment just to secure more followers themselves. Anthem staff had to proactively monitor its Instagram feed for these accounts and delete their tangential comments.

   One of the non-amplified posts ("What Defines a Champion," Box 2.3) garnered more comments (when another social media account replies to a post publicly) than the amplified post did. The results on amplified versus non-amplified posts suggest that if the goal is to spread the word about their HMRE services, an amplified post might be a good strategy. However, if the goal is to foster engagement with the content of the post through comments, amplification may not matter. One potential driver of this was the content of a post. The video and overall message that was used in the champion post, which catered to a slightly broader audience than the other two posts, could have resonated with certain groups more such that it motivated them to comment. However, more research is needed to understand the drivers of commenting.

2. **Social media posts did not increase program enrollment among young adults.** In the months immediately before making the Instagram posts, Anthem enrolled four participants ages 18 to 24 from March–May 2022. In the months immediately following these posts, the program enrolled three participants in this age range, a number virtually unchanged from the immediately preceding period. Furthermore, none of the participants enrolled in June and July reported that they learned about Anthem through social media.

What did we learn about recruiting with Anthem?

Anthem's experience during the two learning cycles conducted as part of SIMR offers several lessons for the HMRE field:

- **HMRE or similar service providers might consider an intentional approach to partnership development that focuses on proactive communication.** Building a trusting partnership takes time. Investing this time at the beginning stages of developing a partnership helps staff understand each organization's culture and develop a shared, co-created vision for working together (Bonner et al. 2017; Zoellner et al. 2017). Regular, transparent communication is a key element in maintaining partnerships (Bonner et al. 2017; Burnette and Sanders 2014; Schiff et al. 2021). Anthem staff credited enhanced communication and collaboration as the primary means of establishing and enhancing their partnerships. However, the learning cycle revealed an opportunity for Anthem to maintain more consistent communication and contact with referral partners. By obtaining feedback from partners, Anthem identified ways to improve its communication with partners in the future —for example, by sending regular update emails or newsletters.

- **Social media is a long-term strategy that HMRE service providers might consider using in conjunction with other methods.** The social media posts implemented during SIMR did not yield additional referrals of young adults. However, Anthem leadership recognized that social media success needs to be measured in the long term and constantly refined over time. This aligns with other literature on this topic, where organizations use multiple social media platforms to continually post and grow their following while trying and refining a variety of posts to reach their communities for several months or longer (for example, Benedict et al. 2019; Skeens et al. 2022). A suggested best practice in the field is to use a multipronged strategy — of which social media and virtual advertising is one option along with referrals and direct outreach (Friend and Paulsell 2020).

IMPROVING RECRUITMENT AND CASE MANAGEMENT FOR SPANISH-SPEAKERS WITH FAMILY SERVICE AGENCY OF SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Spotlight on: Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County

- HMRE grant recipient since 2015; Responsible Fatherhood grant recipient since 2020.
- HMRE program serves adults—both individuals and couples—in Santa Barbara County, California. Most participants speak Spanish as their primary language.
- Uses the *PREP* curriculum for couples and the *Within My Reach* curriculum for individual adults. Serves couples and individual adults in separate groups. Provides an additional parenting workshop for participants with children.
- Family advocates provide individualized case management and economic stability services (for example, connection to social services, employment assistance, and financial literacy).

Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County (FSA-SB) is a multiservice nonprofit organization operating in Santa Barbara County, California. FSA-SB's Connected Couples, Connected Families (Connected Couples) program provides HMRE services to both couples and individual adults throughout Santa Barbara County. The program aims primarily to serve people in relationships–most of whom speak Spanish as their primary language.

In SIMR, FSA-SB chose to test and refine more intensive and purposeful approaches to recruiting participants, focusing on the recruitment of Spanish-speaking men who were eligible to participate in Connected Couples with their romantic partner. In its 2015–2020 grant from OFA, FSA-SB largely served Spanish-speaking women, many of whom were in relationships but participated in the program without their male partner. The grant recipient struggled to encourage men to join its HMRE program or attend program services with their partners. FSA-SB leaders noted several potential reasons for this difficulty. First, FSA-SB staff were mostly female; staff members perceived that their gender posed a potential barrier to recruiting men. Second, agency leaders thought that their program marketing and outreach materials were too generic and were not tailored to the groups they hoped to reach, including Spanish-speaking men. Third, FSA-SB leaders noted they lacked connections with community organizations that worked with substantial numbers of Spanish-speaking men. Given earlier challenges in recruiting Spanish-speaking men, FSA-SB leaders wanted to focus their SIMR rapid cycle work on deepening the program's recruitment strategies directed to Spanish-speaking men.

Learning questions for Family Services Agency of Santa Barbara:

What are the best strategies for recruiting and enrolling participants —particularly Spanish-speaking men—into HMRE services? To explore this question, the SIMR team interviewed and surveyed grant recipient staff, conducted a focus group with participants, and reviewed program data and nFORM data on recruitment.

How can FSA-SB implement a motivation-driven approach to case management to form strong relationships with participants? To explore this question, the SIMR team surveyed and interviewed grant recipient staff.

Over the course of SIMR, FSA-SB leaders identified another pressing implementation challenge—participant engagement in case management services. FSA-SB case managers (whom the program refers to as "family advocates") observed that the needs of current participants were increasing. Program staff attributed the increasing needs to familial stressors associated with the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In recognizing that the program lacked a standardized case management model, FSA-SB leaders began to look for ways to strengthen their case management practices to improve their ability to connect with and understand participants. FSA-SB leaders reported that their family advocates wanted to have more effective conversations that could help them elicit participant needs and thus make more appropriate referrals. Therefore, in a later SIMR learning cycle, FSA-SB piloted an enhanced case management approach.

What did rapid cycle learning look like at FSA-SB?

FSA-SB completed three learning cycles as part of SIMR. The first cycle focused on developing partnerships with other organizations to promote recruitment. The second cycle deployed a multipronged approach to recruitment, including efforts to strengthen recruiting partnerships and enhance direct recruitment. Although the strategies tested in the first two cycles could potentially improve overall recruitment, the two cycles concentrated on increasing the enrollment of Spanish-speaking men. The third cycle piloted a new case management approach to improve engagement in these services for enrolled participants.

Learning Cycle 1: October 2021 – January 2022

The purpose of the first learning cycle was to test strategies for community partner outreach with the goal of increasing the number of referrals from partner organizations. The first cycle began with a training session on partnership development that was identical to the training provided to Anthem (Anthem Box 2.1). Delivered in October 2021, the training featured strategies aimed at helping community partners understand key components of FSA-SB's HMRE program, establishing clear expectations for the partnerships, and ensuring regular communication with the partnerships.

Following the training, FSA-SB staff and the SIMR team worked together to develop partner-specific marketing materials for the Connected Couples program (for example, developing a one-pager for potential partners). Next, FSA-SB leaders worked with the SIMR team to develop a process for reaching out to potential partners. FSA-SB staff delegated partnership development to designated staff members at each of the agency's several locations to form a network of implementation teams across the county charged with forging new partnerships. The teams identified three community organizations as top priorities for

Learning Cycle 1

October 2021 – January 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Develop and implement a process for establishing and maintaining referral partnerships
- **Purpose:** Increase the number of referrals from partner organizations

Data

- Pre-post staff training survey (19 staff)
- Biweekly coaching and debrief calls (10 staff)
- Staff focus groups (4 staff)
- FSA-SB data on referrals from partners
- Partner tracking sheet

Key Takeaways

- Staff gained partnership development skills from the training.
- Two of the three potential partners prioritized by FSA-SB became engaged partners that agreed to regularly refer participants to the HMRE program.

The first learning cycle aimed to answer the learning question:

How could FSA-SB form stronger partnerships to support recruitment, particularly of Spanish-speaking men?

outreach as potential new referral partners, prioritizing organizations that would be well equipped to refer Spanish-speaking men to the program: (1) a farmworkers' association; (2) a health clinic; and (3) a community action agency. The FSA-SB team had a connection to the farmworkers' association in one region of the county and hoped that expanding the connection countywide would support access to an industry that is made up largely of Spanish-speaking males. FSA-SB prioritized the other two partners because they served families with low incomes and typically couples with children. The implementation teams worked closely with SIMR staff to prepare for outreach to the three potential partners by researching and gaining familiarity with and insight into the organizations and then practicing and refining their pitch.

To understand the strategic approach to recruitment, the SIMR team collected partner referral data from staff by using a survey, biweekly monitoring calls, and focus groups. Staff were already tracking partner referrals in their own data system (a separate system from nFORM) and pulled the information monthly for use by the SIMR team. To track partnership development over time, FSA-SB staff regularly filled out a partner tracking sheet developed by the SIMR team to note the current number of partners and related levels of engagement (Anthem Box 2.2).

The SIMR team and FSA-SB observed two important learnings from the first learning cycle:

1. **After the training, FSA-SB staff members demonstrated greater confidence in their ability to forge new relationships with prospective community partners.** On both the pre- and post-training surveys, FSA-SB staff reported confidence in their ability to build and support partnerships. On the post-training survey, most staff (84 percent) agreed that they knew how to approach community partners to build relationships. Similarly, many staff (79 percent) agreed that they knew how to support partners in making effective referrals.

2. **FSA-SB staff used their new partnership development process to establish successful new partnerships.** FSA-SB staff reported that they were able to establish successful partnerships with two of three priority partners. Both partners began to send referrals to the program in the months after initial outreach, exhibiting signs of a stronger relationship. For example, the community action agency invited the FSA-SB team to deliver presentations at its parent meetings. The third priority partner, the health clinic, did not respond to FSA-SB's initial outreach efforts; the team attributed nonresponse to the clinic's focus on urgent health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, given that FSA-SB staff members still saw the clinic as a promising partner, they maintained occasional contact but identified another organization as a priority partner for new outreach in the next learning cycle.

During debrief activities at the end of the learning cycle, FSA-SB leadership and staff reported being satisfied with their partnership development process and were excited about forging two new partnerships. However, they realized that more work was needed to establish new partnerships and deepen their existing ones. Additionally, at the end of the first cycle, the grant recipient had just hired a recruiter, and was ready to deploy a more comprehensive approach to recruitment.

Learning Cycle 2: February – July 2022

The purpose of the second learning cycle was to deploy and test a multipronged approach to recruitment. FSA-SB staff used the following strategies as part of this approach: (1) establishing and maintaining referral partnerships; (2) engaging in direct outreach by staff and participants; (3) and using print and social media marketing. To launch the second cycle, the SIMR team delivered a series of three virtual trainings on direct outreach and marketing in February and March 2022, based on the training on this topic delivered to Anthem (Anthem Box 2.3). The training sessions described strategies to help FSA-SB staff create a profile of their ideal participants, distill the program components and benefits that resonate the most with potential participants, and develop a compelling message or "hook." Staff were asked to ensure the messaging extended across outreach methods, including FSA-SB's marketing materials. The training also included guidance on how to leverage "program champions," typically current and former participants, to amplify the marketing messages or to recruit from their own family and community networks.

The second learning cycle was designed to answer the learning question:

How can FSA-SB use a multi-prong strategy to support recruitment, particularly of Spanish-speaking men?

Learning Cycle 2

February – June 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Empower staff to implement a multipronged approach to recruitment
- **Purpose:** Identify best practices for recruitment in referral partnerships, direct outreach, program champions, and marketing

Data

- Pre-post staff training survey (8 staff)
- Biweekly coaching and debrief calls (7 staff)
- Interactive debrief activity (9 staff)
- Participant focus groups (14 participants)
- FSA-SB tracking of referral sources
- Partner tracking sheet
- nFORM enrollment data

Key Takeaways

- FSA-SB leveled up two priority partners.
- FSA-SB continued forming new partnerships, resulting in six new partnerships during the second cycle.
- FSA-SB leaders perceived the benefits of a devoted recruiter and a shift to direct recruitment.
- FSA-SB was able to identify an initial set of former participants to serve as program champions.
- In focus groups, former participants reported liking photos of real participants and messaging about the program's benefits to the family.

Following the training, FSA-SB formed four implementation teams —each owning a strategy (for example, partnerships, direct outreach, etc.)—that worked closely with SIMR team members to develop and operationalize the strategies. Pivotal to the work was the design of strategies to encourage the recruitment of men. FSA-SB implemented five strategies during the second cycle:

- **Continuing to establish new partnerships.** The partnership implementation team formed during the first cycle continued to use the partnership development process and decided to continue stressing the importance of identifying and approaching partners likely to refer Spanish-speaking men.

- **Leveling up existing partnerships.** The partnership implementation team continued to draw on lessons from the training in the first learning cycle to "level up" or enhance its existing and newly formed partnerships. The FSA-SB team selected priority partners to level up in their engagement with the Connected Couples program, with the aim of reinvigorating stagnant or underperforming existing partners. FSA-SB selected three ways to enhance the selected partnerships: (1) relationship-building through frequent communication and expressions of appreciation and gratitude (for example, gift baskets and thank-you cards); (2) reliance on a clear cross-referral process (whereby grant recipients and partner agree to refer participants to one another); and (3) exploring ways to formalize partnerships through agreements or memoranda of understanding (MOU).

