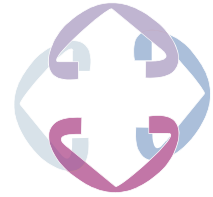




WELFARE PEER TA NETWORK
Strengthening Families First: Technical Assistance
Meeting
Allentown, Pennsylvania
October 20-23, 2003



Final Report

The Alabama Department of Human Resources is exploring ways to promote Healthy Marriage Initiatives in the State of Alabama. Endeavoring to fulfill this mission, Alabama sought and received assistance from the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance (TA) Network to send a representative from the Family Assistance Partnership in Alabama. With the support of Ramona Warren, Team Leader for the Region IV Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Program and the financial support of the Welfare Peer TA Network, Alabama was able to send Program Specialist, Sharon A. Finklea, to Allentown, Pennsylvania to meet with several marriage stakeholders in the Pennsylvania area. They were:

- Nancy Bucci, Office of Family Life, Allentown, PA;
- Dr. William Urbine, Chairman of the Berks County Healthy Marriage & Family Coalition;
and
- Millie Monina, Assistant Director of PREP Workshops, Redding, PA

Ms. Finklea also attended the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) training for local staff as well as the Strengthening Families First Meeting. This meeting was hosted by Strengthening Families First in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Region III. Ms. Finklea's primary goal was to gather ideas and resources for promoting Healthy Marriages for families in Alabama.

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) Training

Prior to the Strengthening Families First Meeting, Ms. Finklea attended the PREP Instructor Training Session led by Gary Barnes. Gary Barnes is currently the Director of Counseling & Testing Services and Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is an ordained minister and a licensed psychologist, specializing in marriage and family research, counseling, and training. After graduating from Dallas Seminary, he served as an assistant pastor for seven years and then earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia University. While in New York, he was a Research Project Coordinator at NYU Medical Center's Family Studies Clinic and later completed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship in clinical child psychology through Parkland Hospital (Dallas) and the Child Guidance Clinics. He is a member of the American Psychological Association, the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, and the Davetian Association of Psychological Studies. He currently serves as an elder at Trinity Fellowship Church and maintains a private practice. He and his wife Cathy have 4 children, ages 18 to 23.

Training Session Highlights

Day 1 encompassed an overview and research history of marriage in America and the guidelines for how PREP was designed. The PREP program was described as a tool to lay the foundation

for successful marriages. The program is a series of 14 lectures designed to be presented over a 12 to 14 hour period of time. The lectures were entitled:

1. PREP Background and Danger Signs;
2. Safety and Structure: The Speaker/Listener Technique;
3. Filters;
4. Negative communication;
5. Problem Solving;
6. Expectations;
7. Fun Homework;
8. Ground Rules;
9. Issues and Events;
10. Core Belief Systems;
11. Friendship;
12. Preserving Sensuality for the Long Term;
13. Forgiveness; and
14. Commitment.

PREP is also a divorce-prevention/marriage enhancing program designed to help partners communicate with the use of basic behavioral concepts put in the form of a concrete tool. The learning objectives of the PREP Instructor Training are to:

- identify key risk factors for the marital failure based on long-term studies of marital outcomes;
- compare empirically based strategies for helping couples lower risks of marital failure associated with negative patterns of interaction and /or unrealistic expectations;
- contrast gender differences in handling conflict;
- list several interaction danger signs;
- demonstrate to couples how to work through forgiveness; and
- list several active listening strategies.

The training ended with an interactive discussion between training facilitators and attendees.

(Detailed PREP information and additional resources are found at the PREP website: <http://www.prepinc.com>)

Strengthening Families First Meeting

Following the PREP training, Ms. Finklea also attended the Strengthening Families First Meeting entitled “Strategies and Resources to Strengthen Marriages and Families in Your Community.” The meeting focused on coalition building in communities and featured speakers were Dr. Scott Stanley, co-founder of PREP, Inc., Julie Baumgardner, Executive Director of First Things First, Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Dave Lett, Regional Administrator for Children and Families in Region III.

Meeting Highlights

The meeting opened on Wednesday evening with a presentation by Julie Baumgardner entitled “Mission Possible: Changing Attitudes and Behaviors toward Marriage and Fatherhood. Ms. Baumgardner described a variety of methods to utilize community collaboration strategies to

decrease divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and increase father involvement. The strategies highlighted included:

- building on common ground;
- focusing on advocacy
- mobilization and technical assistance,
- working collaboratively with community organizations; and
- mobilizing a community wide involvement.

Following the session, Ms. Finklea spoke with the presenter and expressed an interest in the promotion of Healthy Marriages statewide. Ms. Baumgardner spoke of the challenge of working with a diverse population. She stated that First Things First and other stakeholders are currently in the process of expanding to varying segments of the population throughout the State of Tennessee.

Day 2 began with Dr. Scott Stanley's presentation entitled "Helping More Couples Achieve Their Dream of Lasting Love in Marriage." Based on empirical evidence, Dr. Stanley provided information evidencing the difficulties couples have in making their marriage last. Dr. Stanley also highlighted the existing possibilities to help more couples from all backgrounds achieve their goals within marriage. Preceding his presentation, the following morning breakout sessions were held:

- Current Trends in Marriage Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors – Dr. Scott Stanley;
- Family and Work: Do They Have to Compete? – Pat Giles;
- Husbandhood and Fatherhood-A Great Marriage – Eric Vecer and Fedor Hernandez;
- Marriage and Family Education and Skills Training (MFEST) for congregations –Rev. Dr. Edward Santana Grace;
- Marriage & Family in the Hispanic Community – Dr. Ivan Torres; and
- Building Healthy, Safe Communities through Strengthening Marriages and Families – Julie Baumgardner.

