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**ACF's Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability  
Research Consortium (FSSRC):  
Resources and Supports for Conducting and Using Research**

**September 10, 2013**

**ACF Region IX TANF Technical Assistance Meeting**

**Alicia Meckstroth, Mathematica Policy Research**



**MATHEMATICA**  
Policy Research, Inc.

# Context and Motivation

- **Since welfare reform: Large decline in welfare research:**
  - **State and local welfare and family self-sufficiency research capacity**
  - **State-generated research and state-specific program evaluation**
  - **Academic interest in TANF program operations, including use of administrative and program evaluation data**
- **At same time, advances in welfare research:**
  - **Acceptance and adoption of randomized control trials (RCT)'s as the “gold standard” for answering causal questions**
  - **Advances in alternative methodologies examining causal relations**
  - **Increases in data and computing power, making research easier/faster**
  - **Improvements in academic training of new graduates entering the field**

# The Response: The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC)

- Consortium – “An association of two or more individuals or entities with the objective of participating in a common activity or pooling their resources for achieving a common goal.”
- A unified, multi-component approach
  - No one entity or funding mechanism could meet all research and program needs and address all issues
  - Diversity is a strength
  - Consortium > sum of the parts; there is a “collective impact”
- Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC):
  - Advancing Welfare & Family Self-Sufficiency Research Project (Project AWESOME)
  - Family Self-Sufficiency & Stability Research Scholars Network (Scholars Network)
  - Data Center for Family Self-Sufficiency

# Project AWESOME

- **OPRE contract with Mathematica Policy Research**
  - **Key Personnel:**
    - Mathematica: Michelle Derr, Alicia Meckstroth, Matt Stagner
    - OPRE: Brendan Kelly, Matt Borus
  
- **“AWESOME” – Advancing Welfare, Employment, Self-Sufficiency, Stability, Opportunity, and Mobility Evidence**
  
- **Key Activities**
  - **Develop strategic plan for the FSSRC**
    - Document the state of the field
  - **Support collaboration and coordination of Consortium activities**
  - **Maintain communication with key constituencies**
  - **Be “on call” to respond rapidly to emerging policy/research needs**
  - **Produce and disseminate products that enhance the knowledge base**