- **Using staff to conduct direct outreach.** Between the first and second learning cycles, FSA-SB staff hired a male recruiter. FSA-SB leaders and the SIMR team concluded that a male staff member dedicated to recruiting and reaching out to potential participants could help the program better connect with men. After hiring the male recruiter, the grant recipient formed an implementation team, led by the recruiter, focused on direct recruitment. The implementation team's primary goal was to recruit people face-to-face from the community, particularly men. The SIMR team worked with the recruiter and implementation team to identify further staff's perceived characteristics of potential male participants and their reasons for enrolling or not enrolling in the program. The SIMR team helped FSA-SB staff determine productive venues for in-person recruitment, with a focus on identifying where men might congregate, such as barber shops, agriculture fields, and soccer games. Drawing on earlier research on recruiting messages that might appeal to men (for example, Bouchet et al. 2012), FSA-SB staff also worked with the SIMR team to develop a tailored pitch that focused more on "strengthening the family" and less on the couple relationship.

- **Using program champions to conduct direct outreach.** FSA-SB staff also worked with the SIMR team to launch a program to formalize word-of-mouth referrals from "program champions" (current and former participants). The team first identified former participants who were enthusiastic about the program and willing to promote it within their social networks, especially to male and female couples with both partners eager to become program champions. FSA-SB staff and the SIMR team thought that reliance on mixed-gender couples as champions who recounted their reasons for attending and experiences in the program would spur the recruitment of men and women. To help recruit champions, the implementation team developed a tier system (gold, silver, bronze) through which program champions could determine their level of involvement, from helping with recruitment by promoting the program among their networks (bronze) to helping with recruitment and supporting workshop sessions by sharing examples during these sessions of how they applied skills they learned to their own lives (gold). All program champions underwent training to learn about appropriate messaging and strategies for reacting to various scenarios (for example, how to respond when prospective participants say that they do not need services). Champions also received ongoing support from the program's recruiter.

- **Enhancing marketing materials.** Following the training, a separate implementation team applied the lessons from the training to enhance FSA-SB's advertising materials. Before the start of SIMR, FSA-SB's Connected Couples program was engaged in a rebranding effort that led to the development of a new name, logo, and templates for print materials. The SIMR team helped FSA-SB's marketing implementation team–a group including staff from the organization's marketing department, program leaders, and frontline staff–develop its print marketing and Facebook campaign directed at Spanish-speaking men.

The marketing team was interested in learning about which messages would resonate with various groups in the community, including men. The team convened a focus group of current participants (men and women) to provide feedback on draft materials. Focus group participants indicated that they did not like stock photos and instead preferred photos of "real" families doing the types of things they did with their own families, such as going to the beach or a park. With such feedback, FSA-SB replaced stock family photos with pictures of real program participants on the program's print flyers (Figure 3.1).

An additional goal of the marketing team was to enhance the organization's social media strategy to better support recruitment efforts. In June 2022, the team launched a Facebook campaign directed at Spanish-speaking men. The social media campaign emphasized messages about how the Connected Couples program benefits the family. The campaign's sports theme was reflected in images of a family playing soccer with text saying, "Having a strong family takes practice" (Figure 3.2), again aligning with guidance from the field about the recruitment of men (for example, Pruett et al. 2017).

Figure 3.1. FSA-SB original (left) and modified (right) print advertising image

Figure 3.2. A social media post tailored to Spanish-speaking men

To answer the second cycle's learning question, the SIMR team collected data from staff through surveys, biweekly debrief calls, and a focus group. The team also conducted a focus group to gather program participants' perceptions about effective direct outreach. To explore how enrollment changed over the course of the learning cycle, the SIMR team examined referral and enrollment numbers from nFORM and

FSA-SB's internal data system. Finally, the team collected analytics tracked by Facebook to explore the success of social media strategies.

The SIMR team and FSA-SB staff observed several key learnings from the second learning cycle:

1. **FSA-SB staff continued using the partnership development process to form new partnerships.** By the end of SIMR, FSA-SB had formed partnerships with six priority organizations and was actively developing relationships with two additional partners. During staff debriefs, FSA-SB staff members reported that, at the start of SIMR, they focused on existing relationships with individuals at organizations to help them get a foot in the door of prospective partners. However, after the SIMR training, they began to refocus on building relationships with organizations rather than merely with individuals within organizations, thereby fostering buy-in for the program from all staff and ensuring accurate messaging about the program to participants from partners' frontline staff.

2. **FSA-SB staff successfully leveled up several partnerships.** In the first learning cycle, FSA-SB staff succeeded in establishing new partnerships but experienced challenges in maintaining the relationships. Therefore, in the second learning cycle, the FSA-SB team made it a practice to reach out to all partnerships regularly to ensure proactive, frequent communication. By the end of SIMR, data from the partner tracking and referral sheets showed that two partners transitioned from supportive to engaged partners and, after FSA-SB's implementation of its partnership enhancement strategies, five partners moved from willing to supportive partners. Prioritized for partnership in the first learning cycle, the farmworkers' association provided six referrals during the second learning cycle and invited FSA-SB staff into the fields several times to speak with potential participants (primarily men). The organization also supported FSA-SB by posting about the program on its social media accounts. Another new partnership forged during the second learning cycle involved a high school in which FSA-SB staff could recruit students' parents. Even though the school did not send any referrals during the second learning cycle, it started regularly notifying FSA-SB about its family events, permitted FSA-SB to hold classes at its site, and offered to send reminders in advance of classes to parents once workshops started. In coaching calls and debrief sessions, the team expressed hope that the strong foundation built with the school during SIMR would eventually yield steady referrals.

3. **FSA-SB staff found that a dedicated recruiter helped expand outreach capacity and coordination.** With funding from SIMR, FSA-SB was able to hire a recruiter dedicated exclusively to expanding the team's capacity to go into the community and get the message out about the program. Before the recruiter joined the staff, FSA-SB did not have any staff members who only worked on program recruitment. Program leaders noted that the presence of a staff member dedicated solely to recruiting sent a message to program staff that recruitment was a program priority. In addition, the recruiter was a Spanish-speaking male who was more easily able than the agency's largely female staff to connect with men in the program's priority population. When asked about his role in the program, the recruiter reported, "As a male, I brought a different aspect, in terms of how to approach men and grab their attention."

4. **FSA-SB staff changed how they conveyed messages about the program to men.** Through their work during the second learning cycle, FSA-SB staff members adapted the means of disseminating program messages to men. During direct recruitment interactions, staff observed that messages focusing on how the program benefits the whole family, rather than the couple relationship, proved to be a more effective pitch to Spanish-speaking men, an observation supported by earlier research (Bouchet et al. 2012). Male focus group participants pointed to the effectiveness of such messages, which encouraged male enrollment. Staff also stated that their conversations with potential participants during recruitment efforts focused increasingly on building rapport and connection rather than on just conveying the benefits of program participation, as in the past. Staff indicated that their work during the

second learning cycle helped them learn to ask questions about potential participants' lives, enabling the development of outreach messages reflecting recruits' circumstances.

Staff also changed the location of their recruitment activities in an attempt to recruit more men. Before SIMR, FSA-SB staff primarily set up tables at school events. After the SIMR training, FSA-SB staff began focusing direct recruitment efforts on venues where men would be likely to congregate (for example, swap meets and soccer games).

> **We were looking for the people who are the first ones to join, last ones to leave the class. The ones that would participate in the class and were highly motivated to be there. They wanted to give back to the program.**
>
> ***FSA-SB staff member on identifying participants as program champions***

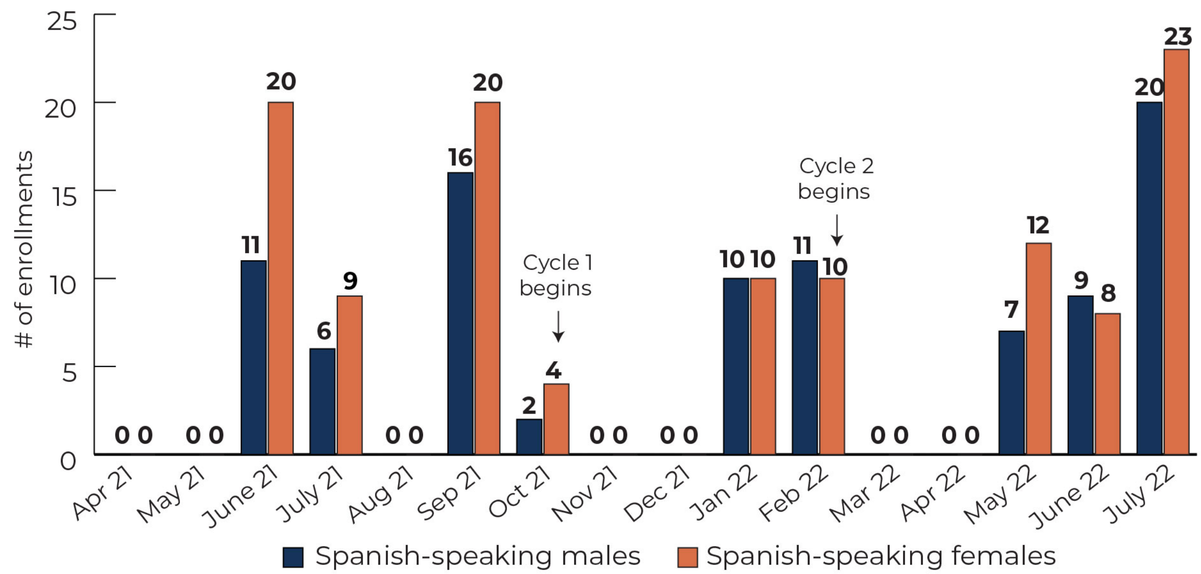
5. **FSA-SB recruited couples to become program champions.** The "program champions" initiative was still in an early phase at the end of SIMR. As result, little information was available on its implementation. However, FSA-SB staff reported that, during the second learning cycle, they recruited three couples to become champions, noting that the couples readily signed up because they were eager to give back to the program. In debrief sessions, staff and leaders listed their growing program champions initiative as one of their greatest accomplishments in SIMR.

6. **FSA-SB staff learned how to enhance the program's print and online marketing.** FSA-SB staff gathered input from participants on how to improve marketing materials. Based on this input, staff members replaced stock photos of families with photos of real participants. They also simplified the materials in accordance with participant feedback. FSA-SB staff initially included in print advertisements or flyers everything deemed important. However, in response to participant input, FSA-SB subsequently removed elements such as facilitator photos and workshop dates, producing streamlined and engaging materials. Per participant feedback on print materials, FSA-SB used its Facebook page as a key platform to launch its first Facebook campaign directed at Spanish-speaking men.

7. **FSA-SB staff reported that their recruitment efforts were coalescing at the end of their SIMR rapid cycle work.** Leaders and staff at FSA-SB reported that their collective recruitment strategies (referrals from partners, direct outreach, marketing) were coalescing by the end of SIMR and, in their view, leading to increased enrollment among both women and men. The grant recipient had its most promising recruitment month in July 2022, enrolling 37 men and 38 women, by far the highest total since starting SIMR (Figure 3.3). Although the strategies aimed to improve the recruitment of Spanish-speaking men, FSA-SB reported the strategies also appeared to benefit their overall recruitment efforts.

During the second learning cycle, FSA-SB leadership decided that they wanted to address an additional implementation challenge through their SIMR RCL work. Specifically, program leaders wanted to enhance their approach to case management in order to strengthen relationships with their participants and engage them more fully in program services. FSA-SB leadership determined that the agency had the capacity to have two learning cycle operating concurrently. Therefore, in April 2022, FSA-SB and the SIMR team launched a third learning cycle focused on strengthening the program's case management. This learning cycle is described in the following section.

Figure 3.3. Enrollment in FSA-SB Connected Couples Program



Source: nFORM.

Learning Cycle 3: April – August 2022

The purpose of the third learning cycle was for FSA-SB to test a new case management model to build stronger relationships with participants. To help improve case management, the SIMR team suggested that the FSA-SB family advocates shift to Goal4 It! to guide their work with participants. Drawing on evidence from behavioral science, neuropsychology, and social science research, Goal4 It! is an intentional process for pursuing goals linked to a set of evidence-based principles for improving child and family outcomes as identified by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (Derr and McCay 2018). The model aims to reduce external sources of stress, create responsive and supportive relationships, and build clients' core self-regulation skills (Box 3.1). Eight family advocates and nine program supervisors and leaders participated in the learning cycle.

In a series of training sessions conducted in April and May 2022, the SIMR team trained FSA-SB's leaders, supervisors, and family advocates in the Goal4 It! model. After the training, leaders revised some of their existing processes, workflows, and data system structures to ensure proper alignment with Goal4 It!. For example, FSA-SB staff members replaced their existing assessments with Stepping Stones to Success, which is an assessment tool

Learning Cycle 3

April – August 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Use Goal4 It!, a goal-focused approach to case management
- **Purpose:** Identify supports needed for staff to implement Goal4 It! well

Data

- Pre-post training survey (11 staff)
- Biweekly coaching and debrief calls (7 staff)
- Supervisor/leadership focus group (8 staff)
- Family advocate focus group (8 staff)
- Interactive debrief session (7 staff)
- Staff feedback survey (9 staff)

Key Takeaways

- Staff throughout the agency saw the potential for Goal4 It! to improve relationships between staff and participants, but they experienced some challenges.

