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**2004 Demonstration Projects in
Post-Adoption Services and Marriage
Education**

Synthesis of Evaluation Findings

October 2011

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This report is based on evaluation reports and other documents submitted by state and local organizations that received Federal demonstration grants in 2004 to design and implement programs to provide post-adoption services and marriage education training to adoptive couples. Any conclusions noted in this report reflect JBA's interpretations of the grantees' findings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the grantees or of the Children's Bureau, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In addition to reviewing and synthesizing information from grantees' evaluations of their child welfare demonstration projects, JBA provides ongoing technical assistance to discretionary grantees regarding the design and implementation of their evaluations and advises the Children's Bureau on a range of evaluation issues and topics. For further information regarding this contract, please contact the Contracting Officer's Technical Representative at the following address:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2004 the Children's Bureau (CB) funded a priority area focused on the development of initiatives to promote the stability of adoptive families through the provision of post-adoption and marriage education services (referred to as the Post-Adoption Services/Marriage Education [PAS/ME] grantee cluster). Seven local and regional non-profit agencies received these grant awards:

- Colorado Coalition of Adoptive Families, Louisville, Colorado
- Children Home Society of Florida, Winter Park, Florida
- Bethany Christian Services, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia
- Child and Family Services of New Hampshire, Manchester, New Hampshire
- DePelchin Children's Center, Houston, Texas
- Children's Home Society of Washington, Seattle, Washington
- Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, West Allis, Wisconsin

Activities. All grantees were required to include a marriage education component in their projects; however, grantees had discretion in choosing or adapting an existing marriage education curriculum or in developing their own curriculum. Three standardized curricula that were used or adapted by the PAS/ME grantees included:

- *Loving Couples, Loving Children* and related curricula developed by the Gottman Relationship Institute;
- *Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP)*; and
- *Relationship Enhancement (RE)*.

Instructional formats ranged from short weekly or bi-weekly workshops to day-long programs and weekend retreats. Although marriage education was the only required component of the PAS/ME projects, grantees were encouraged to provide additional support services for couples and their children. Ancillary services that were provided by all or a majority of grantees included service referrals, special trainings for parents and professionals on adoption and relationship topics, respite care, support groups, and therapy.

Evaluation designs and methods. PAS/ME grantees were required to conduct systematic evaluations of their funded projects. All seven grantees incorporated multiple research designs and methods into their evaluations and used similar methods to collect process data on their respective programs' implementation and sustainability efforts, the numbers of families enrolled in marriage education and other program activities, and participant satisfaction. However, the grantees differed significantly in their efforts to track and document outcome findings. All PAS/ME grantees implemented a variety of surveys and assessment instruments, including a large assortment of standardized instruments designed to measure changes in marital, familial, and psycho-social well-being.

Process evaluation results. Most grantees fell short of their original enrollment targets, although success in meeting enrollment goals appeared to be somewhat correlated with the instructional format of a grantee's program. However, no one instructional format was consistently successful

and well received by program participants, with several grantees switching formats at least once. Enrollment barriers identified by grantees included a lack of perceived need for marriage education among targeted couples, busy work and family schedules that precluded more active participation, and inconvenient class locations. Participants in all seven projects were generally satisfied with the quality of the marriage education they received.

Most grantees identified post-grant funding issues as a challenge to the sustainability of their programs. Some grantees utilized grant funds to develop educational materials that could be used indefinitely. Other grantees responded by adapting their programs to be less costly, while still other grantees sought additional funding sources to sustain program activities.

Outcome evaluation results. Most grantees reported outcome findings in the areas of knowledge/awareness of communication and relationship skills, marriage quality, family relationship quality, parents' social and emotional functioning, children's functioning, and family stability. Major outcome findings are summarized below:

- Changes in knowledge and awareness of communication and relationship issues tended to be quite positive among participants in all seven projects.
- Improvements in marriage quality were generally modest, in part because most couples reported having well-functioning marriages to begin with.
- Family relationships and attitudes, along with parents' socio-emotional well-being, showed modest improvements over time.
- Improvements in children's behavior and well-being were modest and often inconsistent, confirming findings from earlier studies that ongoing services may be needed after an adoption is finalized.
- Data on marital stability were reported by only two grantees (Wisconsin and Washington), with Wisconsin reporting just one divorce and two separations among enrolled couples.
- Overall, very few disrupted adoptions were reported among participating families across all seven projects.

