



Research to Practice Brief

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Cost Considerations for Planning a Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Program

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When policymakers and practitioners are considering a new program, cost is typically a key concern. Cost affects many aspects of a program, including the number of people a program can serve, the type and intensity of services a program can offer, staffing levels, and program sustainability.

This brief provides a framework for thinking about cost when planning a healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) program. Since 2005, Congress has funded HMRE programs through competitive grants administered by the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Although ACF has been sponsoring research on these programs for many years, much of this research focuses on the implementation and effects of the programs (for example, Hsueh et al. 2012; Moore et al. 2018; Wood et al. 2014). There is less research on program cost and how program providers should think about cost when planning an HMRE program.

The framework in this brief comes from the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation, sponsored by ACF. In 2015, ACF contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the STREAMS evaluation to identify strategies for improving the delivery and effectiveness of HMRE programs. The evaluation had a particular emphasis on understudied populations and program approaches not covered in ACF's prior federal evaluations.

The cost estimates and framework presented in this brief are based on the experiences of four HMRE grantees that participated in STREAMS and

CALCULATING PROGRAM COST

We calculated the program cost estimates presented in this brief by using the “ingredients” or resource-cost method (Levin and McEwan 2001), a common standard in the field. First, we identified all resources the grantees required to deliver their healthy marriage and relationship education programs, such as administrative staff, workshop facilitators, curriculum materials, office supplies and equipment, program incentives, and other shared administrative and indirect resources. Next, we assigned a dollar value to each resource identified. These dollar values formed the basis for the summary estimates of program cost presented in the brief. We provide a more detailed description of the study methods at the end of the brief.

provided cost data to the evaluation team (Table 1). All four programs commonly offered HMRE services such as group workshops, individual case management, and referrals. However, the programs might not necessarily reflect the experiences of all organizations funded by the Office of Family Assistance or HMRE programs funded through other sources. For example, HMRE programs funded through state or local governments, philanthropic foundations, or private sources might face somewhat different cost considerations than the ones described in this brief.

DRIVERS OF PROGRAM COST

From STREAMS, we learned that HMRE programs can vary widely in cost and that the primary drivers of cost fall into the following four interrelated categories: (1) program design, (2) program services, (3) partnerships, and (4) personnel costs. We next describe each category. The order we describe them does not necessarily relate to the importance or value of each category. In addition, the categories are not mutually exclusive—for example, the first three categories influence the last one. We describe the categories separately and in sequence to give program providers a logical approach to planning an HMRE program.

1. Program design

Some organizations offer HMRE programming as a supplement to an existing program or service. In STREAMS, for example, More Than Conquerors Inc. (MTCI) offered 12 lessons of an HMRE curriculum as a supplement to an existing health class in two public high schools in the Atlanta area. Another site, Family and Workforce Centers of America (FWCA), offered HMRE lessons as a supplement to an existing employment training program operated by the organization. In offering HMRE programming as a supplement, organizations can reduce their direct costs by relying in part on resources and facilities provided by other programs and organizations. For example, because MTCI offered HMRE programming as a supplement to an existing high school health class, the program did not have a direct cost for the physical classroom space needed for its group workshops. Similarly, FWCA used existing classroom space, financial systems, computer and telephone services, and administrative staff available to the organization through other funding sources. We estimated the cost of these programs as \$1,163 per student for MTCI's school-based program and \$1,156 per participant for FWCA's supplemental program.

Other organizations offer HMRE as a stand-alone program that operates independently. These organizations naturally have greater direct costs because they must account for the resources needed to support their program's basic infrastructure, such as administrative personnel, office space, financial systems, and computer and telephone services. Two of the sites in STREAMS (The Parenting Center [TPC] and University of Denver) provide examples of stand-alone HMRE programs. We estimated the cost of their programs as \$4,350 per participant for the University of Denver's MotherWise program and \$10,844 per couple for TPC's Empowering Families program. Because TPC's program served couples, its cost is roughly double that of a comparable program for individuals. In addition, the per couple cost of the Empowering Families program was similar to the estimated per couple costs of prior HMRE programs for couples. For example, adjusting for inflation, the estimated average costs of the Supporting Healthy Marriage and the Building Strong Families programs were about \$10,000 per couple and \$12,000 per couple, respectively, in 2018 dollars (Gaubert et al. 2012; Wood et al. 2012).

