



SACRAMENTO HEALTHY MARRIAGE PROJECT SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

A Case Study





1. Key Program Distinctions

SHMP is a community-based organization serving low-income, unmarried couples and families in the greater Sacramento region. The program was selected as a leading grassroots organization in the TANF-FBCO Initiative for several reasons. First, while Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project (SHMP) is community-based, since its inception in 2004, it has successfully collaborated with a large number of faith-based organizations in northern California—from clerical leaders serving on its board, to offering parenting classes in local congregations, to drawing on local volunteers. Second, while the program consists primarily of a skill-building classroom experience for new parents and low-income couples, it has also developed a highly innovative employment initiative, in which CalWORKS recipients serve as paid, part-time recruiters who assist with SHMP’s program. (CalWORKS is the State of California’s TANF program, which incentivizes employment by funding 75 percent of recipient wages.) Moreover, CalWORKS employees at SHMP have a unique connection to the population served by the marriage program, and their local connections to communities function as a strategic asset to the initiative’s collaborative work with local WIC Centers, congregations, and other settings frequented by the program’s target population low-income, unmarried couples with newborn children. Finally, SHMP was selected because it has cultivated numerous partnerships with Federal and other public or private organizations, which, in addition to WIC and the local Department of Human Assistance (DHA) office, include Head Start, the County Board of Supervisors, two public universities, the Urban League, 100 Black Men, and a wide variety of local congregations and businesses. In short, SHMP supports Sacramento’s TANF program and other federal programs serving low-income residents by supporting at-risk couples through relationships classes, and by supporting CalWORKS students in local colleges. A list of site visit participants consulted in developing this report is included as an appendix.

Exhibit 1: Demographic Information for Sacramento County^a	
Population	
2007	1,373,773
Ethnicity (2007)	
White	61.4%
African-American	10.1%
Asian or Pacific Islander	14.2%
Hispanic or Latino origin ^b	19.2%
Age Composition (2007)	
0–19	398,136
20–24	95,802
25–44	412,165
45–64	316,790
65 +	150,880
Median Age	34.1
Gender Composition (2007)	
Male	674,167
Female	699,606
Median Income (2007)	
per household	\$55,822
Unemployment Rate	
2007	4.7%
California TANF Indicators (FY 2008)	
Recipients (average)	1,196,411
Families (average)	486,066
Children (average)	951,199
<small>^aSource: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2007 American Community Survey, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, TANF Caseload Data. ^bHispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.</small>	



2. Local Demographics

Sacramento County's largest economic industries are government, agriculture, and transportation. Other major industries include information technology services, leisure and hospitality, education and health services, and construction. In 2007, the median income in Sacramento County was \$55,822.

In 2008, in the State of California an average of 1,196,411 recipients—including 486,066 families and 951,199 children—were receiving TANF benefits. More information regarding Sacramento County's demographics are presented in Exhibit 1.

3. SHMP's Historical Background and Development.

For more than 15 years, the SHMP executive director had served as a licensed marriage and family therapist in northern California. When she attended a SmartMarriage program in 2003, she was inspired by one of the speakers, the Assistant Secretary of the Administration for Children and Families. The Assistant Secretary asked attendees to think about serving larger groups of couples in the community. He also noted the likelihood of future Federal resources in this area, and the executive director decided to form an initial, multi-faith board of directors to oversee a possible initiative.

The SMHP executive director began by visiting her Episcopal rector, who challenged her to “form a big tent” by looking for buy-in from a large number of churches and other religious congregations. He told her to “follow the bread crumbs,” building wherever there was interest—and the executive director did so. At times, she waited hours to meet with pastors of large churches, in one instance actually “pleading with a [cleric's] bodyguard” to get a meeting.

In most instances, she asked two questions: does your congregation have a relationship education program, and if so, would you be open to SHMP publishing the information on your congregation's website? And, second, if you do not have a

class, would you like to host one in your church, synagogue, or mosque?

After getting help from Episcopal Community Services in setting up a 501(c)3 organization, SHMP received an early Compassion Capital Fund grant of \$50,000. This helped them continue to sell the idea among potential benefactors, and soon they received donated office space from two members of Sacramento Rotary Clubs. That year, *The Sacramento Bee* published a story focusing on a SHMP program called “Ten Great Dates,” which it taught in an innovative congregation—and within months, 45 churches asked for resource support to replicate the program.

The following year, in 2005, and after a series of meetings and initial marriage classes in local congregations, the SMHP applied for and received a 5-year, \$500,000 annual grant from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA)—allowing for considerable staff growth and a stronger presence in the Sacramento community.