Box 3.1. What is Goal4 It!

- Goal4 It! draws on a four-step process that promotes core self-regulation skills and creates opportunities to practice them in situations connected to participants' personal and employment-related goals.
- Goal set: The participant articulates meaningful goals.
- Goal plan: The participant creates a detailed plan for success.
- Goal do: The participant puts the plan into action.
- Goal review: The participant reviews, learns from, and revises the goal and plan according to progress achieved.

Source: Derr and McCay 2018.

from Goal4 It! that helps participants gauge their level of stress related to various areas of their life. Case managers can also use the tool to direct conversations about participants' goals for improvement. To model the use of Goal4 It! internally, supervisors began using it in supervision meetings with family advocates; family advocates then practiced use of Goal4 It! with each other. After about a month of internal use and practice, family advocates began using Goal4 It! with Connected Couples participants.

The third learning cycle aimed to answer the following question:

How does integrating motivation-based practices into case management support better relationships with clients?

Throughout the third learning cycle, the SIMR team obtained feedback from FSA-SB staff on its progress with Goal4 It!. The team collected the information through regular coaching calls and focus groups with supervisors and family advocates.

FSA-SB staff reported favorable experiences with the model both internally and with participants. The SIMR team and FSA-SB staff observed three key takeaways from the third learning cycle:

1. **Supervisors were eager to use Goal4 It! after the training but experienced some difficulty in implementing it with staff.** Following the training, supervisors modeled the use of Goal4 It! with family advocates during supervision and coaching meetings. In a post-training survey, most managers and supervisors agreed that they understood how Goal4 It! could improve their work with staff. However, about a month after implementing it with staff, supervisors noted in a focus group debrief that Goal4 It! was difficult to use. Many supervisors perceived the associated activities as an extra step that diverged from their ongoing supervisory activities. In response, the SIMR team developed a series of tip sheets to provide supervisors with instructions on and examples of integrating Goal4 It! into staff meetings and activities.
2. **FSA-SB staff found the model promising and plan to continue using it.** As family advocates began using Goal4 It! with participants after the training, several noted in focus group debriefs that it helped in forming deeper relationships with participants. Family advocates reported that the ease of access to training and supporting materials–coupled with Stepping Stones already built into the data system–expedited the adoption of Goal4 It!. At the end of SIMR, program staff worked with the SIMR team to develop a detailed plan for supporting the continued use of the model and for spreading and integrating use of the model and its associated practices and principles more broadly across the organization.

3. **Staff needed additional supports to implement Goal4 It! with participants.** Staff experienced some challenges in implementing the four-step process of Goal4 It! and reported that initial meetings with participants were taking longer than in the past. The additional time reflected staff members' more meaningful and deeper conversations with participants, even though some conversations were tangential to the focus of the Goal4 It! and the case management process. In response, leadership created a diagram for family advocates to show what they should and should not do in each meeting. For further support, three of the family advocates who were part of the implementation team hosted a series of sessions with other family advocates to offer coaching and an opportunity to practice the skills needed to implement Goal4 It!. In a feedback survey with family advocates and supervisors in July 2022, most respondents reported that they felt at least somewhat confident with the four-step Goal4 It! process but desired additional guidance and support.

What did we learn about recruiting and using a motivation-based approach to case management with FSA-SB?

The following two lessons from FSA-SB's experience during SIMR rapid cycle learning could benefit other HMRE programs:

- **Recruiting Spanish-speaking men for HMRE programs may require an intentional focus involving several recruitment methods.** Research suggests that recruiting men, particularly Spanish-speaking men, for social service programs requires a multipronged approach (Farquhar et al. 2014; Rhodes et al. 2018; Stahlschmidt et al. 2013). FSA-SB implemented a multipronged recruitment approach as part of SIMR that called for (1) prioritizing recruitment partners who were likely to be trusted and known entities to men; (2) hiring a male recruiter; (3) identifying former male program participants to serve as program champions who could connect with other men in their networks; and (4) changing how FSA-SB markets its program to men both directly and through social media. At the end of SIMR, program staff thought that reliance on a variety of strategies was coalescing to support recruitment in general and the recruitment of men in particular. HMRE programs seeking to increase program enrollment might consider a similar multipronged recruitment approach tailored to their local community and population of interest.
- **Identifying small teams tasked with spearheading specific elements of a multipronged recruitment strategy may improve implementation of the strategy.** Throughout SIMR, FSA-SB leaders focused sharply on developing implementation teams comprising small groups of staff members responsible for implementing specific elements of the grant recipient's recruitment strategy. Implementation science suggests that programs function best when staff have well-defined roles and responsibilities (Fixsen et al. 2005; Lennox et al. 2017). This principle aligns with the recruitment successes observed in earlier evaluations of HMRE programs, especially programs that relied on a team dedicated exclusively to achieving enrollment goals (Friend and Paulsell 2019). Before SIMR, FSA-SB took an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to recruitment. However, as it developed a more intentional and multifaceted recruitment approach, the organization learned that it needed small teams of dedicated staff members addressing each element of the recruitment strategy, with one team

> **"The way we worked together as a team, not as each individual region coming up with their own way of doing something but coming together and implementing–putting our heads together … sharing the ideas and afterwards putting those ideas into work, [helped us with] seeing the increase in recruitment, the increase in engaging with the community, the increase with our partners."**
>
> ***FSA-SB facilitator***

focused on strengthening relationships with recruitment partners, a second focused on the program's direct outreach efforts, a third focused on the program champions, and a fourth focused on tailoring the program's marketing materials. FSA-SB leaders engaged staff from across its service regions throughout the county to join the teams, which helped the agency coordinate operations across its large service area. Other HMRE programs planning to implement a multipronged approach to boosting recruitment may also want to consider creating dedicated implementation teams tasked with implementing each element of their plan.

- **Using a motivation-based approach to case management guided by a model like Goal4 it! shows promise, but it takes time and effort to implement fully.** Both leaders and staff at FSA-SB found promise in using Goal4 It! and its standardized case management model that promoted participant motivation. Family advocates reported gaining skills from the training and found value in using the model with participants. They reported that they could use the tools from Goal4 It! to develop deeper relationships with participants. Supervisors and organizational leaders also noted seeing promise in using the Goal4 It! tools in their supervision practices and staff interactions.

  Though the use of Goal4 It! showed promise, staff noted needing more guidance and support to use it efficiently and effectively. It is important to note that Goal4 It! is not an off-the-shelf model — program staff need to work to fit the model into their own organizational and program context. With assistance from the SIMR team, FSA-SB leaders recognized the need to build Goal4 It! and broader motivational practices into what they were already doing so that it complemented their existing work and practice. FSA-SB leadership and the SIMR team developed a tip sheet for supervisors and built a road map for family advocates that outlined how to use Goal4 It! in their interactions with both staff and participants. These considerations helped to ensure that Goal4 It! was embedded in the day-to-day implementation activities of the staff.

CHAPTER 4

ENHANCING HMRE SERVICES FOR RURAL PARTICIPANTS WITH GATEWAY COMMUNITY ACTION

Spotlight on: Gateway Community Action

- HMRE grant recipient from 2006 to 2011 and 2020 to the present; RF grant recipient in 2011 to the present
- Serves adults across nine rural counties in eastern Kentucky. The population Gateway serves is diverse, including parents, individuals with low-income, individuals who are unemployed, adults experiencing homelessness, those reentering the community after incarceration or drug rehabilitation, and noncustodial parents.
- Uses *Within My Reach* curriculum, supplemented with content on financial literacy, in an 18-hour group workshop. Participants are also assigned a case manager who provides referrals to resources in the community to address additional needs, such as employment services, utility assistance, and rental assistance.

Gateway Community Action is a multiservice agency that provides education, employment, and family services in eastern Kentucky. Gateway's HMRE program—Life Elevated—serves individual adults in nine rural counties. The launch of Life Elevated in 2020 marked a resumption of HMRE services, which had not been offered since Gateway's ACF-funded HMRE services ended in 2011. Most enrollees in Life Elevated are referred from substance use disorder (SUD) recovery centers or are experiencing incarceration. Gateway uses virtual programming to serve these participants while they are in their facilities. Gateway focused on serving participants from recovery centers because Kentucky ranks high in U.S. methamphetamine and opioid use and deaths (Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy 2022). Additionally, many of Gateway's existing partnerships were community organizations that address substance use issues in rural Kentucky.

When resuming their HMRE service in 2020, the grant recipient experienced challenges in recruiting and enrolling participants into Life Elevated. Gateway staff attributed their recruitment challenges to three factors. First, they indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated their recruitment challenges, as their main partners were facilities such as substance use recovery centers, which restricted visitor access because of pandemic concerns. Second, because Gateway had not provided HMRE services since 2011, staff thought that Gateway had lost name recognition in the community in connection with HMRE services. Gateway has operated an ACF-funded Responsible Fatherhood (RF) program since 2011 and was better known in the community for providing RF services than HMRE services. Third, Gateway provides services in an extremely rural area. The collective population of the nine counties in their service area is under 250,000 people. Staff indicated that the region's large area and dispersed small population made it difficult to reach substantial numbers of eligible participants who were willing to travel for in-person services.

To address these recruitment challenges—and to deepen their connections within the community they serve—Gateway leadership sought to diversify their partnerships, bringing in other organizations that could provide referrals for Life Elevated. As a first step in the SIMR rapid cycle work, Gateway chose to focus on testing and refining strategies for more intensive and purposeful approaches to recruiting participants by bolstering referral partnerships.

Learning questions for Gateway Community Action:

What are the best strategies for recruiting and enrolling participants into HMRE services? To explore this question, the SIMR team interviewed and surveyed grant recipient staff, surveyed community partners, and reviewed program data and nFORM data on recruitment.

What are the best ways to engage participants in virtual HMRE services? To explore this question, the SIMR team interviewed grant recipient staff and surveyed participants.

After completing a six-month learning cycle focused on developing recruitment partnerships, Gateway identified a secondary objective for the rapid cycle learning work: improving facilitators' skills to engage participants in virtual services. Gateway facilitators perceived participants in their virtual services as being less engaged than participants were in their in-person workshops. Moreover, participants attending classes from substance use recovery centers and those who are incarcerated often join a virtual session from one computer, making virtual facilitation more difficult. In partnership with the SIMR team, Gateway staff completed a second two-month learning cycle focused on testing strategies to address challenges associated with virtual service delivery.

What did rapid cycle learning look like at Gateway?

The SIMR team and Gateway staff conducted two learning cycles—the first on referral partnership development and the second on virtual facilitation strategies. This section describes the strategies that were tested and the methods for rapid cycle learning, then relates what was learned from each of the two learning cycles at Gateway.

Learning Cycle 1: October 2021 – April 2022

The purpose of the first learning cycle was to test strategies for community partner outreach with the goal of increasing the number of referrals from partner organizations. To help bolster recruitment into their HMRE services, the SIMR team developed training identical to the training at Anthem (Anthem Box 2.1). The SIMR team delivered the training to Gateway staff in October 2021.

Using the principles taught in the training, Gateway and SIMR staff worked together closely to develop two strategies to improve recruitment:

1. **Developing a cohesive brand:** Gateway staff followed a similar process to Anthem's. Originally, Gateway referred to their HMRE services as simply "FRAMEWorks," using the name of the federal grant funding the services. As an initial step, Gateway renamed their HMRE services "Life Elevated," a name designed to engage potential participants and to evoke the goals of participating in the workshop series. Gateway staff then developed marketing materials to match the rebrand.
2. **Identifying and engaging partners:** Gateway staff worked with the SIMR team to develop a comprehensive process for reaching out to potential partners. The process was documented in a flow chart that staff could use to guide their activities. The SIMR team also developed a tracking sheet for Gateway staff to use to monitor engagement levels of partners, monthly referral commitments, meetings held, and referral numbers from partners (Anthem Box 2.2).

The first learning cycle included three staff responsible for developing and maintaining partnerships and seven staff from potential partner organizations. The purpose of the first learning cycle was to learn about the feasibility and sustainability of implementing more intentional community partner outreach and partner-specific materials to increase the number of referrals from partner organizations.

Learning Cycle 1

October 2021 – April 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Develop and implement a process for establishing and maintaining referral partnerships
- **Purpose:** Increase the number of referrals from partner organizations

Data

- Biweekly coaching calls (3 staff)
- Pre- and post-training survey (10 staff)
- Staff reflection survey (3 staff)
- Partner tracking sheet (updated monthly)
- Partner survey (7 partner staff)
- Interactive debrief activity (4 staff)
- nFORM enrollments

Key Takeaways

- At the end of the learning cycle, Gateway staff felt confident in their ability to develop relationships with new partners
- Partners were willing and able to refer their participants to Life Elevated
- Staff at partner agencies were satisfied with Gateway staff's communication, materials, and vision for the partnership

This learning cycle aimed to answer the following learning question:

What are the best strategies for developing community partnerships to promote recruitment into Gateway's HMRE services?