Recommendations. The experiences of the PAS/ME grantees suggest that there are no "one size fits all" recipes for implementing successful marriage education programs or for meeting the diverse needs of adoptive families. Their efforts reveal overarching lessons that may contribute to the successful development of similar marriage enrichment and post-adoption service programs in the future. Key lessons for future programs include the following:

- Conduct an initial needs assessment.
- Maintain flexibility with programming and instructional formats.
- Educate target audiences about the benefits of marriage education.
- Provide "adult time" for couples.
- Provide critical support services.
- Plan ahead for sustainability.
- Implement the most rigorous evaluation design possible.

Introduction

Beginning with the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, Federal legislation has authorized discretionary funds for demonstration projects in an effort to identify service models and best practices that promote the country's child welfare goals, including increased permanency for children in foster care through adoption and other permanency options. Specific statutory authority to fund adoption demonstration projects was established by the Adoption Opportunities Program under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-266). Demonstration grants are awarded by the Children's Bureau (CB) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) through a competitive process open to state and local government entities; federally recognized Indian Tribes and tribal organizations; faith-based and community-based organizations with experience in the adoption field; colleges and universities; public or private non-profit licensed child welfare or adoption agencies; and state or regional adoption exchanges. In its 2004 Funding Opportunity Announcement regarding the availability of discretionary funds to support Adoption Opportunities Programs, the CB included a priority area focused specifically on the development of initiatives to promote the stability of adoptive families through the provision of post-adoption and marriage education services. Referred to in this report as the Post-Adoption Services/Marriage Education (PAS/ME) grantee cluster, one of the specific goals of this priority area was "to gather evidence about how communities can improve outcomes for adopted children and their families by strengthening marriage and promoting family life" (HHS, 2004).

Successful applicants were awarded funding for a period of 60 months, with an initial grant award of 12 months beginning on October 1, 2004. Continuation of funding beyond each 12-month budget period was subject to the availability of funds, satisfactory progress on the part of each grantee, and a determination that continued funding was in the best interests of the Federal government. The maximum Federal share of funding for each successful applicant was \$300,000 per budget period. The timeframe for these projects was October 1, 2004 through September 30, 2009, although some grantees were awarded no-cost extensions of up to one year (HHS, 2010). Federal funding for the PAS/ME grants was authorized for and ultimately awarded to a total of seven local and regional non-profit agencies:

- Colorado Coalition of Adoptive Families, Louisville, Colorado
- Children's Home Society of Florida, Winter Park, Florida
- Bethany Christian Services, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia
- Child and Family Services of New Hampshire, Manchester, New Hampshire
- DePelchin Children's Center, Houston, Texas
- Children's Home Society of Washington, Seattle, Washington
- Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, West Allis, Wisconsin.

For the sake of convenience, grantees are referred to throughout this report by the state in which they are located.

Project Rationale

Professionals in the child welfare field have long recognized that families who adopt children have pressing needs that do not end upon the finalization of the adoption (HHS, 2004; Kramer & Houston, 1998). Adoptions can be particularly stressful on marriages as couples struggle to meet the new and ongoing needs of their adopted children. Disagreements regarding how to meet these needs—exacerbated by a lack of time and energy for couples to work on their own relationships—can place excessive strain on marriages, sometimes to the point of separation or divorce. Children adopted from the child welfare system are at high risk for emotional or behavioral issues, and children raised in families with serious marital conflict have additional risks for emotional or behavioral disorders (American Psychological Association, 2004). Strained or separated couples often have difficulty meeting the needs of their adopted children, and the disruption or dissolution of an adoption may result. Conversely, stable and unified marriages can promote secure and permanent adoptive placements. Thus, PAS/ME projects aimed at strengthening the marriages of adoptive parents can contribute to the CB's overarching goal of improved permanency outcomes for children.

Purpose of this Synthesis

This synthesis summarizes evaluation findings detailed in the final reports submitted in 2010 by the seven PAS/ME grantees. Supplemental materials that were reviewed included the agencies' original grant proposals, semi-annual progress reports, and the grantees' project websites. In preparing this synthesis, these materials were reviewed and analyzed to identify content in several major thematic areas, including: (1) descriptions of the projects' target populations and service models; (2) process evaluation findings (e.g., enrollment, demographic characteristics of enrolled children and families, services and activities, implementation challenges); (3) outcome evaluation findings (e.g., permanency status, child and family well-being); and (4) policy implications and lessons learned through the implementation of the projects. Data from these thematic categories serve as the basis for the content and structure of this synthesis.