Today, SMHP has four full-time employees, two full-time contractors, four part-time employees, and one part-time contractor. Although its OFA grant is designed to serve low-income, unwed couples with children up to 3 months of age, SMHP's larger overall mission is to provide relationship skills training and relationship education programs to individuals of all ages, in order to stabilize family relations and enhance the well-being of children.

In the first 6 months of its OFA grant, the program served a total of only 18 people. The executive director was devastated—but an early OFA peer-to-peer roundtable event was tremendously helpful. “Going to Oklahoma City to meet with peers and Federal staff was the best thing that could have happened to us,” a staff member says. The meeting allowed the executive director to be honest about the program's struggles and to get altogether new ideas from other program leaders running similar initiatives.



Part of the solution was an unusual staff composition. Today, four part-time employees are TANF recipients placed at SHMP by CalWORKS as part of their work requirements. SHMP is also supported through the efforts of approximately 40 volunteers who, thus far, have donated more than 1,400 hours to the program. In addition to this support, another group of volunteer instructors collectively provides more than 500 hours of instruction—including programming in local prisons, classes in local congregations, and support for SHMP’s work with WIC centers, Head Start centers, and other initiatives. A small Head Start grant added formality to that partnership in 2007. Today, SHMP is overseen by a group of interfaith ministers and licensed marriage and family therapists, who together serve as advocates on the program’s board of directors.

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Following its receipt of capacity-building technical assistance support and resources, SHMP’s primary funder is the Administration for Children and Families, which supports SHMP through its Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant Program. SHMP also received support from a number of smaller funding sources, including the California Healthy Marriages Coalition, and several private donors and local foundations.

4. Programmatic Information

SHMP offers the majority of its programs through a network of courses and curricula. The Flourishing Families program is SHMP’s largest program, supported by the Healthy Marriage

Demonstration Grant Program. Flourishing Families is a 15-hour workshop targeting low-income, unwed couples who are romantically involved and expecting a child or parenting a child 3 months of age or younger. This course contains 22 components focusing on issues such as conflict resolution, the importance of fathers and co-parenting, improving the communication between families, and financial management. Flourishing Families instructors select from the 22 components to design workshops that target the needs of the individuals participating in each cohort.

In addition to these programs, SHMP routinely conducts a series of town hall meetings aimed at building strategic efforts and developing action plans to better support the formation of healthy families in the African-American community.

SHMP also offers a wide array of other programs that, since the program’s inception, have collectively drawn on a total of 16 different curricula. These curricula are designed to help individuals develop the skills for healthy relationships by assisting them in improving communication, reducing their levels of stress, and setting goals. Some of the courses offered include Bringing Baby Home, a workshop for pregnant couples and parents of infants and toddlers; Love U2, aimed at teaching middle and high school youth about pregnancy prevention, communication skills, and healthy relationships; How To Avoid Marrying a Jerk (or Jerkette), a program for singles; and The Third Option, targeting reconciliation for struggling couples.

In addition to these programs, SHMP routinely conducts a series of town hall meetings aimed at building strategic efforts and developing action plans to better support the formation of healthy families in the African-American community. Since



2006, SHMP has held numerous events affiliated with local congregations on Black Marriage Day, and it recently launched a radio show to teach healthy relationship skills in the Hispanic community.

Supportive services to aid individuals in program participation are also provided. These services include childcare, transportation stipends, a meal, and a monetary bonus offered upon course completion, as noted above.

Couples in need of additional services that fall beyond the scope of SHMP are referred to local Family Resource Centers, which are independent community-based organizations created by the California State legislature, using a surcharge from tobacco and alcohol purchases in the State—a so-called “sin tax” designed to help low-income communities. In addition, couples who cannot be assisted by SHMP due to substance abuse issues, domestic violence, or for any other reason are referred out for pro-bono counseling services. Finally, SHMP provides a comprehensive list of community resources and referrals to participants if they continue to encounter problems after completing the program.

5. Partnerships and Community Engagement

Because the OFA grant’s principal target audience is so unique (low-income, unwed couples with a child 3 months old or younger), SHMP serves a focused group of participants. Each year, the initiative offers services to approximately 500 individuals—of whom nearly 200 couples are unwed. Beyond this group, the program offers classes to middle and high school students, pre-married couples, married couples, new families, and “empty nesters.”

In addition to receiving referrals from TANF caseworkers at the local DHA, SHMP has served TANF officials by providing a broader training session for more than 300 DHA staff members. The training consisted of an extended educational workshop, focusing primarily on the Healthy Marriage Project

and the importance of stable and healthy relationships. Referrals to SHMP’s classes have followed, and the training offered a direct window into the value of FBCOs for many case managers and TANF support personnel.