The SIMR team used surveys, biweekly monitoring calls, and a focus group to collect data from staff. To gather partners' perspectives on their outreach and communication, the SIMR team collected survey data from employees at four of Gateway's partners. These partner surveys were sent toward the end of the learning cycle to staff with whom Gateway had recently interacted, including seven staff at two existing and two new partner organizations. To track partnership development over time, Gateway staff regularly filled out the partner tracking sheet to note the current number of partners, outreach attempts to potential partners, and perceived levels of engagement of current partners. To explore how enrollment changed over the course of the learning cycle, the SIMR team examined referral and enrollment numbers from nFORM.

During the course of the first learning cycle, the SIMR team and Gateway staff observed six key learnings. These findings include:

1. **Gateway staff developed greater confidence in their ability to forge new relationships with prospective community partners after the training.** On post-training surveys, most staff indicated that the training and accompanying tools were useful in their work to form and maintain partnerships with organizations in their community. Many staff reported that the training made them feel more comfortable pitching the program to potential partners. When asked to identify the topics that were most helpful, many staff indicated that it was particularly useful to learn how to research prospective partners and tailor their pitch to each potential partner before any outreach.

2. **Gateway staff used strategies learned in the training to develop several new partnerships and to enhance relationships with existing partners.** During coaching calls and on weekly surveys, staff members reported that they used the partnership development process and endorsed its usefulness. During the first learning cycle, Gateway recorded three new partners on the partner tracking sheet. These local partner organizations agreed to refer participants to Life Elevated.

   Gateway staff also reported that they used their new partnership development process to enhance and deepen their relationships with existing partners. During the learning cycle these organizations became "engaged" partners that regularly referred appropriate participants for their services (see Anthem Box 2.2). Gateway staff attributed this progress to their improved, more consistent communication with these partners.

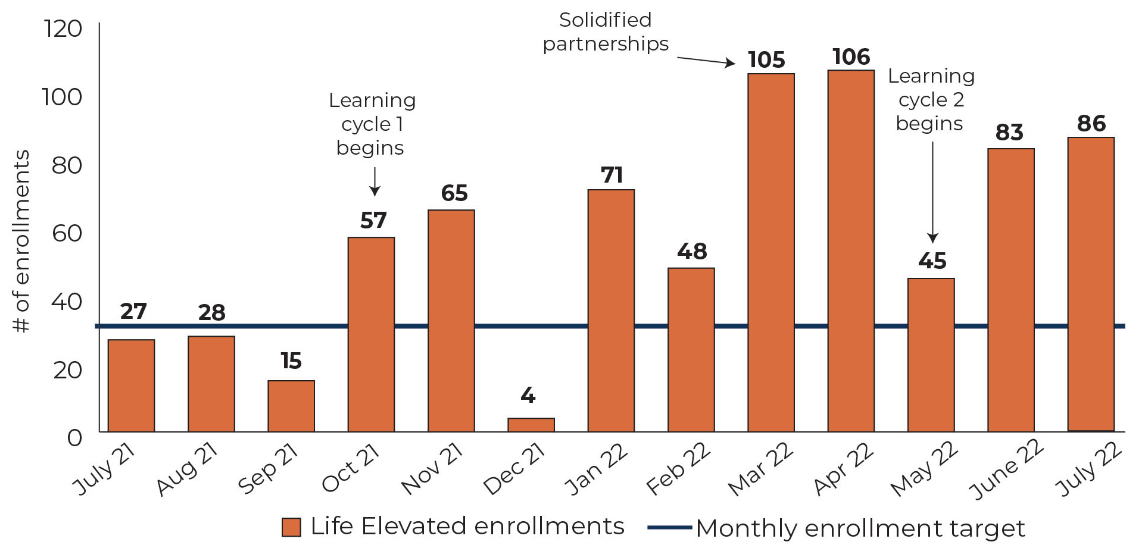
3. **Gateway established clear and consistent communication processes with staff at partner organizations.** On partner surveys, most of Gateway's new and existing community partners reported that they were satisfied with their partnership. Staff at partner organizations reported that they appreciated the level of communication with Gateway staff and their efforts to establish clear roles and responsibilities for the partnership. During biweekly coaching calls, Gateway staff said they learned that consistent communication and frequent follow-ups with partners—especially in-person follow-ups—are key to establishing an engaged partnership. Staff indicated that consistent, regular communication was important whether establishing a new partnership or strengthening an existing one. Overall, staff at community partner agencies reported they were eager to deepen their partnership with Gateway.

4. **Co-location was a useful product of forming a partnership.** One principle covered in the SIMR partnership training was the use of reciprocal referrals and co-location of services to strengthen partnerships. Gateway leadership embraced this principle during the learning cycle, realizing that offering HMRE classes at their partner locations (co-locating) could help improve their partnerships, help them meet their enrollment targets, and better serve their participants. During the learning cycle, partners began providing space at their physical locations to host Life Elevated classes—both on their own and at the request of program staff. A notable example of a new partnership during this cycle was with Morehead State University (MSU), which now hosts Life Elevated classes on their campus. MSU agreed to host multiple cohorts with Gateway each semester, which will provide a steady stream of participants for Life Elevated workshops over the next school year.

5. **Gateway made steady progress toward its enrollment goals.** Over the course of the learning cycle, Gateway made substantial progress toward its enrollment targets for Life Elevated. Gateway staff enrolled 740 participants into their HMRE services from July 2021 to July 2022 (Figure 4.1). A notable trend is the growth in enrollment numbers after establishing new partners. After solidifying their partnerships in early March 2022, monthly enrollment reached peaks in March and April.

The figure also shows that there are likely seasonal and capacity-related trends in enrollment around when the grant recipient offers classes. For example, Gateway holds fewer workshops during late November and December 2021, coinciding with the holiday season, when participants are less likely to enroll. Additionally, the large number of enrollments in March and April led to fewer enrollments in May, possibly because of insufficient staff capacity to facilitate several workshops simultaneously. In the future, Gateway staff discussed the need to be more strategic and intentional in planning their workshop calendar to account for seasonal lulls and facilitator capacity.

Figure 4.1. Monthly enrollment in Gateway's HMRE services from July 2021 to July 2022



Source: nFORM

Findings from the first learning cycle affirmed that Gateway's new partnership processes were working well, and that partners were interested in further deepening their partnerships. At the end of the learning cycle, Gateway staff gave debriefings on what was going well or what could be improved regarding their partner processes. On the basis on this exercise, they planned to develop more communication opportunities with partners, such as follow-up visits and newsletters advertising upcoming workshops or events. In sum, program staff and leadership felt comfortable with their partnership processes and felt they identified the key partners they sought out. Leadership also thought that there were very few partnerships left to establish in their rural region. Leadership also noted they were exceeding their monthly enrollment goal of 29 participants and therefore thought it was unnecessary to continue focusing on developing new referral partners. Thus, Gateway chose to focus its second learning cycle on how best to address the facilitation challenges they were facing, particularly those associated with virtual service delivery.

Learning Cycle 2: May – June 2022

The purpose of the second leaning cycle was to explore how to engage participants more successfully in virtual workshops. In May 2022, near the end of its period of SIMR rapid cycle work, Gateway leadership noticed issues sustaining participant engagement in virtual workshop sessions. This learning cycle was relatively short, only about two months – as the need emerged towards the end of SIMR RCL work.

At the start of the learning cycle, the SIMR team trained Gateway facilitators on a range of techniques that they could use to enhance their facilitation in virtual workshops. This training provided content on (1) building safe and supportive virtual classroom environments, (2) encouraging group discussions, and (3) developing strong relationships with participants in a virtual environment. The training was based on a similar SIMR training developed for the Montefiore SIMR site described in Chapter 5. The SIMR team also developed an easily accessible engagement toolkit reiterating some of the key engagement tools from the training, which facilitators could keep on hand.

The goal of this learning cycle was to pilot the use of strategies described in the engagement toolkit with Gateway's facilitators. The SIMR team collected data from staff through biweekly monitoring calls and a focus group. Over a two-week period, Gateway staff collected exit surveys from participants after each workshop session to get participant feedback about the workshops and the quality of facilitation.

Although the second learning cycle was brief, the SIMR team and Gateway made two key observations regarding improving virtual facilitation, as follows:

1. **Gateway staff found some initial success using the engagement strategies during the learning cycle.** Since the second learning cycle was short, facilitators reported during the debriefing session that they did not have a chance to use the training tools and techniques as much as they would have liked. Some facilitators only had time to try a couple of strategies, and others had yet to try any. The facilitators who were able to practice the strategies taught in the training reported that they proved clear and useful. On surveys, participants rated the Life Elevated workshops favorably.

2. **Several facilitators noted that the virtual engagement strategies were difficult to use when teaching virtual classes in SUD recovery center settings.** In these settings, multiple participants sit around one computer, which makes interactive digital tools on web meetings—the chat feature and breakout rooms, for example—not feasible. Additionally, there are restrictions on using paper and pencil supplies, which makes using worksheets or other enrichment activities difficult. Program staff noted the need to continue brainstorming about how to engage participants in classes in these restrictive settings.

Learning Cycle 2

May 2022 – June 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** A training and engagement toolkit containing techniques to engage participants in virtual workshops
- **Purpose:** Identify promising practices to engage participants in virtual workshops

Data

- Biweekly coaching calls (9 staff)
- Participant exit survey (14 different workshop series led by 6 different facilitators)
- Interactive facilitator debrief session (4 responses)

Key Takeaways

- Facilitators found engagement strategies helpful, but needed more time to try them out
- Participants liked Gateway's workshops and facilitators
- Gateway staff found participant surveys useful

This learning cycle aimed to answer this learning question:

How can Gateway improve participant engagement in virtual workshops?

What did we learn about developing recruitment partnerships with Gateway?

The SIMR team helped Gateway create more structured processes for partner outreach and materials to communicate the key aspects of their HMRE services, and helped improve Gateway staff's confidence to pitch their services and solidify their partnerships. Leadership and program staff plan to continue to develop partnerships with community organizations that serve families. Facilitators also hope to continue implementing engagement strategies in their next cohorts. Moreover, Gateway plans to use rapid-learning methods to develop and refine new workshop structures to help improve retention.

Gateway leadership and staff learned several key lessons that could benefit others in the HMRE field:

- **HMRE or similar service providers may find success with a sustained, intentional, and well-documented approach to partner development.** Being intentional about partnership development helps establish and deepen partnerships. Research suggests that developing a quality, trusting partnership takes time and investment. For example, investing time at the beginning stages of partner development helps staff understand each organization's culture and develop a shared, co-created vision for work together (Bonner et al. 2017; Zoellner et al. 2017). In addition, co-created sustainability planning can maintain both the partnership and services over the long term (Bonner et al. 2017). Gateway staff spent several months working with SIMR staff to develop a comprehensive process for partnership development. This effort was led by staff and informed by the context of their services and communities they operate in. The result was a sustainable process for partner outreach that was easy for staff to follow. The process included thoughtful and intentional communication and outreach efforts that many staff thought was the key to success in terms of developing and enhancing partnerships.
- **Service providers may want to explore the possibility of offering services at partner organizations that serve a population that is well aligned with those they hope to reach with HMRE services.** Coordinated services can improve trust between organizations and participants—co-location is one means of better coordinating services between two organizations (for example, Beach et al. 2022; Ellebre et al. 2011). Leadership and staff noted the importance of co-location during rapid-learning cycles. During the first learning cycle, Gateway staff realized that holding workshops at community partner sites—where eligible participants were comfortable and able to more easily access services—would be mutually beneficial for Gateway, their community partners, and the participants. Community partners were satisfied with the development of these relationships and saw benefits in continuing and deepening these partnerships.
- **Determine best practices for delivering virtual HMRE workshops in restrictive settings.** An important future direction is the development of best practices for providing engaging virtual workshops in restrictive settings, such as a SUD recovery center, where participants may not have their own device to log into. During the second learning cycle, Gateway identified several challenges, such as participants joining via one computer, which limited the ability to use features like breakout sessions or the chat function; also, the facilitator may not be able to see all of the participants clearly. Future work could test additional engagement strategies that still meet the requirements of these settings.

PARTNERING WITH MONTEFIORE TO ENHANCE VIRTUAL HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WORKSHOPS

Spotlight on: Montefiore Medical Center

- HMRE grant recipient 2006 to the present; RF grant recipient 2020 to the present
- Serves couples in committed relationships in which both partners are 18 or older, expecting a child or have at least one child living at home, and have low incomes
- Headquartered in South Bronx, but provides services at other locations throughout New York City, as needed
- Primary workshop consists of 12 weekly, two-hour sessions that teach content from *Bringing Baby Home* and *PREP 8.0*
- Provides employment services including, job development, job placement, and job retention services along with supplemental employment and financial management workshops

As a long-standing, federally funded HMRE service provider, Montefiore Medical Center provides the Supporting Healthy Relationships (SHR) program to couples with low incomes in the Bronx and surrounding boroughs of New York City. SHR uses a hybrid curriculum that combines the *Bringing Baby Home* and *PREP 8.0* curricula. In addition to individualized case management, Montefiore provides economic stability services in the form of individualized employment assistance and supplemental workshops on employment and financial management.