Overview of Funded Projects

Exhibit 1 on the following page summarizes key information regarding the seven PAS/ME grantees, including the grantees' names, project names, locations, geographic scope, and target population. The grantees were required to provide marriage education services to families that had adopted children from public child welfare agencies and were also encouraged to provide ancillary services to adoptive couples and/or their children to support family stability, including counseling, respite care, case management, and other forms of assistance. The geographic distribution of the funded projects was fairly even, with three in the South (Florida, Georgia, and Texas), one in New England (New Hampshire), one in the Upper Midwest (Wisconsin), one in the Rocky Mountain region (Colorado), and one on the West Coast (Washington).

Exhibit 1: Summary of 2004 Post-Adoption Services/Marriage Education Projects

| State | Grantee | Project Name | Geographic Scope | Eligible Families |
|----------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Colorado | Colorado Coalition of Adoptive Families | Adoptive Families Initiative | Two regions encompassing the north-central (mainly suburban metropolitan) and west-southwest (primarily mountainous rural) parts of the state | Single and married adoptive parents residing in targeted geographic regions |
| Florida | Children's Home Society of Florida | Post-Adoption Marital Services Program | Three north Florida counties of Leon, Gadsden and Wakulla | First year: Adoptive parents of special needs foster children and residents of Leon County Subsequent years: Adoptive parents in all three counties, as well as couples in the process of adoption |
| Georgia | Bethany Christian Services, Inc. | Relationship Enhancement for Adoptive Parents (REAP) | The 11-county metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia. In Year Three the target area expanded to include 46 predominately rural counties | Pre-adoptive families whose adoptions had been arranged but were not yet finalized; foster parents who were in the process of adopting their foster children; relative families who had adopted special needs children through the state's kinship placement system |
| New Hampshire | Child and Family Services of New Hampshire | Collaborative Post-Adoption Services New Hampshire | Initially Hillsborough, Merrimack, and Rockingham Counties; later expanded to encompass Central and Eastern New Hampshire | Couples who had adopted children within the previous two years, or anticipated adopting through the state child welfare agency. Later expanded to include fostering couples |
| Texas | DePelchin Children's Center | Family Adoption Connection and Enrichment Services (FACES) | Greater Houston region | Post-legal or post-placement adoptive parents and their minor adoptive and biological children |
| Washington | Children's Home Society of Washington | Strengthening Adoptive Families through Education (SAFE) | Initially Pierce County; in 2009 expanded to South King, Kitsap, and Thurston Counties | Families that adopted children through the state child welfare system |
| Wisconsin | Adoption Resources of Wisconsin | Great Families | Initially only Milwaukee County; eventually expanded statewide (although only 25 counties actively participated, mostly in SE Wisconsin) | Parents adopting children aged 5-11 from a county child welfare system who had lived with the adoptive family for at least 2 years; later expanded to include all adoptive and foster parents |

Target Populations

While all seven projects served adoptive families, they differed in terms of their geographic scope, the specific characteristics of targeted families, and in their methods to recruit families to participate in marriage education and other services. To increase enrollment several grantees eventually sought to expand the geographic scope of their projects and the types of families they recruited, or altered their recruitment methods.

Geographic Scope. Each grantee's project had a specific geographic scope, although several grantees gradually expanded their service boundaries. For example, Wisconsin eventually expanded the geographic scope of its project to include the entire State of Wisconsin, although in practice program implementation was limited to a smaller geographic area in the southeastern part of the state.

Family characteristics. The characteristics of eligible families varied considerably among the PAS/ME grantees. For example, some grantees focused their efforts on families that had adopted within certain timeframes (e.g., within the last two years) whereas other grantees applied no timeframes. One grantee (Wisconsin) limited its program to families that had adopted children within a certain age range (5-11). All grantees initially only included adoptive and/or pre-adoptive families, although some later expanded the scope of their projects to include fostering families.

