Hello,

We are excited to share the inaugural issue of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Research and Evaluation Newsletter with you! The purpose of this newsletter is to connect with stakeholders, researchers, curriculum developers, practitioners, and service providers and share
the work we are doing in the area of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood services.

This newsletter will add to the sources of information that exist on the programs, services, curricula, and practices for Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) by specifically focusing on the research and evaluation activities sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Within ACF, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) conducts rigorous research and evaluation projects to study ACF programs and the populations they serve. You can read more about ACF’s common framework for research and evaluation here.

In conjunction with the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), which administers the HMRF grant program, OPRE has conducted rigorous studies and evaluations of HMRF programs for over a decade in order to better understand the populations these programs serve, the range of services available to participants, and the effectiveness of specific interventions.

In this issue of the newsletter, we provide an overview of the research portfolio strategy we use to address policy and practice-relevant research questions, present short summaries of some of our current HMRF projects, and spotlight the Building Bridges and Bonds (B3) project. Future issues will provide quarterly updates on new research findings, updates from existing projects, program spotlights, and other features from the HMRF research portfolio.

We look forward to continuing to engage with you around HMRF research, evaluation, and practice.

Sincerely,

Maria Woolverton
Director, Division of Family Strengthening, OPRE

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Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grants

The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) competitively awards Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grants to states, local governments, and community based organizations (both for profit and not-for-profit). The current cohort of HMRF grants was awarded in September 2015 and includes 45 Healthy Marriage grantees, as well as the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families, 39 Responsible Fatherhood grantees, and 5 Responsible Fatherhood Opportunities for Reentry and Mobility (ReFORM) grantees, who focus on services for the reentering population. For more information on the HMRF grant program, please visit the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood website.
The OPRE Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Research Portfolio Strategy

OPRE's strategy for HMRF research and evaluation centers on three types of activities that are intended to produce information to improve services for women, men, couples, youth, and families: foundational activities, program evaluation and improvement projects, and research/evaluation capacity building initiatives.

Foundational activities: These activities focus on describing the populations that are served and the programs that serve them, as well as identifying appropriate evaluation approaches.

Program evaluation and improvement projects: These activities seek to identify and further develop innovative approaches, as well as to identify effective approaches.

Research/evaluation capacity building initiatives: These activities focus on translating, disseminating, and assisting the field in using and applying research findings, stimulating and supporting new research in the field, and facilitating research networks.

Spotlight on Building Bridges and Bonds (B3)
There is great interest in identifying effective strategies that build fathers' capacity to support their children both emotionally and financially. Responsible Fatherhood programs use a number of promising models to work with fathers, but few rigorous studies have been done to show which are effective and should be a focus of expansion or replication efforts.

**The Building Bridges and Bonds (B3) study**, led by MDRC, is designed to test innovative, evidence-informed programming for fathers. Throughout 2015, B3 partnered with Responsible Fatherhood programs and experts in the field to identify high-priority questions and emerging service approaches. As a result, three separate program approaches were selected for evaluation:

**Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Individuals Seeking Employment (CBI-Emp)**

B3 aims to learn what approaches help fathers involved with the criminal justice system find and retain better jobs with higher earnings. To do so, MDRC collaborated with the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute to develop CBI-Emp, a new approach to employment services - one that requires more active learning from participants than traditional job readiness curricula and incorporates methods that have been shown to improve outcomes of men in the justice system.

**Just Beginning**

The study seeks to examine what approaches build the parenting and co-parenting skills of fathers, whether or not the fathers live with their children. Just Beginning represents a new way to do so, engaging fathers and their young children up to age three in a series of sessions designed to strengthen their relationships. Using a play-based approach, facilitators rely on Sesame Street videos to support parent learning and a child-friendly space for father-child play. Developed by Georgetown University and the Youth Law Center, Just Beginning includes direct feedback to emphasize and reflect on positive examples of parent and child bonding.

**DadTime smartphone application**

Finally, the study seeks to test new tactics programs can use to improve participant recruitment and engagement. For fathers who are juggling parenthood, fatherhood program activities, and holding down a job or looking for work, it may be difficult to attend the Just Beginning sessions consistently. In response to this challenge, the B3 team developed DadTime in collaboration with CauseLabs and the developers of the mDad mobile application. DadTime is a smartphone-based mobile application that provides a father with automated program attendance reminders. It also offers a private way to plan how he can apply what he is learning in Just Beginning the next time he is with his child.
To measure program effects, B3 will use a random assignment design. Six organizations (see below) have been selected to provide one group of fathers with services enhanced by either Just Beginning or CBI-Emp and provide another group of fathers with services as usual. B3 will compare fathers' parenting and employment outcomes after several months. The study also includes an impact study of DadTime in Just Beginning sites. An implementation analysis will describe who participated in services, how services operated, the challenges staff faced, and emerging lessons for the field. Data will be collected from multiple sources, including web-based and text surveys, program participation information, interviews, and administrative data from government agencies.