Montefiore, which has operated SHR for nearly 15 years, offered in-person workshops until 2020. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, they quickly shifted to offering services virtually over Zoom. Although Montefiore staff considered their virtual services to be promising, they identified several challenges. Among these were issues with accessing and using technology (reported by both participants and staff), difficulty translating and delivering in-person content in the virtual setting, and managing participants' at-home distractions during workshop sessions. For example, Montefiore staff reported that they had to wear "multiple hats" during virtual workshops—toggling between facilitation and technology management duties—because of technology challenges experienced by participants. Montefiore staff

lacked confidence in managing these technological difficulties. Montefiore leadership sought to address these challenges and make their virtual workshops as engaging as their in-person ones.

As part of SIMR rapid cycle learning, Montefiore chose to test and refine strategies that would enhance their virtual workshops. The SIMR team and Montefiore conducted three learning cycles together – the first on improving general virtual facilitation skills, the second on increasing participant engagement in virtual sessions, and the third on developing online skill coaching sessions for helping participants practice and apply the content taught in workshops.

What did rapid cycle learning look like at Montefiore?

Learning question for Montefiore Medical Center

What are the best strategies for engaging participants in virtual services? To explore this question, the SIMR team interviewed and surveyed grant recipient staff, observed workshops, and interviewed participants

The SIMR team and Montefiore conducted three learning cycles, each focused on improving the delivery of virtual SHR workshops. In the first learning cycle, Montefiore staff were trained on virtual facilitation skills and technology best practices; in the workshops they facilitated after the training, staff applied the concepts they had learned. Findings from the first learning cycle informed the content of the second: the SIMR team partnered with Montefiore to co-create and pilot several strategies to enhance the virtual workshop experience, including a Zoom technology tip sheet, a streamlined virtual curriculum, and additional virtual skill coaching sessions designed to reinforce curriculum content (called “Little Love Bites” sessions). In the third learning cycle, Montefiore restructured Little Love Bites coaching sessions based on findings from the second cycle and piloted the revised format.

Learning Cycle 1: August – November 2021

The purpose of the first cycle was to implement and test strategies to improve virtual facilitation. To help strengthen Montefiore staff’s virtual facilitation skills, the SIMR team developed a training based on the SIMR team’s experience with helping other service providers make the shift to virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic (for example, Anderson and Derr 2020; Bodenlos et al. 2021; Yanez and Selekman 2022). The hybrid in-person/virtual training, which was delivered in late August 2021 over the course of three days, provided information on virtual facilitation and technology best practices (Box 5.1). The training also included dedicated time to practice using the virtual Zoom platform features and troubleshooting common technology challenges.

Box 5.1. Virtual facilitation training topics

- Understanding and addressing common computer and Internet issues
- A deep dive into the features of Zoom use
- Hands-on learning lab with Zoom features
- Developing virtual relationships with and among participants
- Translating in-person facilitation techniques to the virtual environment

Throughout the training, staff had opportunities to identify and refine their own ideas on how to best deliver the SHR workshops virtually and worked closely with the SIMR team to devise strategies to test in upcoming workshops.

Following this training, Montefiore facilitators and the SIMR team worked closely to understand when and how to use the strategies and knowledge taught in training.

To explore the learning cycle question, the SIMR team used a training survey and an interactive debrief session with facilitators to collect data from facilitators. To assess facilitation and participant engagement, the team used a standardized rating system and observation guide (developed in a different study; Bodenlos et al. 2021) when they viewed a series of recordings of workshop sessions. To gain insight into participants' experiences in virtual sessions, the team conducted a series of participant interviews.

On the basis of Montefiore's experience and the data gathering conducted during this learning cycle, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff observed two key lessons from this cycle:

1. **Facilitators reported skills gains after the training, and they applied them in workshops.** Facilitators reported some skill gains on the pre-post-training survey in all areas taught during the training. In a debrief session, facilitators who took the training expressed that the dedicated time to optimize their Zoom settings, practice using Zoom features, and receive help from the SIMR team on Zoom was the most beneficial aspect of the training. In the workshop observations, the SIMR team saw several training concepts successfully put into practice, such as the use of breakout rooms, the chat function, virtual backgrounds, polling, and virtual engagement techniques that foster peer-to-peer interactions (for example, virtual ice breakers in the chat to start each session). Facilitators shared that they felt the most confident translating their relationship-building skills from in-person to virtual workshops (for example, being empathetic and authentic, as well as creating a safe space where couples feel comfortable sharing personal stories). In interviews, participants indicated that they liked the virtual workshops and described Montefiore facilitators as skillful, responsive, and supportive. Workshop observations corroborated Montefiore facilitators' skill in facilitating open, honest couple communication.

This learning cycle aimed to answer this question:

How does virtual facilitation training enhance virtual workshops?

Learning Cycle 1

August – November 2021

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Training on best practices and use tools for virtual workshop engagement
- **Purpose:** Increase facilitator knowledge and confidence in virtual facilitation and improve participant engagement

Data

- Pre- and post-training survey (11 staff)
- Biweekly coaching calls (3 staff)
- Observations of recorded workshop sessions (14 workshop sessions observed)
- Interviews with participants who attended virtual workshops (16 interviews)
- Interactive debrief session (17 staff)

Key Takeaway

- Facilitators reported growth in their virtual facilitation skills but struggled with troubleshooting participant technology issues, fostering peer connection, and conducting virtual skill coaching

2. **Technology issues, time pressures, and difficulty with skill coaching seemed to influence engagement.** Technology issues were common during virtual workshops. Many facilitators noted that troubleshooting participants' technology issues—such as Wi-Fi connectivity or enabling the correct audio and visual settings in Zoom— took them out of the facilitation headspace, which often made it challenging to keep participants engaged. Several noted the difficulty of "wearing two hats," that is, having to be tech support and facilitator. They worried they were often sacrificing important participant relationship-building time to troubleshoot technology with a single participant or couple. In interviews, some participants noted issues participating in the virtual workshops because of a weak Internet connection.

   Compounding these technology challenges was the feeling of being pressed for time. Most facilitators thought that the curriculum content was well paced for in-person workshops, but that pacing did not necessarily translate to the virtual environment. Several facilitators perceived that many activities took longer when delivered virtually. Facilitators noted that this was particularly the case when attempting to practice specific skills during the workshops. For example, several facilitators felt that more time was needed to set up, monitor, and return from breakout rooms, whereas in the in-person workshops, transitions from small- to full-group activities were quicker and easier as couples simply moved around in the room. Facilitators concluded that these time-consuming transitions in the virtual setting made it difficult to get through all the curriculum content.

> **There are so many different things to manage during the workshop in the world of technology, how do we stay focused and prioritize?"**
>
> ***—Montefiore facilitator on dealing with technology challenges***

   A related challenge was the issue of virtual skill coaching. During in-person workshops, facilitators often circle the room to help coach participants on using the skills taught in the workshop. In the debrief session, many noted that this was hard to do virtually, particularly when facilitators needed to monitor or transfer into multiple breakout rooms. Several facilitators also noted that the ability to conduct quality in-session skills coaching was compromised by the other challenges associated with virtual service delivery—in particular, the time constraints caused by the need to troubleshoot technology issues and the extra time required to transition between small- and full-group activities. Montefiore staff indicated that these time constraints often meant spending less time practicing and coaching skills, a notion supported by the SIMR team's observations of the sessions. The limited time available for skills coaching led many facilitators to question whether participants were truly solidifying the skills and applying them correctly.

Moving from Learning Cycle 1 into Learning Cycle 2, Montefiore leadership wanted to focus on creating and piloting additional strategies to address the challenges observed in the first cycle.

Learning Cycle 2: December 2021 – May 2022

Feedback and results from the first learning cycle informed the second learning cycle, during which the SIMR team and Montefiore staff co-created and implemented strategies to enhance the participant experience and foster better participant engagement. The strategies tested aimed to address technological challenges, ensure that facilitators had time to cover the core concepts of each lesson, and provide adequate opportunities for participants to practice the skills while being coached by facilitators. The SIMR team tested the implementation of three strategies designed to achieve these goals, as follows:

1. **A technology guide:** To help prevent and troubleshoot technology issues, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff developed a guide for participants on managing technology during group sessions. This brief guide provided instructions to participants on navigating Zoom and troubleshooting common technology challenges (Box 5.2). The SIMR team developed this content by consulting official Zoom support materials. Montefiore staff gave participants a copy of the guide and went over it after enrollment. Montefiore staff also emailed the tip sheet to participants before the first virtual workshop session.

Box 5.2. Technology guide topics

- Creating a Zoom account and joining Zoom meetings
- Setting up for success attending virtual workshops
- Troubleshooting audio/microphone issues
- Describing Zoom features
- Dealing with Zoom and Wi-Fi issues

2. **A streamlined HMRE workshop curriculum:** To help facilitators manage time and deliver the core lessons of the curriculum in an engaging manner, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff worked to streamline the presentation of curriculum content. To begin, the SIMR team, in consultation with the curriculum developers, identified the core concepts that needed to be taught in each curriculum module. They then applied adult learning theory (Merriam 2008) to streamline and enhance activities that were used for anchoring, practicing, and applying those core concepts. Informed by principles outlined in a white paper on applying adult learning theory concepts to HMRE service delivery (Alamillo et al. 2021), the streamlined curriculum used a process the SIMR team dubbed, “Teach, Demonstrate, Practice, Process.” Using this process, facilitators first introduced the content or skill from the curriculum (Teach). They then showed participants how the skill should be applied (Demonstrate). Next, participants tried out the skill with support of facilitators (Practice). Finally, the facilitators initiated a discussion with the group to discuss how the practice session went and to seek input on how to connect it with their lives (Process).

Learning Cycle 2

December 2021 – May 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Streamline the virtual HMRE curriculum, distribute a participant-facing technology guide, and implement skill coaching
- **Purpose:** Improve participant engagement in virtual workshop and skill coaching sessions

Data

- Interviews with participants (14 interviews)
- Interactive debrief session (17 staff)
- Observations of recorded workshop sessions (12 observations)
- Observations of recorded skills coaching sessions (7 sessions)

Key Takeaways

- Participants found the tip sheet helpful, but Montefiore experienced dissemination challenges
- Observations suggested that participant technology use and engagement appeared to improve from Learning Cycle 1
- Staff and participants found value in skill coaching but noted areas for improvement

3. **Virtual skills coaching:** Montefiore facilitators wanted to replicate in their virtual workshops the skills coaching that they had successfully delivered for years in their in-person workshops. Facilitators considered such replication essential to their approach to HMRE workshops—the literature supports the importance of skills coaching, particularly when done outside a workshop session (Stanley et al. 2020). To help in this replication, the SIMR team consulted with the PREP curriculum developers and identified a promising out-of-session skill coaching modeling approach that could be delivered virtually. This model was used as part of the evidence-based OurRelationship program, which provides four 15-minute coaching sessions outside the regular workshop sessions (Doss et al. 2020; Hatch et al., 2021; Roddy et al. 2021). To develop the coaching modeling, the PREP team trained Montefiore staff on virtual coaching best practices in February 2022. Montefiore staff then worked with the SIMR team to identify the focus of the coaching sessions and form an implementation plan. The co-created approach consisted of five 15-minute skills coaching sessions—the aforementioned Little Love Bites—each focused on one of the five core lessons of the curriculum (Box 5.3).

Box 5.3. Little Love Bites coaching session topics

- Softened start-up
- Taking a break
- Speaker–listener technique
- Compromise
- Repair

The second learning cycle focused on understanding how these strategies helped improve participant engagement. To explore this issue, the SIMR team interviewed participants to learn whether they considered the technology guide and the skills coaching sessions useful. The team also viewed recorded workshop sessions to monitor how the modified curriculum was working in a virtual environment. Similarly, SIMR team members observed the Little Love Bite sessions, using a systematic coding process based on a prior study (Bodenlos et al. 2021).

This learning cycle aimed to answer this question:

How can virtual engagement strategies improve the virtual experience for participants and facilitators?

On the basis of Montefiore's experience and the data gathered during this learning cycle, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff observed three key lessons:

1. **The technology guide helped reduce the number of technological issues, but some participants did not remember receiving the guide.** Through workshop observations during the second learning cycle, the SIMR team saw participant technology challenges decrease. In sessions the SIMR team observed, participants could navigate the virtual session platform and typically did not experience issues either joining or participating in the session. Montefiore facilitators agreed that, in general, participants experienced fewer technology issues, particularly with Zoom. In interviews, the participants who remembered receiving the technology guide reported that they read it and found it useful. However, over half of the interviewed participants indicated they either did not receive the guide or could not remember receiving it because they received so many other materials at the start of the workshop. Therefore, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff agreed that strategies for distributing the guide should be strengthened.

> **Something the program will do differently, in terms of virtual service delivery, is continuing to implement those tips for Zoom workshops. I think it has greatly helped a lot of our couples who don't have a lot of experience using technology to engage in any kind of workshop, and kind of really prioritizing, especially during orientation, getting all that hashed out so they can attend consistently with less issues and be able to be fully present."**
>
> ***—Montefiore staff discussing the technology guide***

2. **The streamlined curriculum gave facilitators more time and helped them solidify key curriculum concepts with participants.** Feedback from facilitators and workshop observations suggest positive shifts in the participant and facilitator in-session experience when the streamlined curriculum is used. SIMR team observations confirmed that participants appeared more consistently engaged in discussion and more frequently talked directly with their peers than they were during the first learning cycle. Participants said during interviews that one of the things they enjoyed most about the workshop was hearing and learning from the other couples, as well as sharing their experiences during the workshops. Montefiore staff reported that they liked the streamlined content and experienced fewer time constraints when delivering it. The process of streamlining—examining each lesson and associated activities with the Teach-Demonstrate-Practice-Process framework—also forced facilitators to examine their beliefs around why and how they facilitate or teach a topic or skill. This made staff develop a strong rationale for their beliefs and practices around facilitation, something they had not needed to have before. Facilitators reported that this reflection rationale development improved their delivery of the content.