Special needs. Several grantees specified that participating families had to have adopted children with "special needs." Although the states in which grantees operated have differing definitions of "special needs," all states include children with physical, mental, medical, and emotional disabilities in this category. In addition, some states categorize children of particular minority groups or ethnicities and older children (i.e., teenagers) as having special needs.¹

Recruitment Methods

Grantees employed a variety of methods to recruit adoptive or fostering families into their projects, ranging from word-of-mouth referrals to public recruitment events. For example, staff from Washington's project informed supervisory staff from local child welfare departments about the project, who passed the information along to their caseworkers who in turn shared it with adoptive families on their caseloads. Texas hosted a quarterly "Fun Day" that served as a primary vehicle for recruiting families, although many participants also enrolled in the project as a result of therapists' referrals or requests for respite care. New Hampshire employed a wide variety of recruitment activities that encompassed both person-to-person contacts and various types of media; examples included several outreach events for foster and adoptive families, family recognition dinners, a Family Photo Day, and articles about the project in state and non-profit child welfare newsletters. As a result of improved collaboration with the state child welfare agency, the New Hampshire project also had opportunities to make presentations about the project during child welfare staff meetings.

¹See <http://www.nrcadoption.org/resources/prac/SpecialNeedsAdoption.pdf> for more information on states' definitions of special-needs children.

Partnerships

Each grantee's project involved partnerships with one or more organizations. Over half of the grantees partnered with at least one state or local public child welfare or social service agency. After unsuccessful efforts to develop partnerships with local offices of the Florida Department of Children and Families, the grantee in Florida established partnerships with departments and centers affiliated with Florida State University in Tallahassee. Two grantees (Georgia and Washington) partnered with marriage/relationship training and education organizations in order to develop new curricula tailored to adoptive couples. Colorado listed partnerships with 11 different agencies, including a university department and several county departments of human services, although two of these agencies terminated the relationship during the grant period. Exhibit 2 on the following page summarizes the project partners listed in the grantees' original grant proposals.

Marriage Education Curricula

Although a wide variety of services and activities were encouraged, all seven grantees were required to include a marriage education component in their projects. Marriage education is defined as "programs [that] provide information and teach attitudes, skills, and behaviors designed to help individuals and couples achieve long-lasting, happy, and successful marriages and intimate partner relationships" (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2010, p. 5). Marriage education is not couples therapy nor is it intended for couples that are experiencing serious problems such as domestic violence. As these demonstration projects were intended to pilot new service and pedagogical models, grantees had discretion in choosing or adapting an existing marriage education curriculum or in developing their own curriculum. However, all curricula were required to cover the following core domains:

- Communication skills;
- Conflict resolution skills;
- Benefits of marriage (for adults, children, community, and society);
- The qualities/characteristics of healthy relationships and healthy marriages; and
- Values and beliefs about marriage.

In addition, each project's marriage education program was required to include a minimum of eight hours of instructional time for every participant. In general the grantees used one of three well-established evidence-based curricula as the foundation for their marriage education programs, although many used variants of a standardized curriculum or adapted it to meet the unique needs of adoptive couples. For example, the focus of two grantees (Georgia and Wisconsin) was on developing and piloting new curricula based on evidence-based marriage education programs but that were tailored to the specific needs of adoptive families. The three standardized curricula that were used or adapted by the PAS/ME grantees included:

Exhibit 2: List of Collaborative Partners

| Grantee | State/Local Child Welfare Agencies | Non-Profit and University Organizations |
|---------------|---|--|
| Colorado | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado Dept. of Human Services (DHS) • Boulder County Dept. of Social Services (DSS) • Broomfield County DSS • Larimer County DHS² • Alamosa County DSS • La Plata County DHS • Mesa County DHS • Montrose County DHS² | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institute for Families • Learning Systems Group • University of Denver |
| Florida | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Florida State University Family Institute • Florida State University, Center for Marriage and Family Therapy • Florida Inter-University Center for Child, Family and Community Studies |
| Georgia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Georgia Dept. of Family and Children Services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Institute of Relationship Enhancement • Georgia Center for Adoption Resources and Support • Georgia Family Council |
| New Hampshire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Hampshire Dept. of Health and Human Services, Division for Children, Youth, and Families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casey Family Services |
| Texas | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Services of Greater Houston |
| Washington | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Adoption Services Office | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Gottman Institute |
| Wisconsin | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catholic Charities • Lutheran Social Services |

²Terminated partnership before the grant's completion.

- *Loving Couples, Loving Children* and related curricula developed by the Gottman Relationship Institute;
- *Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP)*; and
- *Relationship Enhancement (RE)*.

All three of these curricula have been used for decades and have repeatedly demonstrated effectiveness in preventing divorce and enhancing marriages (American Psychological Association, 2004; Dion, 2005).