2. Program services




All four sites in STREAMS offered a core group workshop. The resources required for these workshops include the workshop facilitators, curriculum materials and supplies, and (for some organizations) the physical classroom space needed to host the workshop sessions. The cost of these resources can vary depending on the length of the workshop; the characteristics, education levels, and experience of the facilitators; and the number of facilitators required (for example, workshops led by single facilitators versus co-facilitators). However, the costs are otherwise common to all HMRE programs that offer a core group workshop.

Three of the four sites offered supplemental services in addition to a core workshop, which contributed to differences in program cost. For example, TPC supplemented its group workshop with (1) one-on-one employment counseling and additional employment supports for individual participants and (2) supplemental one-on-one financial coaching for couples. The one-on-one employment counseling and additional employment supports accounted for a sizeable portion (15 percent) of the program's total cost (Wu et al. 2022). The one-on-one financial coaching accounted for another 5 percent of the cost. Program providers must account for these supplemental services to get an accurate estimate of their program's full cost.

COSTS TO PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Although harder to measure and observe, healthy marriage and relationship education programs also have costs to participants. For example, the time participants spend in program services cuts into the time they have available to spend at home, at work, or participating in programs that offer other services. Participants might also incur transportation or child care costs while attending the program.

Program providers can account for these costs by

-  (1) respecting the value of participants' time and taking care to not overburden them;
 -  (2) offering compensation and supports such as transportation, meals, and child care assistance; and
 -  (3) offering evidence-based services that participants value and from which they will benefit.
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3. Partnerships

Many HMRE program providers rely on community partners to support the reach and operation of their programs. In STREAMS, for example, the University of Denver's MotherWise program partnered with Denver Health, a large health care system in the Denver area, as the program's primary referral source. FWCA's Career STREAMS program relied in part on referrals from local social services agencies, Job Corps, and American Jobs Centers. MTCI partnered with a local county health department to identify schools interested in offering HMRE programming. For TPC's Empowering Families program, staff from two partner agencies delivered the program's employment and financial literacy services.

Accounting for partnerships when planning for program cost is important for two reasons. First, some formal partnerships require payments that directly affect program cost. For TPC's Empowering Families program, because the partner agencies delivered the program's employment and financial literacy services, they required payments that increased the program's total cost. Indeed, we found that contracted services to partners accounted for 30 percent of total cost. Second, some types of informal partnerships can indirectly reduce a program's total cost. For example, for FWCA's Career STREAMS program, the referrals the program received through its informal partnerships with local social services agencies, Job Corps, and American Jobs Centers indirectly reduced the program's marketing and recruitment costs.

4. Personnel costs

A program's design, services, and partnerships all influence the number and types of personnel the program needs to operate successfully. For example, organizations offering HMRE as a stand-alone program will likely require more personnel than organizations offering supplemental programming. Similarly, the more supplemental services a program offers, the more staff an organization will likely require.

These differences are important because personnel ultimately account for the largest share of a program's total cost. For the sites in STREAMS, we found that personnel costs accounted for 70 percent of the total cost of FWCA's Career STREAMS program, 80 percent of MTCI's program for high school students, and 60 percent of the University of Denver's MotherWise program. For TPC's Empowering Families program, direct personnel costs accounted for a smaller portion of total cost (32 percent). However, this figure excludes the cost of personnel employed through TPC's partner organizations. Factoring partner organization staff into personnel costs increased the share of personnel costs to 62 percent. Therefore, for all the STREAMS sites, personnel accounted for at least 60 percent of the program's total cost.

SUMMARY

Findings from STREAMS indicate that the cost of HMRE programming can vary widely, from around \$1,000 per individual participant to more than \$10,000 per couple. When planning an HMRE program, providers can assess where they are likely to fall on the spectrum by considering the following questions:

- **Program design.** Does your organization provide HMRE programming as a supplement to an existing program or service? Or does the program operate more independently? More independent programs must account for the resources needed to support the program's basic infrastructure (such as administrative personnel and physical classroom space), which can increase direct cost.
- **Program characteristics.** Does your program offer supplemental services in addition to an HMRE group workshop? Supplemental services can make up a sizeable portion of a program's total cost.
- **Partnerships.** Does your organization rely on formal or informal partnerships to help with recruitment, service delivery, or other aspects of the program? Formal partnerships can involve contracted services and payments that add to program cost.
- **Personnel costs.** Accounting for program design, program characteristics, and partnerships, how many personnel do you need to operate the program? Getting an accurate staff count is important because personnel costs make up the largest share of an HMRE program's total cost.