Following the completion of the first series of breakout sessions, Ms. Finklea spoke with Dr. Stanley to determine what information was available for promoting healthy marriages for low-income families. According to Dr. Stanley, marriage information targeting low-income families is largely unavailable. Next, Dave Lett led a discussion session entitled the President's Healthy Marriage Initiatives. His presentation defined the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative, the challenges of the initiative, the partnership of the government with States and communities, and what is already happening in various communities around the country.

The second series of breakout sessions were offered in the afternoon. They included:

- Marriage and Family Ed 101: Which Marriage and Family Education Programs Can Make a Difference and Why – Dave Lett;
- Building a Community Healthy Marriage Initiative – Midge Barrett;
- Grant Writing – The Lewin Group;
- African American Healthy Marriage Initiatives – Nisa Muhammed;

- Politics and the Family – Dr. Sam Martineau; and
- Questions and Answers with the Administration for Children and Families – Dave Lett.

Once the general session reconvened, Nancy Bucci of the Berks County Healthy Marriage & Family Coalition discussed the formation of their coalition. She stated the coalition initially began with a small group of interested people from various faith-based organizations. These stakeholders began by presenting and discussing data such as 68 percent of births in Redding, PA were out of wedlock, thus demonstrating a need for community action. The group continued to meet for a year. The leaders decided to go after a grant in response to a Request for Proposal issued from Berks County. Although the grant was denied, outside interest groups became involved and the coalition decided to write another grant. The coalition received a four-year grant with the commitment to train 31 instructors, and providing services to 364 people through a bilingual program. The coalition now saw a need to broaden themselves. As a result, the coalition gave invitations to one hundred interested parties to attend an informational breakfast. At the end of the breakfast the coalition gave each participant an informational sheet and requested the participant to respond if they were interested in becoming a part of the coalition and the date and time of the next meeting. During the meeting a steering committee was also formed. Coalition members talked about their individual philosophies, which resulted in the group coming up with individual goals, which slowly moved to shared goals. Consequently, the coalition has grown and was renamed the LeHigh Valley Coalition. In addition, the coalition has recently received an additional grant to promote marriage initiatives among refugees.

Future coalition efforts and activities include exploring the use of VISTA volunteers, a logo contest as advertisement for the coalition, and developing stronger outcome data. Funding sources utilized by the coalition are TANF funds, Safe and Stable Families funds, and Refugee Resettlement dollars.

The meeting ended with a panel discussion entitled Practical Application of a Marriage & Families Coalition. Panel members included a local judge; a mental health representative, a social services representative and a faith based representative. This question and answer session was highly interactive and addressed the effectiveness of having a coalition and the impact it can have on a community.

Informal Interviews

As technical assistance (TA) requestor, Ms. Finklea also informally interviewed several key individuals and marriage stakeholders. She met with Millie Molina, Assistant Director of PREP Workshops, in Redding, Pennsylvania to discuss the formation and implementation of programs promoting marriage initiatives in the Berks County area. Mrs. Molina stated that the programs were primarily derived from grants, which fund the programs. Examples of such grants implemented in the Berks County area are the Crime and Delinquency grant and the Weed and Seed grant. Ms. Molina further asserted that the use of these grants as well as others, require monthly progress reporting. Ms. Molina also provided Ms. Finklea with copies of both grants and program progress reports with the hope other organizations will benefit from the examples and utilize them to provide grant funding to promote marriage initiatives in creative ways.

She also met with the other individuals to discuss new and innovative ways of implementing Marriage Initiatives in programs. They were:

- Barbara L. Andrews, Lead Program Liaison Specialist for Department of Health and Human Services located in New York, NY;
- Diane Meadows, Extension Agent County Program Coordinator of the West Virginia University; and
- Jimmy Carr, Urban Services Director of the YMCA Greater Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina.

All parties agreed to maintain ongoing communication with one another each as they further develops ways to implement Marriage Initiatives in their respective areas of concentration.

LESSONS LEARNED

Strengthening marriages among low-income families is a promising component of a larger strategy to increase work and employment skills, reduce welfare dependence and improve economic well-being among TANF recipients¹. The Children's Trust Fund of Alabama has adopted this belief and has started to utilize tools to enhance marriages in one Alabama community. The Alabama Department of Human Resources supports this and other similar endeavors and is currently looking toward utilizing available tools to strengthen marriages across the State.

According to the TA requestor, the PREP training, meeting, and informal interviews generated several ideas and strategies to be examined by Alabama. In each of the discussions it was clear that the success of marriage promotion was largely due to focused groups of individuals who were committed to promoting marriage as a foundation for a healthy society. One idea born out of Ms. Finklea's TA experience is to provide such information to county organizations across Alabama as an effort to build healthy marriage coalitions within targeted areas of the State.

¹ Wood, Rangarajan and Deke, 2003. Marriage Patterns of TANF Recipients: Evidence from New Jersey. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. October 2003 #5