Gottman-based programs. Three grantees (Florida, Washington, Wisconsin) developed marriage education programs based on the work of John and Julie Gottman. The goals of Gottman programs are to “increase respect, affection, and closeness, break through and resolve conflict ... generate greater understanding between partners, and keep conflict discussions calm” (Gottman & Gottman, 2011). Florida began with an earlier Gottman curriculum that focused exclusively on marital issues, but later adopted another Gottman-based curriculum called *Loving Couples, Loving Children* that helps couples work on parenting issues as a team. This curriculum uses videos followed by discussion as one of its primary pedagogical strategies. Wisconsin developed a variant of *Loving Couples, Loving Children* entitled *Our Home, Our Family* that was specifically geared toward adoptive parents, while Washington used *Loving Couples, Loving Children* and in its final year incorporated aspects of Wisconsin’s *Our Home, Our Family* curriculum.

Our Home, Our Family has two main units. The first unit focuses on various aspects of relationships, including problem solving, healing emotional wounds, the warning signs of troubled relationships, working toward compromise, relationship recovery, and honoring dreams (Our Home, Our Family, 2011). The second unit focuses on forgiveness, i.e., of spouses toward their spouses, of parents toward their children, of adopted children toward their biological parents, and toward other important people in a family’s life.

Relationship Enhancement. The Relationship Enhancement (RE) curriculum was developed by the non-profit National Institute of Relationship Enhancement (NIRE) over 45 years ago and has shown effectiveness through randomized controlled trials (Dion, 2005). The original RE curriculum focuses on the development of ten skills sets: Empathy, Expressiveness, Discussion/Negotiation, Problem/Conflict Resolution, Facilitation, Conflict Management, Self-Change, Helping Others Change, Generalization, and Maintenance³. RE served as the basis for an education curriculum developed by Bethany Christian Services (Georgia) specifically for adoptive families called *Relationship Enhancement for Adoptive Families (REAP)*.

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). The PREP curriculum and/or variations of it were used by Colorado, Texas, and New Hampshire. PREP is a well-established education program supported by decades of research regarding its effectiveness in preventing divorce and enhancing couples’ marital satisfaction (Dion, 2005). PREP’s goals are to teach couples how to “communicate more openly and effectively, reduce communication patterns that

³ For more information see <http://www.nire.org/professional-training-supervision-and-certification-programs/relationship-enhancement-couple-family-therapy>.

can damage relationships, clarify important expectations, protect and preserve fun and friendship, and preserve and enhance commitment in marriage” (University of Denver, 2008). Texas integrated the PREP curriculum into another curriculum designed specifically for adoptive families called the *Educational Network for Adoption—Building Lasting Environments* (ENABLE). In addition, in 2008 New Hampshire began incorporating a variant of the PREP curriculum known as *Within Our Reach*, which is targeted particularly at low-income couples, into its original PREP-based program.

Instructional Formats

The PAS/ME grantees’ curricula were designed to be implemented in a variety of formats, with the minimum requirement stipulated by the CB that they provide at least eight hours of instruction per participant. Instructional formats ranged from short weekly or bi-weekly workshops to day-long programs and weekend retreats. Some formats worked better for certain grantees, and most grantees discovered that they had to change instructional formats over the course of their grants to meet the needs and limitations of program participants. The grantees’ curricula and presentation formats are summarized in Exhibit 3 on the following page and are described briefly below.

Workshops. Three grantees (Texas, Washington, Wisconsin) implemented weekly or bi-weekly workshops as the preferred instructional format throughout the duration or during a portion of their grants. Some programs had concurrent activities for children during marriage education classes for adults.

Weekend retreats. A majority of grantees implemented some variant of a “weekend retreat” during all of a portion of their grant periods. These retreats were generally two days long and involved an overnight stay at an area hotel. New Hampshire originally implemented “family retreats” that included concurrent activities for children, but later switched to “romantic getaways” for adults only along with modified day-long workshops (see below). The “romantic getaways” were generally better attended and rated more highly by couples than the day-long workshops. Washington implemented a combination program involving a series of six video presentations about marital issues followed by a weekend retreat. Texas began with a workshop instructional format but switched to weekend retreats in Year Three of its project.

Day-long programs. Georgia changed its format from a weekend retreat to a day-long program to accommodate couples with time or childcare constraints, while New Hampshire implemented day-long programs in conjunction with couples-only retreats as an alternative to family retreats. These sessions generally lasted a full work day (eight hours).

Home-based services. Only one grantee (Florida) provided marriage education primarily through home visits, which involved a two-hour visit by a trained counselor to participating families’ homes one night a week for 12 weeks.