# Family Self-Sufficiency Research Scholars Network

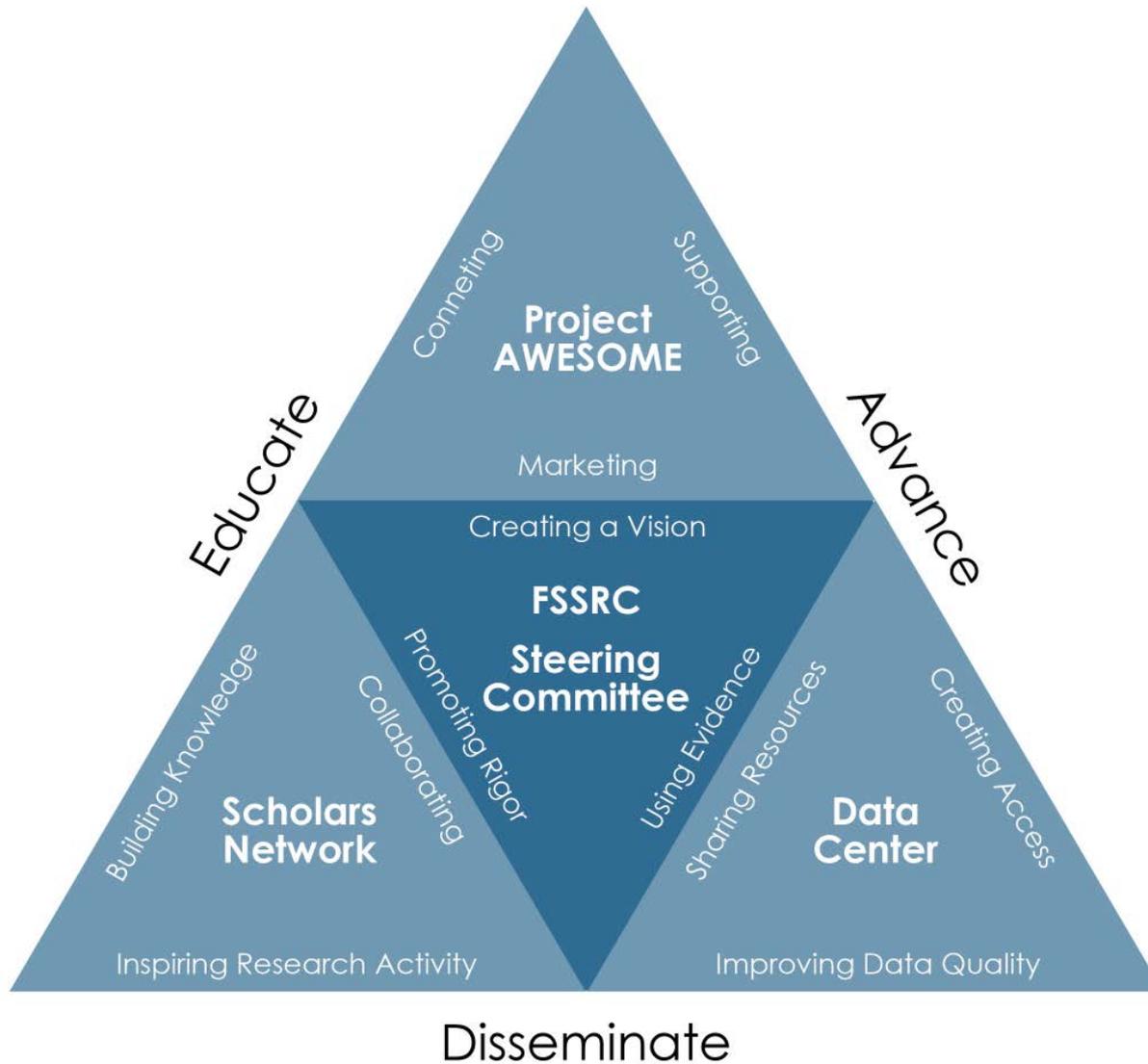
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- **7 grants to Principal Investigators to join a network of scholars**
- **A collaborative enterprise of scholars who undertake research in family self-sufficiency and stability that is both scientifically rigorous and very relevant to programs and research in the field**
- **Cooperative agreements with scholars:**
  - **Work independently and collectively to examine research gaps:**
    - Systems of support for children and families
    - Family stability and instability issues
  - **Execute research and program evaluation activities in collaboration with human services agencies and CBOs**
  - **Participate in a multi-disciplinary learning community by collaborating with other members of the Scholars Network, Data Center, and affiliated scholars**

# Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center

- **Cooperative agreement to develop, implement, and support ongoing operations of a Data Center related to FSS programs and research.**
- **A hub to support the development of state and institutional capacity for data collection, linkage, and, where necessary, data storage**
- **Possible Center activities:**
  - **Conducting a national assessment of state/local needs**
  - **Negotiating, supporting and maintaining ongoing access agreements for administrative and program evaluation data**
  - **Facilitating expedited data access and streamlined data access processes**
  - **Supporting secondary analyses of data**
  - **Working with State and local human services to improve data quality**

# Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (FSSRC)



# Collectively, what will the Consortium do?

- **Maintain, elevate and promote an emphasis on rigor**
  - For example, through Project AWESOME the Consortium will support the activities of the NAWRS Research Academy at the NAWRS Conference
- **Supplement state and local research capacity to help answer unanswered questions**
- **Stimulate academic interest**
  - Develop a multi-disciplinary conceptual framework
  - Focus on unanswered, but emerging interests
  - Exploit variation across states and localities as an opportunity for research, rather than a constraint
- **Facilitate research partnerships and strive for proactive research**
- **Provide an institutional mechanism to respond rapidly when policy and research issues arise, such as natural experiments**

# Timeline

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- Consortium in formative stages
- Project AWESOME began October 2012
- Scholars Network and Data Center grants awarded Sept 2013
- FSSRC Steering Committee will begin planning October 2013
- Ongoing –
  - Engage stakeholders and seek out opportunities for program and research collaborations