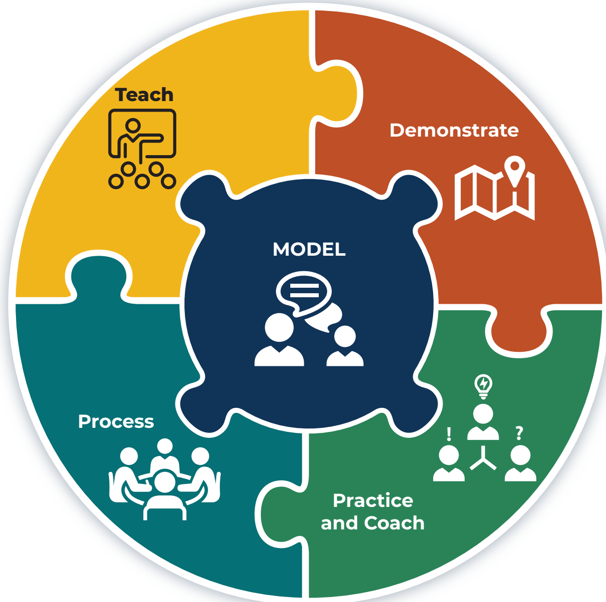
   At the end of the learning cycle, Montefiore leadership reported plans to incorporate the "Teach, Demonstrate, Practice, Process" model into their in-person workshops as well as in virtual ones. In this part of the learning cycle, Montefiore staff realized that they needed to add two other elements to the framework. First, they wanted the concept of modeling reflected at the center of the approach—that is, staff would use the core skills taught in the workshop in everyday interactions with each other and participants. Second, facilitators wanted the framework to reflect their role as a coach during the "Practice" step. Accordingly, going forward they plan to refer to this step as "Practice & Coach" to better reflect the support facilitators give participants. Figure 5.1 shows the framework developed through the learning cycle.

> **When we are able to be consistent with our curriculum—when everyone knows what is supposed to happen and they know what to expect—it lessens the distractibility of participants. It was really, really helpful to restructure our content."**
>
> ***—Montefiore facilitator on using the streamlined curriculum***

3. **Both facilitators and participants found coaching sessions beneficial and identified areas for improvement.** Judging from observations and facilitator and participant feedback, the Little Love Bite coaching sessions are a promising opportunity to offer virtual one-on-one skills coaching to couples enrolled in HMRE services. The SIMR team saw participants eager to practice the skills, and facilitators were glad to have the opportunity to give more personalized attention to each couple. During interviews, participants reported finding the coaching sessions useful, as they provided an intimate space to receive support directly from facilitators and work on their relationships in a private, safe space. Facilitators echoed this sentiment in the debrief session.

   Both the SIMR team and Montefiore staff noted that during the coaching sessions, Montefiore facilitators sometimes struggled to keep both partners engaged and they experienced challenges focusing on and practicing specific skills with couples. The SIMR team and Montefiore staff observed that the Little Love Bites sessions sometimes lacked structure, and coaches sometimes attempted to resolve issues that were too big to be addressed fully in a 15-minute coaching session. For example, couples could pick a skill to focus on, and sometimes they spent a lot of time debating with each other or the facilitator about what to select, leaving little time to practice the skill. In other instances, couples would want to practice a skill in the context of an issue that was too weighty to be discussed and resolved in the 15-minute sessions—for example, recovering from infidelity or solving issues with unstable housing. In addition, many facilitators reported struggling with their role as a coach rather than a clinician. The role of a coach is to gently correct or support a skill, not to focus on more clinical aspects—for example, processing why using a skill might be hard (Markman and Ritchie 2015). Facilitators discussed struggling with the urge to delve into the clinical issues the conversations raised and with knowing when to pause a weighty discussion and redirect the conversation back to skills coaching. When couples raised consequential relationship issues in coaching sessions, facilitators needed to sensitively refer couples to an hour-long booster session, which is better suited to provide support for such issues.

Figure 5.1. Teach-Demonstrate-Practice & Coach- Process model curriculum framework



Even with some initial implementation challenges, Montefiore staff perceived the Little Loves Bites to be a powerful tool, if executed well. Thus, Montefiore leadership chose to focus their final learning cycle on refining the Little Love Bites coaching sessions.

Learning Cycle 3: June – August 2022

The third learning cycle focused on testing refinements to the Little Love Bites coaching sessions. After observing the challenges in the second learning cycle, the SIMR team led Montefiore staff in an interactive activity to establish a common philosophy to guide the session. This philosophy was one of empowerment: a facilitator coaches each partner to toward success with using a skill in a way that encourages continued use of the skill and motivates the couple to continue the workshop and coaching sessions. Using this philosophy as a guide, the SIMR team led Montefiore staff in an interactive exercise to add more structure to the Little Love Bites, assigning a specific skill to each of the five sessions (Box 5.4). The structure would enable facilitators to prepare before the session and then confidently start each session with a specific skill in mind, while selecting an appropriate topic in which to anchor the practice. To help coaches monitor their progress and complete the coaching session within 15 minutes, Montefiore leadership also developed an agenda for each of the five sessions with approximate times for each part of the session. Additionally, the SIMR team, in consultation with the PREP developer, prepared a tip sheet based on observations from the second learning cycle and best practices in coaching (see, for example, Markman and Ritchie 2015; Roddy et al. 2021) to help facilitators understand their role as a coach and how they should function in that role during the Little Love Bites. For example, the tip sheet gave guidance on how to delineate their role as coach clearly and avoid a more clinical approach.

This learning cycle focused on understanding how the refinements to the coaching session improve participants' and facilitators' experience. We collected data from two sources. First, we continued our observations of recorded sessions. We also held an interactive debrief session with Montefiore staff at the end of the cycle.

Learning Cycle 3

June – August 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Restructured coaching sessions with an assigned skill for each session
- **Purpose:** Improve engagement in virtual skill coaching sessions

Data

- Biweekly coaching sessions (3 staff)
- Observations of recorded coaching sessions (7 sessions)
- Interactive debrief session (17 staff)

Key Takeaway

- Restructuring helped streamline the coaching sessions, enabling both members of the couple to practice a skill and receive feedback in 15 minutes

The SIMR team and Montefiore staff observed one key lesson that emerged from Montefiore's experience and data gathering in this cycle:

- **Refining the Little Love Bites helped streamline the sessions, allowing each member of the couple to practice and the facilitators to lean into their role as coach.** The SIMR team observed the couple spending more time successfully practicing the skills in the coaching sessions, as compared with observations in the second learning cycle. The structure gave coaches the opportunity to focus their preparation ahead of each session, which worked better than not knowing which skill the couples would choose in open-ended sessions, as in the prior learning cycle. The more structured approach helped coaches start the session more efficiently and clearly, with a stated goal and guidelines for each session. Building more structure also enabled the facilitators to concentrate on their role as coach rather than drifting into their clinical skills. With clearer instructions at the start of the session, couples chose an appropriate issue more often than in the previous cycle, enabling couples to practice the skill rather than attempt to address major relationship problems in a brief session. When couples brought up a major issue or argument, facilitators validated the couples' struggles and prompted them to schedule an hour-long booster session in which more processing and discussion could occur, then continued coaching on the skill. Despite more guidance on the

This learning cycle aimed to answer this question:

How might refined coaching sessions improve the participant experience and provide participants an opportunity to better practice skills?

coaching role in this learning cycle, several facilitators reported in the debrief session that they were still struggling with walking the line between clinician and coach. Additionally, facilitators reported liking the greater structure the refined Little Love Bites coaching sessions offered, but they also noted instances in which less structure might have been better for a given couple. For example, one facilitator reported that one couple really struggled with the speaker–listener technique and wanted flexibility to practice this technique with them in more than one coaching session.

Box 5.4. Focus of refined Little Love Bites skills coaching sessions

- **Taking a break:** Couples complete a somewhat stressful task (for example, naming two-legged animals while listening to loud music). Coaches then help couples practice self-awareness—to notice when they are overwhelmed—and self-soothing techniques and discuss with each other how they can use these skills during conflict.
- **Softened start-up:** Coaches ask the couple to identify a "marble-sized" problem or a recent scenario that might require starting a difficult conversation. Coaches then help couples discuss the problem with each other by identifying and expressing emotions, facts, and requests in a positive way.
- **Speaker–listener technique:** Couples select an issue that requires a discussion employing good speaking and listening skills. Coaches help the partners take turns practicing active listening and paraphrasing after their partner is done speaking.
- **Compromise:** Couples select a topic that requires compromise. Coaches then help the couple understand their partner's perspective, focus on understanding the issue before problem-solving, find common ground, and brainstorm solutions in a judgment-free manner to find a win-win conclusion.
- **Repair:** Couples identify a recent argument that triggered a sore spot for one or both of them. Coaches help the couple use prior skills (for example, speaker–listener skills) to share their perspectives in a conversation with each other and to find emotional safety by validating, apologizing, and forgiving.

What did we learn about delivering virtual services with Montefiore?

Montefiore's experience during their three learning cycles conducted as part of SIMR offers several lessons that could be useful to others in the HMRE field:

- **HMRE and similar service providers that plan to offer virtual versions of their in-person services will need to take the time to adapt them appropriately.** The COVID-19 pandemic forced many HMRE service providers to pivot to virtual programming (Bodenlos et al. 2021). Virtual programs are showing promise (for example Doss et al. 2020; Megale et al. 2022), which suggests that more HMRE service providers might consider adapting this format. In interviews with Montefiore participants, the SIMR team heard couples tout the benefits of virtual workshops. Participants noted several advantages to the virtual format, such as the flexibility of attending workshops from home, without the prohibitively high costs of transportation and child care. As part of SIMR, program staff and the SIMR team observed that what worked when delivering services in person did not always work in the virtual environment. Moreover, facilitators noted that implementing virtual workshops took longer than did in-person workshops, given the extra time it took in a virtual workshop to get participants settled and focused initially and during transitions from small-group to full-group activities. Together, these findings suggest the need for other service providers to think critically about how to translate their in-person services to a virtual environment in a way that supports quality facilitation and participant engagement.

Service providers may need to streamline curriculum content when planning a virtual version of their in-person workshop, or to allow more time to cover the same amount of content in a virtual format.

- **HMRE service providers offering virtual services might consider adding skills coaching to reinforce their workshop content.** A growing body of literature suggests the promise in out-of-session skills coaching when teaching relationship skills to adults (Doss et al. 2020; Roddy et al. 2021; Stanley et al. 2020). Montefiore found that it was difficult to implement brief coaching sessions with individual couples as part of regular workshops after they had transitioned to virtual service delivery. As part of SIMR, Montefiore and the SIMR team developed a series of brief coaching sessions with couples to supplement the core workshop. At Montefiore, both facilitators and participants saw the benefits of these virtual coaching sessions. Facilitators noted that skills coaching allowed couples to practice and succeed in using a skill. These sessions also helped coaches gauge whether couples understood the skills taught in the group workshop, information they could use to refine their approach to delivering content. In addition, both facilitators and participants viewed the Little Love Bites sessions as an opportunity for personalized attention and strengthened the relationship between the couple and the facilitator. This stronger bond could help couples feel more motivated to attend workshops and more confident sharing their experiences in group sessions, given the trust they built with their coach (Bulling et al. 2020; Quirk et al.2014).

- **HMRE and similar service providers offering virtual services might consider how best to handle participants' environmental distractions.** Across the three learning cycles, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff observed that distractions in participants' environment—for example, caring for young children or performing household chores like making dinner—sometimes hindered their engagement in virtual sessions. In other cases, participants joined the session separately from their partner. Facilitators reported feeling particularly unsure about how best to manage participants who were multitasking or were off-camera dealing with issues at home. However, the SIMR team and Montefiore staff did not address this issue as part of SIMR rapid cycle learning because Montefiore leadership and staff wished to give priority to the other strategies discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, in a debrief session at the end of the final learning cycle, Montefiore leaders and facilitators began brainstorming ways to address environmental distractions—for example, by setting expectations for virtual participation at intake. Other HMRE service providers or researchers might want to address this common challenge for virtual service delivery.