Although not a direct cost to the program, providers should also account for the time and resources required of program participants. They can do this by (1) respecting the value of participants' time and taking care to not overburden them; (2) offering compensation and supports such as transportation, meals, and child care assistance; and (3) offering evidence-based services that participants value and from which they will benefit.

Table 1. Characteristics of the four HMRE programs in STREAMS

Grantee name	Population and location	Program and services	Program cost	Breakdown of total annual program cost
Family and Workforce Centers of America	Adults with low incomes seeking employment services in St. Louis, Missouri	Career STREAMS, which featured HMRE lessons offered as an enhancement to an existing employment training program, followed by five one-hour booster sessions	\$1,156 per participant	Personnel (70 percent); curriculum workbooks and materials, office supplies, and other direct costs (30 percent)
More Than Conquerors Inc.	High school students in Atlanta area, Georgia	Twelve lessons of the <i>Relationship Smarts PLUS</i> curriculum delivered in school as part of a semester-long health class for primarily 9th-grade students	\$1,163 per student	Personnel (80 percent); contracted services for a community liaison and financial and information technology support (14 percent); supplies, equipment, and other direct costs (5 percent); and facilities (1 percent)
The Parenting Center ^a	Couples with low incomes raising children together in Fort Worth, Texas	The Empowering Families program, which featured an eight-session workshop, employment services and referrals, financial coaching, and case management	\$10,844 per couple	Personnel (32 percent); contracted services for economic stability services and financial and information technology support (30 percent); supplies, equipment, and other direct costs (31 percent); and facilities (7 percent)
University of Denver	Women with low incomes who are pregnant or have just had a baby in Denver, Colorado	The MotherWise program, which featured a six-session workshop, individual case management, and an optional couples' workshop	\$4,350 per participant	Personnel (60 percent); shared administrative staff, information technology support, and phone services (21 percent); contracted services, supplies, equipment, and other direct costs (13 percent); and facilities (6 percent)

^a Because this program served couples, its cost is roughly double that of a comparable program for individuals.

METHODS FOR THE COST STUDY OF THE STREAMS EVALUATION

As part of the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation, staff from the evaluation team collected data on the resources that four STREAMS sites used to implement their healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs. The team collected this information (1) to expand the available evidence about the cost of implementing HMRE programming and (2) to provide context for the findings from random assignment impact studies the evaluation team conducted at each site. For more information on the STREAMS evaluation, participating programs, and random assignment impact studies, see [the project website](#).

For each STREAMS site, we collected data on the resources required to implement programming over a one-year period of typical operations. The resulting cost estimates therefore reflect the resources required to deliver programming during a steady state of operations, rather than the start-up resources required to develop or launch a new program. In addition, we calculated the estimates from the perspective of the organization responsible for implementing the program, rather than from the perspective of program participants, taxpayers, or the federal government. We chose this perspective so the estimates would reflect the resources that similar organizations would need in order to offer HMRE programming in other locations.

As summarized earlier in this brief, we calculated the program cost estimates using the “ingredients” or resource-cost method (Levin and McEwan 2001), a common standard in the field. We relied primarily on each site’s accounting records to assign dollar values to each resource identified. We applied three exceptions during this process: (1) to estimate the cost of any subsidized or rent-free office space the sites used, we used the market value of commercial space based on monthly or yearly rental rates for the zip code of the site’s location; (2) we calculated an annual value of equipment and facilities-related expenses by dividing the value of the original purchase price of the equipment (as estimated by the sites) by the useful life based on depreciation guidelines from the Internal Revenue Service; and (3) to account for variation in local prices or cost of living in each organization’s metropolitan area, and to make the cost estimates comparable across all sites, we created an index based on wage data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to adjust the total value of resources for personnel (staff salaries, payroll taxes, and benefits) and non-personnel (after all other adjustments).

For each site, we first calculated the total cost of offering HMRE programming for one year. We also broke down the estimates to show the percentage of the total cost apportioned to each of five resource categories: (1) personnel; (2) contracted services; (3) supplies, equipment, and other direct costs; (4) facilities costs; and (5) overhead. To calculate per-participant costs, we used electronic attendance and participation records entered by each site during the one-year cost period. For the Family and Workforce Centers of America and More Than Conquerors Inc. sites, we divided the total annual cost by the total number of program participants. For the other two sites (The Parenting Center [TPC] and the University of Denver), we first calculated the cost of serving one couple (TPC) or one individual (University of Denver) for one month. We then multiplied this value by the average length of program participation (in months) for all couples (TPC) or individuals (University of Denver) who received services.

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