Study enrollment and data collection began in 2016. We expect to release interim reports to the field on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the project, which ends in 2019.

**Key Partners**

OPRE awarded a five-year contract to MDRC, with partners MEF Associates, Abt SRBI, and leading experts in the field. For more information please contact: Dina Israel ([Dina.Israel@mdrc.org](mailto:Dina.Israel@mdrc.org)) or Anna Solmeyer ([Anna.Solmeyer@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:Anna.Solmeyer@acf.hhs.gov)) .

**B3 Participating Organizations**

- Children's Institute, Inc., Los Angeles, California
- The Fortune Society, New York, New York
- The Kanawha Institute of Research and Action, Dunbar, West Virginia
- Passages Connecting Fathers and Families, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio
- People For People, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Seedco with BronxWorks and STRIVE International, New York, New York

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**Highlights From Ongoing OPRE HMRF Projects**

**Ex-Prisoner Reentry Strategies**

The Ex-Prisoner Reentry Strategies Study, conducted by the Urban Institute, documented the implementation of selected reentry programs initially funded in FY 2011 under the RF grant program, the experiences of staff and participants, and lessons useful to others in the field. Additional work involved evaluation design recommendations and a focus on measures appropriate for use in evaluations of programs with similar goals and objectives as these grant programs.

Early implementation findings showed that grantees served fathers before, during, and after incarceration. A wide range of pre-release and post-release activities were conducted by grantees including parenting and relationship classes, financial literacy training, domestic violence screening and services, support groups, mentoring, child-parent visits, and family activity days. Additionally, grantees documented relationships with a multitude of partner organizations, including local criminal justice organizations, human services programs, community based organizations, and faith-based organizations. Publications from the project include a series of briefs on the responsible parenting, healthy marriage, and economic stability components of Responsible Fatherhood programs and a final report on implementation findings.

**Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-Site Project** (FaMLE Cross-site)
The Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-Site (FaMLE) project supports high quality data collection and analysis for the 2015 cohort of HMRF grantees. Mathematica Policy Research is conducting the project under a contract awarded by ACF in Fall 2013.

The project has three main purposes:

1. Improve the quality and cross-site consistency of performance measure data collected by federal HMRF grantees about their operations, performance, and outcomes. All HMRF grantees use a cutting edge newly designed data management information system called Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) to collect standardized performance measures and outcome data across study sites. Grantees provide the following types of data via nFORM: program applicant characteristics, program operations, enrollment and participation in program services, and client outcomes before and after services. nFORM was introduced to grantees in the summer of 2016.

2. Strengthen the capacity of grantees, working with their own local evaluators, to conduct evaluations that add to the body of evidence on program effectiveness and operations. The project is providing technical assistance to grantees to support the evaluations.

3. Examine and analyze aggregate data for all grantees. The project will analyze performance data to identify the "big picture" of HMRF program experiences and effects.

Parents and Children Together (PaCT)

The Parents and Children Together Evaluation (PACT) evaluation, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, has four primary study components: 1) a random assignment impact study of a subset of two Healthy Marriage (HM) and four Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grantees; 2) a process study two HM and four RF grantees; 3) a qualitative study of interviews with a subset of RF program participants; and 4) a study of a subset of four Hispanic RF grantees. Recognizing that both HM and RF programs are continuing to grow and develop, the PACT evaluation is intended to provide foundational information that can be used to guide ongoing and future program design and evaluation efforts, and to serve as an initial building block in the evidence base for programming in this area.

Responding to Intimate Violence in Relationship Programs (RIVIR)
The RIVIR project, conducted by RTI International, seeks to understand how to best identify and address intimate partner violence (IPV) and teen dating violence (TDV) in the context of healthy relationship programming. Early reports from the project highlight the prevalence and experiences of adult populations that attend healthy relationship programs, as well as the approaches that existing programs take to address IPV and TDV. Recently released reports summarize the evidence for understanding how healthy relationship programs may influence IPV/TDV and the evidence on recognizing and addressing IPV/TDV in healthy relationship programs.

**Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS)**

The STREAMS project, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, is a multi-site random assignment evaluation of healthy marriage programs for youth and adults that will feature detailed process and impact studies of programs at six sites. Each study will focus on distinct policy-relevant research questions that will help strengthen the grant initiative and address important gaps in the research. Four study sites in the evaluation are focused on adult-serving programs, while two sites are focused on youth-serving programs.

**Youth Education and Relationship Services (YEARS)**

The YEARS project, conducted by Child Trends, seeks to better understand the services that federally-funded Healthy Marriage programs are providing to youth. The project will describe the organizations implementing Healthy Marriage programs, the services they provide, and the youth these programs serve; assess the alignment of Healthy Marriage programs with best practices in the field; and identify promising approaches that grantees are using to better serve youth in Healthy Marriage programs. A recent brief provides a snapshot of how programs serve youth and the characteristics of youth in Healthy Marriage programs.

To find out more about the HMRF portfolio, please contact the OPRE team lead, Samantha Illangasekare at Samantha.Illangasekare@acf.hhs.gov.