Beyond the local TANF office, however, referrals for SHMP come from a wide variety of sources, including area clinics, private ob-gyn specialists, clinics serving low-income individuals, community colleges, and individuals who have completed the program. In addition to WIC and TANF agencies, SHMP gets referrals from California’s eight Family Resource Centers throughout the greater Sacramento area, from the County Department of Human Assistance, and from the County Department of Mental Health.

Churches also play an important role, by recruiting participants and in providing local settings where classes are offered. One congregation learned about the program from one of its parishioners, a CalWORKS recipient who was working at SHMP. The parishioner introduced the program to her congregation, which was already serving the community in a variety of ways, including a food closet, a basketball ministry, and a rigorous after-school program. Having received public grants in the past, the church’s leaders were familiar with church-state distinctions and prohibitions against proselytizing, but they liked the pro-marriage emphasis of SHMP, and deeply believed that they exist to serve the community-at-large, not just their own members. Thus, for nearly 2 years, SHMP has been training local couples on Saturday mornings.

SHMP’s partnership with the local faith-based community also includes work with the National Hispanic Evangelical Christian Association, the Association of Ministers for Empowering Neighbors (AMEN), the Interfaith Service Bureau, and Area Congregations Together (ACT). Like churches, other faith-based congregations often host SHMP programs and workshops for their communities and congregations. For example, AMEN recently co-hosted conferences and led Town



Hall meetings with SHMP. AMEN has also helped SHMP bring together community partners from the business community, government, and faith-based community to discuss the unwed birthrate in the African-American community.

In addition, formal connections with a pair of universities play an important role. Early in its partnerships with City College, a local community college, SHMP offered a workshop for a group of 70 women consisting mostly of African-American and Hispanic students. It was a successful event, and the division director of the school—who oversees the Equal Opportunity Program Services office—has since allowed students to volunteer or work with SHMP. Another school, Consumnes College, has also hosted workshops and allowed its primarily Hispanic student population to volunteer with the program.

WIC offers another strong recruiting ground for the program, and SHMP's emerging partnership is a solid example of FBCO collaboration with public agencies. As a local WIC office staff member made clear, "It's a natural partnership. Parenting skills are severely needed by those we serve—and they aren't funded by WIC, which is primarily a nutritional support program." SHMP offers its participants new skills and learning opportunities that include understanding how to set healthy boundaries and how to balance caring for yourself as a mother and loving your children—all goals that are deeply interconnected to WIC's larger purposes.

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Typically, SHMP sends staff members to WIC's initial classroom session to give a 5-minute "pitch" to WIC recipients at the end of the class, inviting them to attend a Flourishing Families session. A short introduction to SHMP content is followed by a description of the incentives for participating, which include childcare, transportation support, meals, and a gift card for those who complete the class.

In addition, the program draws participants from annual special events, such as Black Marriage Day and Hispanic Marriage Day. Because of the program's goals, OFA's grant requirements, and the overall effort to support at-risk couples, most activities are populated by TANF-eligible recipients, and the staff estimates that 80–90 percent of the individuals served through SHMP receive or are eligible for TANF support.

6. Lessons Learned

- **Technical assistance, including peer-to-peer input, can be highly valuable for new programs.** SHMP's director spoke explicitly about several "breakthrough moments" during a 2008 grantee roundtable in Oklahoma City, designed and facilitated by the Office of Family Assistance's Technical Assistance (TA) team. "At that time, we were still just getting started, and I decided to be completely honest about our difficulties—to tell other program leaders just how hard it was to recruit these particular couples at such a particular six-month window in their relationship." Doing so thickened the dialogue, opening up a new level of honesty amongst the group, and it allowed TA experts to offer some critical input and support. Soon thereafter, SHMP redesigned its recruiting process, enlisting far more of its staff in the process—and found more partners at the local level. Similarly, a peer-to-peer site exchange in 2009 at the Sacramento HMP fostered additional input from other programs, and drew out new retention insights and ways to utilize data to support programming.