USING MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING TO ENHANCE SERVICES WITH THE RIDGE PROJECT

Spotlight on: the RIDGE Project

- HMRE grant recipient from 2006 to 2011 and 2020 to the present; RF grant recipient from 2011 to 2020
- Faith-based, nonprofit organization operating in seven counties and nine prisons in Ohio
- Provides services to men and women who are incarcerated—including those who are in relationships—within nine months of their anticipated release
- The TYRO Couples program uses the TYRO Couples Marriage Relationship Education Skills curriculum, delivering 20 hours of programming during a participant's incarceration
- Includes case management services post-release and offers employment and financial services

The RIDGE Project is a faith-based, nonprofit organization aiming to support families in Ohio who are experiencing challenges resulting from incarceration and poverty. Through its TYRO Couples program, RIDGE serves participants in a relationship who are or have been incarcerated. Specifically, RIDGE provides HMRE services to men and women who are reentering the community after being incarcerated. RIDGE operates primarily in prisons, implementing its primary group workshop with those who are incarcerated. The program offers supplemental services to participants' partners (who are not incarcerated), as well as opportunities to join some workshop sessions, if the correctional facility permits. The group workshop uses the TYRO Couples Marriage Relationship Education Skills (MRES) curriculum. In addition to fostering healthy relationship skills, an important goal of RIDGE's services is to promote a future-focused mindset to help participants set and achieve goals after incarceration. To that end, the TYRO Couples program offers its participants case management services designed to align with future-focused mindset of the curriculum. RIDGE leadership viewed their case management approach as an important means to provide services that help participants succeed after incarceration, aligning with suggested HMRE practices (Alamillo et al. 2020; Friend et al. 2020).

> **Learning question for The RIDGE Project:**
>
> **What are the best strategies for engaging so that they remain engaged in services post-release?** To explore this question, the SIMR team interviewed and surveyed grant recipient staff.

To support participants as they prepare for life after incarceration, case managers—who also serve as facilitators for the program's group workshops—meet with participants to help them develop goals for their life after release and make plans for achieving them. During these goal planning sessions, RIDGE staff use a comprehensive worksheet to help participants identify goals related to their families, career, and communities, and to discuss barriers and challenges to achieving these goals. After these goals are identified, case managers work with the participant to think through steps for achieving them. Case managers also encourage participants to think about their social support network and how that could assist them in achieving their goals.

Working with the goal planning worksheet, case managers continue providing appropriate support to participants after their release. For example, the case managers meet with participants regularly to provide support toward achieving identified goals and adjusting to life after incarceration. Case managers connect participants to an array of services, depending on the identified needs and goals, such as employment, mental health, child support, housing, and intimate partner violence prevention and treatment services.

As part of their SIMR rapid cycle learning work, RIDGE leadership wanted to enhance their case management approach with a method that aligned with their organization's primary philosophy of instilling a future-focused mindset. When exploring potential issues to focus on as part of their SIMR rapid cycle work, RIDGE leadership identified the challenge of retaining participants in their case management services after they were released from prison. Program leadership attributed this lack of participation post-release to the range of challenges that participants often experience upon reentering the community, among them social stigma, employment difficulties, and negative peer influences. Leadership also perceived a disconnect between the participants' enthusiasm during their primary workshop and their interest in services after release. For these reasons, as part of SIMR, the organization opted to focus on enhancing participant motivation for change by having their program staff use motivational interviewing (MI) techniques with participants. Motivational interviewing is a widely used evidence-based communication approach that involves a balance of careful listening and respectful provision of information and advice (Miller and Rollnick 2013).

What did rapid cycle learning look like at RIDGE?

Because of delays associated with COVID-19 and the complexities of service delivery in prisons, RIDGE did not begin its rapid cycle work with the SIMR team until early 2022. This late start left time for only one learning cycle testing the use of MI with participants in the TYRO Couples workshop.

The SIMR team and RIDGE leadership identified MI as a tool that aligned with RIDGE's approach to providing HMRE services. MI is a collaborative approach to communications with participants that is designed to identify internal motivations for change and commitment to developing and achieving goals (Box 6.1; Miller and Rollnick 2013). Research suggests that readiness to change is an important factor in reducing the risk of recidivism, and MI has been found to boost readiness to change among people who are incarcerated (Anstiss et al. 2009). Thus, leadership at RIDGE recognized that MI could support their efforts by giving staff a new skill for helping their participants find the motivation to change their decision-making processes and achieve their goals.

The SIMR team began the learning cycle by enlisting a certified MI instructor to lead an intensive, two-day training in late February 2022. The training covered (1) the purpose and basic principles of MI; (2) detailed explanations and examples of MI techniques; and (3) structured exercises to practice MI skills and apply them in the context of RIDGE's HMRE services.

Beginning in March 2022, RIDGE staff began using MI in their interactions with participants. In particular, staff wanted to use MI to enhance their current case management when setting goals with participants before their release from incarceration. Staff also wanted to use this technique when encountering individuals who are ambivalent or resistant to change post-release.

Staff applied their MI skills primarily in case management sessions with participants. During these sessions, staff typically tried to (1) cover formal goal-setting and review before a participant's release; (2) support participants who were preparing for release; and (3) encourage goal attainment—including discussions of challenges to it—and give support to participants who were recently released. To assist RIDGE staff, the SIMR team developed an MI resource with detailed information and examples of how RIDGE could apply MI with their participants. For example, the SIMR team annotated the goals worksheet participants completed prior to release, noting where and which MI concepts could be used.

The SIMR team and RIDGE staff conducted a learning cycle together from February to July 2022, focusing on staff experiences with MI. The purpose of the cycle was to test the use of MI as part of RIDGE's case management plan and to develop resources for supporting staff as they applied MI techniques in their work with participants. Given their positive experiences in using MI to enhance case management, RIDGE staff began to apply MI techniques in some of their workshop sessions.

Learning Cycle
February – July 2022

Strategy and Purpose

- **Strategy:** Train staff to use motivational interviewing strategies
- **Purpose:** Build staff knowledge and skills to use motivational interviewing strategies

Data

- Pre- and post-training survey (13 staff)
- Regular coaching calls (4 staff)
- Staff focus groups (8 staff)

Key Takeaways

- Staff reported that MI could serve as a useful tool for engaging HMRE participants
- Staff felt confident in their ability to use MI and were interested in applying their knowledge and experience to other programs and services offered at their organization

The learning cycle aimed to answer the following learning question:

How can motivational interviewing be used to strengthen HMRE programming offered to men and women who are incarcerated or recently released?

Box 6.1. What is motivational interviewing (MI)?

MI is a guiding style of communication to use with those who are resistant or ambivalent to change. MI is a balance of good listening and giving information and advice (Miller and Rollnick 2013). MI aims to have people elicit change from within through self-reflection in the form or dialogue with someone else.

MI leverages several core skills known as OARS—see the bulleted items below—that help an MI user implement and elicit change language and the exchange of information:

- **Open questions:** These are questions designed to get the participant's perspectives and thoughts on a topic or to explore something further. Example: "Tell me about your week"; "How did that go for you?"
- **Affirmations:** These are statements to support participants' statements or affirm strengths or successes. Example: "It's important to you to be different from your father" and "You seem really in touch with your thoughts and feelings."
- **Reflections:** These are statements of empathy or understanding conveyed by repeating, rephrasing, or offering a deeper guess about what the person is trying to communicate. Example: "So you feel…"; "Sounds like you're wondering if…"
- **Summarizing:** These are statements that tell the participant you were listening to what they said. Example: "Let me see if I got all of this. You've had time to reflect on your past mistakes, you see the roadblocks in your life, and you've got a plan to detour around them and get where you need to go.

MI has four fundamental processes in which users can apply OARS skills:

1. **Engaging is the foundation of MI.** It is the process of establishing a trusted and well-respected relationship. Interviewing in this phase aims to establish rapport and comfort with the participant.
2. **Focusing is the process of seeking and maintaining a direction of change or a change goal.** MI in this phase can seek to direct and guide participants to identify and focus on a change goal.
3. **Evoking is the process of beginning and sustaining discussion around change.** The goal for this phase is to have the participant start thinking about the desire or need to change ("I would like to see my kids more"; "I've got to do something different"). Then comes a commitment to changing ("I'm ready to do this"; "I will make a promise to my kids to be different").
4. **Planning is the process of planning how the change could occur.** The goal for this phase is to solidify the participant's commitment to change and create a plan based on the participant's own insights and expertise.

Source: Miller and Rollnick 2013.

In addition to the pre- and post-training survey, the SIMR team conducted regular coaching calls with four leaders from RIDGE and focus groups with seven RIDGE staff, who served as both facilitators and case managers; the aim was to understand the challenges and successes staff reported after gaining experience using MI for case management and for workshop facilitation.

The SIMR team and RIDGE observed four key findings from the learning cycle.

1. **Staff reported skill gains following the training and found success using MI with participants who are incarcerated.** The survey administered before and after training showed that most staff found the training useful and felt they had made modest gains in MI skills. RIDGE leadership supported the continued development of MI skills in regular staff meetings. RIDGE staff found that the most useful resources for continuing education on MI are short videos that demonstrate the application of MI in specific scenarios. For example, one staff explained that a video showing the wrong way to use MI was especially helpful, since it allowed him to reflect on mistakes he may have made when using it with participants.

All case managers who participated in focus groups reported using MI to varying degrees when working with participants on their goals and addressing obstacles. They also reported greater success with MI with incarcerated participants than with those who had recently been released. All staff agreed that participants were more receptive to engaging in MI-based conversations prior to their release. Staff attributed this pattern to the setting. According to these staff, participants who are incarcerated could focus, with minimal distractions, on a plan for achieving their goals. Case management sessions with participants who had been recently released proved more challenging. Staff noted that, once participants had been released, most case management was conducted over the telephone, which made it more difficult to establish the meaningful connection with participants that is vital for MI to succeed. In addition, participants were often living in crowded and sometimes chaotic environments after their release, creating distractions that made MI and case management generally less effective.

2. **Case managers found MI to be most useful for uncovering challenges; building on participant motivation, trust, and self-regulation skills; and reengaging those who stopped participating in workshops:**

   - **Identifying the root cause of challenges.** Staff noted that MI was helpful in getting to the bottom of a challenge facing a participant. They reported that before using MI, they had been more likely to address only surface-level issues. Since the main source of the challenge had not been resolved—trauma, lack of skills needed to get a job, strained relationships with family and friends, for example—participants continued to face the same challenges and to struggle to overcome them. With MI, staff have additional tools to drill down on a challenge and identify the cause sooner rather than later. For example, in a focus group, one staff member reported a situation where he used various MI techniques to help a participant shift from focusing only on the challenges associated with not having a job to addressing the reasons why he was not able to stay employed.
   - **Enhancing existing motivation.** All staff agreed that MI is most effective with participants who are invested in making significant improvements in their lives and actively working toward achieving their goals. Conversely, RIDGE staff experienced challenges using MI with participants the staff perceived as uninterested in making different decisions or uncooperative during the goal development process. In these scenarios, staff thought those participants were not ready to collaborate with them and be held accountable for making a change. Additionally, one staff member reported difficulties using MI to create long-term plans or to encourage self-regulation to achieve goals. This staff member said some participants wanted to change their lives, but were more interested in solutions that could resolve an issue immediately than in making slower progress toward a larger goal.

“I use open-ended questions and get them to think about their dreams and what they actually want, then try to get them to break those down into steps on how they will accomplish that.... I want them to dream again and have them take hold of the things they want to do but thought were lost because they screwed up. Life is not over because of your decisions—you can find fulfillment.”

——RIDGE staff member on the use of MI in case management

- **Building relationships and trust with participants.** With MI being a collaborative approach by design, many staff reported using the techniques to gain respect and build trust with participants. Staff reported setting the tone for the relationship by applying MI techniques in early interactions with participants by asking more questions and seeking their input in one-on-one sessions. Several staff reported that MI techniques garnered trust faster than did past approaches. One staff member explained that this improvement in relationship building meant that participants view him “less as a boss, and more like a trusted leader.”
- **Building self-regulation skills**. Several staff agreed that one of the biggest benefits of MI techniques when working with participants is that the approach allows participants to build self-awareness around their own choices and the effects those choices have on their lives. Staff elaborated that they find the use of reflective statements (for example, “What I hear you saying is…”) helps participants realize on their own that by repeatedly making the same types of poor decisions, they are sabotaging their own potential.
- **RIDGE staff also used MI to reengage participants who had stopped attending workshops.** Some staff found that using MI techniques to understand why participants had dropped out of workshops was more helpful in reengaging them than was simply asking participants to return. In one instance, a staff member connected with a participant who stopped attending the workshop after the third session. By using MI techniques to learn about that participant’s challenges and goals, they were able to show the value of participation in the workshop, with the result that the individual rejoined the workshop.

3. **As RIDGE gained experience with MI in case management sessions, several staff began applying the techniques in group workshop sessions.** MI techniques can be an appropriate tool when facilitating group sessions (Wagner and Ingersoll 2012). The same concepts that apply to one-on-one discussions can be applied to group discussions. After staff began seeing this overlap, they applied these techniques during workshop discussions. Several facilitators shared that using open-ended questions to spark discussion led to more participants actively engaging in the conversation. By using affirmations and summarizing participants’ experiences, staff found that participants trusted them more, perceiving these techniques as demonstrating more support and respect. One facilitator reported MI as a helpful tool in responding to participants who express ambivalence or skepticism during a workshop session. This facilitator felt that when one participant reacts in this manner, that energy can permeate the group and detract from the goals of that lesson. By using MI to react to these participants and explore the root of their concerns, facilitators felt better equipped to address those types of reactions. In some cases, using MI techniques to address these reactions brought into the conversation more participants who asked their own questions or offered alternative ways to address challenges. RIDGE staff expressed interest in expanding their MI skills to use this approach in even more workshop discussions in the future.