**We want you to be engaged with us!**

# A Few Reflections...and For More Information

- **Consortium audience:**
  - State/local TANF and other social service agencies
  - Federal, state, and local policymakers
  - Research field
  
- **To be successful, Consortium must be:**
  - Accessible
  - Efficient
  - Responsive
  
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# Family Self-Sufficiency Research Consortium

## Key Questions:

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- 1. What aspects of your program are new, changing, or expanding?**
- 2. What are research questions you'd like answers to?**
- 3. In conducting or using research, what are the *headwinds* (challenges) or *tailwinds* (opportunities) that your agency faces?**
- 4. What is needed to build better relationships between researchers and program administrators?**
- 5. In what ways could the Family Self-Sufficiency Research Consortium and Project AWESOME help?**

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# Why engage? A local agency perspective...

Kinsey Dinan, NYC Human Resources Administration

**The Goal: Improved policies and programs through evidence-based decision-making at state and local social service agencies.**

**→ *Increasingly important in current fiscal environment.***

- 1. Internal research and evaluation capacity can enhance agency operations with critical and timely insights into policies, programs, and procedures.**
- 2. Fully developing and leveraging high-quality research capacity requires agency commitment, internal resources, and external supports.**
- 3. The Research Consortium can play a valuable role in making this happen!**

# 1. In-House Research Can Improve Operations

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*Advantages of internal research capacity include:*

- **Easy access to administrative data and to staff and clients (for interviews, surveys, focus groups)—without lengthy agreement and approval processes.**
- **Familiarity with agency programs and with the structure, contents, and “quirks” of agency administrative data.**
- **Ability to be responsive to administrators’ timelines and inform program reporting and operations in real time.**

# 1. Improve Operations (cont.)

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*Internal research staff are uniquely positioned to:*

- **Evaluate a wide range of agency actions, from small program and procedural “tweaks” to complex new interventions and pilots.**
  - **Conduct detailed and timely process evaluations to complement and explain impact findings and support improvements in implementation.**
  - **Inform the development of new policy proposals and pilot programs through research and analysis re: client experiences, perspectives, and outcomes.**
- *Cost-effective way to develop the evidence base agencies need to maximize their impact.*

# 1. Improve Operations (cont.)

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## *Examples from NYC Human Resources Administration:*

- **Random assignment evaluation of an alternative process for establishing child support orders for children on cash assistance.**
- **Quasi-experimental evaluation (propensity score matching) of public- vs. private-sector subsidized jobs programs for cash assistance clients.**
- **Client surveys, client-staff observations, and administrative data analysis to inform transition toward a self-directed service model in SNAP.**
- **Focus groups with clients to understand program outcomes and enhance communications efforts.**

## 2. Developing and Leveraging Research Capacity

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*Key conditions include:*

- **Collaboration with agency leadership.**
- **Trained research and evaluation staff.**
- **Culture of collaboration between administrators and researchers able to override time constraints, differences in training and perspectives, and competing priorities.**
- **Access to technical assistance and “lessons learned” regarding research methods, strategies, and techniques that can be applied at the agency level.**

*Also very helpful:* High quality administrative data and archiving!

### 3. The Research Consortium Can Help

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*The FSSRC offers an array of mechanisms to:*

- **Facilitate communication and information-sharing between state and local researchers and practitioners**
- **Provide technical assistance and other resources and supports for designing, conducting, and using rigorous research.**
- **Share information about research methods and findings.**

*→ E.g., Through support of the NAWRS Research Academy...*

# NAWRS Research Academy

- Focused on enhancing agency capacity to use rigorous research methods—including random assignment—to improve and document program effectiveness.
- Connects federal, state, and local researchers and administrators together with other research and evaluation experts.
- Activities include panels, workshops, and plenary speakers at the annual NAWRS conference, as well as webinars and other virtual events throughout the year.
- A Google Group serves as a forum for discussion and information-sharing—encourage your staff to join!  
→ Go to <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/nawrs-research-academy/join>