- **Other organizations that focus on domestic violence are often strong partners for Healthy Families programs.** No single program can “be all things to all people,” as the adage goes. Instead, programs that become excellent in one area do well to partner intentionally with local initiatives that reinforce one another. SHMP has partnered with several Family Resource Centers in the area, funded primarily by the state’s “sin tax” (on cigarettes and alcohol purchase), to offer support for individuals who have suffered domestic violence or other forms of abuse. Additionally, the program consistently refers participants who don’t qualify for its targeted workshop to outside partners—including federally funded programs like WIC and Head Start, as well as other privately funded, community-based initiatives.
- **Employing TANF recipients as staff members, even part-time, can provide highly strategic advantages for the program.** This hiring strategy has been an invaluable part of SHMP’s success—for multiple reasons. First, the program’s 2-4 TANF-funded staff members are paid by a wage that is 75 percent funded by State TANF funds (in this case, CalWORKS). Second, these incentivized staff members were themselves TANF recipients, often for years. They lived alongside low-income families, and “know the community,” which means they can offer new insights about where individuals eligible for SHMP’s program live, shop, eat, and congregate. As SHMP’s deputy director described, “These women and men have been wonderful conduits of information for us: they’ve helped immensely with designing flyers to pass out, and they’ve been more successful than any non-CalWORKS staff in their door-to-door recruiting. They also understand what’s out there in terms of other services, and they understand firsthand the pressures of our target population.”
- **Data tracking and evaluation are important for both strategic programming successes and for supporting longer term operations.** SHMP carefully tracks its volunteer involvement, its referral sources, and participant evaluations

of various curricula and workshop leaders. One key strategy has been to post on an internal office white board the accomplishments of individual staff members who recruit from various locations in the surrounding area. Additionally, the program retooled its participant evaluation form, to help show which staff members bring particular contributions to different parts of the curriculum. Finally, SHMP is using the data it collects from participants and local partners as part of a larger evaluation, which it plans to share with prospective new partners and potential funders.

- **Strategic partnerships with “invested” faith-based organizations offer multiple benefits.** SHMP has developed faith-based partnerships with a large Episcopal diocese, with Catholic and Protestant churches, and with a Jewish rabbi who initially helped support the Board’s composition. But relationships with local churches which offer to host healthy marriage classes in their facilities have been instrumental. One notable example is the partnership with New Hope Church, which considers “service to local families throughout the community” a paramount priority of its own—and which has a large building just one block from a bus stop, in a low-income, Hispanic community. If location and infrastructure matter, as SHMP has found, shared buy-in by faith-based organizations is also a critical part of success.
- **Times of economic downturn sometimes bring opportunities for increased FBCO involvement with the public sector.** In the wake of recent income tax losses and a significant state budget crisis, members of the local Board of Supervisors have become especially open to FBCO collaboration with State agencies. “We really need their help in enabling people to move beyond Food Stamps, beyond unemployment insurance, and beyond 3-5 years of receiving TANF benefits,” one member of the County Board of Supervisors stated during an interview. Partnering with community-based programs not funded entirely by state grants is a critical strategy for public agencies.



7. Conclusion

In just 5 years, the SHMP has grown considerably, drawing on faith-based organizations, schools, and other public agencies in important ways. One of its most innovative partnerships is its collaboration with CalWORKS, which currently helps fund 75 percent of the compensation of four part-time staff members. These individuals are continually in contact with the population served by the organization's Flourishing Families program: they understand client concerns about transportation and child care, based on firsthand experience; they are able to inform other staff members about domestic challenges, public housing realities, and crime-ridden communities; and they bring living "connections" to WIC programs, Head Start and Early Head Start offices, and other Federal or locally sponsored initiatives serving low-income couples and families. In the words of one SHMP participant, "I realize now that many of the problems I had before—drinking, joblessness, and occasional illegal behavior—were actually rooted in relational disappointment, and hurt from various relationships in the past. Though I haven't gotten back together with my kids' mother, I've learned some principles that are helping me get back on track."

Moreover, the SHMP team is in close contact with the local Department of Human Assistance office, and collaborates strategically to help enrolled TANF recipients with their job searches and occasional case management needs. Working together allows both offices to more comprehensively reach their goals, in that teaming with local TANF providers offers SHMP a practical, economically viable way to strengthen connections with its target population, and contribute to greater self-sufficiency in the lives of low-income couples.

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List of Site Visit Participants – Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project

Carolyn Curtis, Executive Director, Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project

Bruce Wagstaff, Director, Department of Human Assistance

Patricia To, Program Manager, Women Infants and Children Program (WIC), Oak Park Facility

Norm Rogers, Program Director, Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project

Sharon Melvin, Program Manager, Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project

Alice Pederson, Program Analyst, Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project

Focus Group – Former CalWORKS (TANF) Recipients and current Program Specialists, Sacramento HMP

Katie Campbell, Director, River Oak Family Resource Center

Don Nottoli, Member, Sacramento Board of Supervisors

Keene Hortencia, CalWORKS Employment Specialist, Consumnes River College

Focus Group – Participants, Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS), Sacramento City College

Daniel Wong, Pastor, New Hope Community Church

Enoch Yeung, Deacon and Community Programs Director, New Hope Community Church

TANF FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS INITIATIVE