   Staff did note that incorporating MI during workshops presented challenges, mainly in terms of timing. If they are to delivery all workshop content, staff cannot dedicate much time to using MI to address individual challenges. Therefore, facilitators had to use the technique selectively, when they thought MI would best support the content and goals of the session.

> **“If I give an affirmation to one [participant], they give it to each other and they build each other up. They collaborate together and brainstorm together. They help each other—if you ask the right questions, they encourage each other to grow.”**
>
> ***—RIDGE staff member on using MI during group workshops***

What did we learn about MI and case management with RIDGE?

Through their SIMR rapid cycle work, the RIDGE team gained confidence in their ability to use MI to better engage participants and promote a future-focused mindset. Overall, RIDGE staff embraced the core philosophies of MI—active listening and offering information and guidance—to help evoke readiness for change. RIDGE planned to continue to expand the use of MI and to apply these skills in new ways, both in one-on-one interactions with participants and during discussions in workshops. RIDGE's experience with incorporating and implementing MI into their services offers several keys lessons that others in the HMRE field could benefit from:

- **HMRE and similar service providers can view MI training as potentially transformational for the interactions staff have with participants across the services offered.** MI can influence staff's mindset on their approach for interacting with participants, and it can be applied to a variety of situations, services, and needs. The change in staff mindsets that MI engendered helps enhance the implementation of services or organizational initiatives as a whole (for example, Arbuckle et al. 2020; Madson et al. 2009). When working with individuals who are incarcerated or recently released, staff traditionally used a stronger, more directive "tough love" approach. During the training, some staff were ambivalent to the MI philosophy of leaning into participant self-reflection and promoting participants' autonomy, as that philosophy conflicted with their traditional approach. However, after the training and the initial success with MI, many staff reported learning when to shift their "tough love" approach to one that was more empathetic and patient.

  MI has been applied to an array of challenges and settings (for example, Frost et al. 2018). Though RIDGE began using MI in case management, staff —who were also facilitators— saw value in applying these skills to workshop discussion. Additionally, the effects of the MI training and usage rippled outside of their HMRE services and influenced the organization as whole. Some staff and managers were part of several different services offered at RIDGE in addition to their HMRE services. These staff discussed using MI techniques in other services.

- **HMRE service providers may need organizational support to help ensure MI sustainability.** Organizational support for the use of MI is important for sustained use (Dickinson et al. 2006). Leadership at RIDGE embraced this concept. During coaching calls after the training, leadership reported seeing the value of MI as a tool for their organization as a whole and sought to support its use. To do so, they incorporated an MI continuing education approach by reviewing and discussing MI principles at regular meetings. For example, because leadership supported organization-wide use, they incorporated videos demonstrating MI examples into their regular staff and supervision meetings across all services offered at RIDGE.

> **[Being trained in MI] brought more understanding since I'm recognizing the participants' challenges. I'm more aware of the tools I have now also when working with participants and using the tools at the right time."**
>
> ***— RIDGE staff member on the value of MI***

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In the SIMR project, five FRAMEWorks grant recipients used rapid cycle learning techniques to test and refine strategies to strengthen the implementation of HMRE services for adults and address challenges that grant recipients faced related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement. In order to benefit from HMRE services, service providers must take steps so that participants can access and learn from curriculum content. SIMR had two goals: (1) to improve the service delivery of these grant recipients and (2) to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges. The team began working with grant recipients in the summer of 2021 and completed all rapid cycle learning by August 2022. An explicit focus of this work was to provide grant recipients with tools and strategies they could keep using to continue strong implementation of HMRE services after SIMR concluded, through the end of the grant cycle in 2025.

At the beginning of the project, SIMR team members led grant recipients' staff in brainstorming sessions that used human-centered design activities to identify and prioritize the focus of rapid cycle learning. In these early meetings, the SIMR team included staff from all levels of the grant recipients' organizations to ensure a range of perspectives on the most important implementation challenges grant recipients faced. All of the FRAMEWorks grant recipients offered HMRE services in prior rounds of funding from ACF, although some had not offered HMRE services for some time when they were awarded their grant. All five had implementation challenges they hoped to address as part of SIMR (Baumgartner et al. 2022):

- **Anthem was returning to offering HMRE services after a hiatus in which it offered only RF services.** In the wake of this hiatus, recruitment was a problem for its HMRE services. In SIMR, the grant recipient wished to strengthen its recruitment practices.
- **FSA-SB experienced challenges in its prior round of funding recruiting Spanish-speaking men into its program.** This challenge persisted in the current grant. In SIMR, FSA-SB leadership wanted to develop a set of strategies to strengthen its recruitment of Spanish-speaking men.
- **Gateway was also returning to providing HMRE services after a break during which it had offered only RF services — leading to challenges with recruitment.** Gateway leadership also noticed issues with participant engagement during virtual workshops. In SIMR, the agency sought to deepen its community partnerships to help with recruitment and improve engagement in virtual workshops.
- **Montefiore made the switch to virtual services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced challenges related to engagement in virtual workshop sessions.** The grant recipient saw promise in these services and sought to make them as strong as their long-standing in-person HMRE services.
- **RIDGE served adults who were incarcerated around the time of their release from prison.** The organization had experienced issues with engagement with their case management services — particularly after their participants were released from prison. In SIMR, RIDGE staff and leaders wanted to improve their case management services to better support their participants after their reentry into the community.

After identifying the key implementation challenges, the SIMR team worked with the grant recipients to develop tailored strategies to strengthen service implementation. Collaboration and co-creation were central to the SIMR approach. The SIMR team contributed insights from research and connected grant recipients to training and experts. For example, **Montefiore and RIDGE** implemented evidence-based strategies that have shown promise in the HMRE field or similar fields (Doss et al. 2020; Miller and Rollnick 2013). **Anthem, FSA-SB, and Gateway** all implemented suggested best practices from the field to guide development of their recruitment strategy (for example, Friend and Paulsell 2020). The SIMR team used principles drawn from implementation science—a body of research about how to successfully implement evidence-based practices—to ensure strategies were well designed (for example, Fixsen et al. 2005; Nilsen 2015; Michie et al. 2011).

The grant recipients brought their deep knowledge as practitioners to the partnership to ensure they tailored strategies to their specific context and service population. Participating in SIMR's structured process helped grant recipients recognize and build on their organizational strengths. For example, through all three learning cycles, **Montefiore** found value in bringing together facilitators, recruiters, and case managers to generate ideas on how to enhance its virtual program. Likewise, **FSA-SB** formed implementation teams of facilitators, family advocates, and supervisors from each of its three regions to ensure recruitment strategies reflected community contexts. Frontline staff and leaders at **RIDGE** came together to identify ways to use and support motivational interviewing across all the services the organization offers.

The SIMR team developed plans with each grant recipient to test strategies with iterative rapid cycle learning: implementing a strategy over a short time period, collecting and analyzing data, and using the resulting insights to adjust the strategy and test again. Grant recipients completed between one and three learning cycles.

SIMR's influence on the FRAMEWorks grant recipients that participated

By participating in SIMR, grant recipients increased their capacity to collect and use data in decision making. For example, **Anthem** leadership observed the value of participant focus groups to inform the look and feel of their social media posts, and said they would use focus groups to get participant feedback going forward. **FSA-SB** staff began tracking and aggregating metrics such as partner referrals and the conversion rate of referrals into enrollments in their client database system, which helped them monitor the engagement levels of each of their community partners. The agency plans to continue tracking these metrics for monitoring recruitment partnerships now that its involvement with SIMR has concluded.

Overall, the FRAMEWorks grant recipients participating in SIMR strengthened staff capacity and developed tools and strategies to support strong implementation through the rest of the grant period. For example, **Gateway** developed a partnership development process that identified key tasks and people to carry out each step of the process. To address transportation barriers resulting from its sprawling rural service area, the agency began co-locating its workshops at referral partner sites. To adapt to virtual services, **Montefiore** streamlined its curriculum, which helped facilitators solidify key concepts with participants and devote more time during workshops to engaging participants in activities and discussions. **FSA-SB's** implementation teams empowered frontline staff and supervisors to take ownership over different strategy areas—including partner development, direct outreach, and motivation-based practices—to allow leadership to spread responsibility for their numerous initiatives. These teams continued post-SIMR.

The grant recipients participating in SIMR planned to continue using the strategies they developed and refined with the SIMR team. **Anthem** staff reported they would continue to be more intentional with their approach to social media and apply the skills they learned in SIMR to launch more social media campaigns focused on recruiting specific groups. **FSA-SB** worked with SIMR to adopt the Goal4 It! (Derr and McCay 2017) case management approach, and will keep using this approach moving forward. The grant recipient also launched a program champions initiative to help spread word-of-mouth referrals from current participants. **Montefiore** will continue providing brief skills coaching sessions to all participants outside of regular workshops, and has incorporated a review of the technology guide into its workshop orientation. **RIDGE** will continue using and expanding staff's use of motivational interviewing.

Insights from this rapid cycle work that can inform other HMRE grant recipients

Through the SIMR project, the SIMR team and the grant recipients generated insights and lessons to inform strong service delivery that are relevant to other HMRE grant recipients:

- **Build and maintain partnerships with other community organizations to strengthen recruitment efforts.** Across several evaluations of federally-funded HMRE programs, staff often perceived greater recruitment success when they had an array of strong community partners that provided regular referrals to their HMRE program (Dion et al. 2010; Friend et al. 2020; Gaubert et al. 2012; Zaveri and Baumgartner, 2016). Both **FSA-SB** and **Anthem** learned the value of using an intentional approach to identifying and building partnerships. Both grant recipients also learned about the need to continually maintain their partnerships — particularly through regular, proactive communication. **Gateway** staff learned the value of using a variety of strategies with partners. Specifically, the grant recipient learned the value of not only receiving referrals from partners, but co-locating workshops at these partners' locations to improve recruitment. Staff at these grant recipients noted the importance of considering the needs and characteristics of their potential partners when crafting their approach to partnerships. Across these three grant recipients, staff tailored their efforts based on their knowledge of partner organization and feedback from partner staff– which many staff felt improved the effectiveness of the strategies. Other HMRE programs interested in bolstering their recruiting can learn from the efforts of these three programs to strengthen their recruiting partnerships.

- **Be intentional about the shift to virtual services.** The transition from in-person to virtual workshops can prove challenging (Barden et al. 2021; Bodenlos et al. 2021; Turner et al. 2022). Facilitators face difficulties translating their experience into the virtual workshops, and participants might be less engaged when not in-person. Sites in SIMR dealt with these challenges by intentionally focusing on making their virtual services as engaging as their in-person workshops. **Montefiore** found that they could enhance the virtual workshop experience for participants and facilitators through a range of strategies that included a facilitator training, a technology guide for participants, and streamlining the virtual workshop content. **Gateway** also saw the value in adding to their facilitators' virtual facilitation tools to enhance their virtual workshops after experiencing issues with participant engagement during the SIMR project. Leadership at both organizations noted the continual need to focus on virtual workshops in order to help their facilitators build their skills in the virtual space. Other programs planning to implement virtual HMRE workshops can learn from the experiences of these two organizations.

- **Reinforce workshop content through skill coaching.** Practicing skills learned in HMRE workshop sessions during workshops is common (Markman & Ritchie, 2015; Stanley et al., 2020). However, research has shown that skill coaching outside of workshop sessions is a promising strategy for helping participants retain the skills they have learned and for promoting participant engagement with workshop content (Hatch et al., 2021). **Montefiore** considered the launch and testing of its online skill coaching program—Little Love Bites—to be a success and something the grant recipient plans to employ during in-person services. Other HMRE programs could consider similar strategies to create opportunities to coach participants on relationship skills outside the regular workshop sessions.

- **Strengthen case management practices.** Case management can be a powerful tool for helping participants address their needs (Alamillo et al. 2020; Austin et al. 1997). However, HMRE and similar programs may face challenges with participant engagement in these services. As a result, programs may need to consider adopting a formal case management model or training staff in additional tools to use during case management sessions. **FSA-SB** adopted a formal case management model — Goal4 It!. Both program leadership and case managers saw the promise of using a standardized approach to case management. **RIDGE** staff received training in motivational interviewing and found it to be a useful tool, not just for their case management approach, but for the organization as a whole. Other HMRE programs interested in strengthening their case management could consider implementing similar approaches.

The tools and strategies grant recipients developed can be starting points for other organizations that want to strengthen their own HMRE services. To help make these tools available to other programs, the SIMR team has developed briefs for practitioners that share these promising tools in full. Interested organizations can use these tools in their own HMRE services and apply the lessons grant recipients learned through their participation in SIMR. For a list and links to all SIMR publications, visit the SIMR page on the OPRE website.

Any organization providing HMRE services can make its program stronger by integrating methods from SIMR into its continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes. When the organization is confronted with an implementation challenge, this practice can bring together a range of staff to define the problem and understand the driving factors. The next step is to create tailored solutions informed by evidence and practice, engaging experts where appropriate. This is followed by developing a plan to test the solutions on a small scale, addressing the research question of interest and the data to collect to measure success. After the test, staff convene to review the data, determine the adjustments that need to be made, and plan to test again.

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