Exhibit 3: Summary of Marriage Education Curricula

| Grantee | Foundational Curriculum | Adaptations to Curriculum | Format | Length/Duration |
|----------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Colorado | PREP | Developed video-based Strengthening Adoptive Relationships (STAR) curriculum; added LGBT couples workshop | Weekend retreats | 2 days |
| Florida | Gottman-based <i>Loving Couples, Loving Children</i> | | Home-based services | 2 hours a week for 12 weeks |
| Georgia | <i>Relationship Enhancement (RE)</i> | Developed <i>Relationship Enhancement for Adoptive Parents (REAP)</i> based on RE | Started with weekend retreats; modified to day-long program | 8 hours |
| New Hampshire | PREP | Incorporated parts of the PREP-based <i>Within Our Reach</i> curriculum in 2008 | Originally weekend “family retreats” that included concurrent activities for children; later switched to modified one-day workshops and weekend “romantic getaways” for adults only | 1 or 2 days |
| Texas | PREP | Incorporated <i>Educational Network for Adoption—Building Lasting Environments (ENABLE)</i> curriculum | Workshop Changed to weekend marriage retreat in Year Three | Weekly 2-hour sessions for 4 weeks; 2-day marriage retreats |
| Washington | Gottman-based <i>Loving Couples, Loving Children</i> | In final year incorporated aspects of Wisconsin’s <i>Our Home, Our Family</i> curriculum | Workshop followed by a weekend retreat | Short weekly presentations for 6 weeks, followed by 2-day retreat |
| Wisconsin | Gottman-based <i>Loving Couples, Loving Children</i> | Adapted to create <i>Our Home, Our Family</i> curriculum specifically for adoptive parents | Workshop | Total of 6 sessions held every other week |

Ancillary Services

Although marriage education was the only required programmatic component of the PAS/ME projects, grantees were encouraged to provide additional support services for couples and their children. As indicated in Exhibit 4 on the following page, a total of six grantees provided one or more ancillary support services. The one exception was Florida, which provided service referrals but otherwise did not offer additional services beyond home-based marriage education. Some grantees implemented concurrent programs for children to enable parents to attend marriage education without having to secure childcare. Other grantees had services for children and families that were completely separate from the marriage education component but that shared the overarching goal of promoting family stability. Washington and New Hampshire appeared to place at least as much emphasis on services for adoptive children and families as they did on marriage education by providing 10 different ancillary services; Washington's project also incorporated a case management component in which project staff developed family service plans for enrolled families and assisted parents in accessing educational services for their children.

Many services were unique to just one particular grantee, with only a few services such as service referrals, training for parents and professionals, respite care, support groups, and therapy/counseling provided by a majority of grantees. Distinctions between certain categories of services were sometimes ambiguous; for example, it was not always clear if "faith based support" referred to one-on-one counseling or support groups or to a completely different type of service. Furthermore, some general service categories such as trainings and conferences covered a wide range of specific topics and types of services. More detailed descriptions of major service categories are provided below.

Service Referrals. All grantees except Colorado identified service referrals as a project activity. However, Colorado's website included references to numerous services, so it is likely that referrals were provided if not mentioned in its final evaluation report. Florida identified referrals as its only ancillary project service in part because Children's Home Society of Florida already provides numerous post-adoption services through other programs.

Training opportunities. In addition to marriage education, several grantees offered training workshops for parents or human service professionals on specific topics concerning the needs of adoptive children and their families. However, it was not always clear whether and which trainings were funded exclusively through the CB discretionary grant and which were offered to project participants but funded through other sources. Depending on the grantee, the topics covered in these trainings were as general as "parenting" or as specific as parenting children with certain disabilities. For example, Colorado sponsored a speaking series titled "Mindful and Reflective Parenting and Self-Esteem," while Washington held workshops titled "Love and Logic" and also hosted presentations on clinical topics such as sensory integration disorders.

Exhibit 4: Ancillary Services

| Service | CO | FL | GA | NH | TX | WA | WI | Total |
|--|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-------|
| Service referrals | | X | X | X | X | X | X | 6 |
| Conferences/training for professionals | X | | X | X | X | | | 4 |
| Conferences/trainings for parents | X | | | X | | X | X | 4 |
| Respite care | | | | X | X | X | X | 4 |
| Support groups for parents | X | | | X | X | X | | 4 |
| Therapy/counseling | X | | | X | X | X | | 4 |
| Children's group activities | | | | | X | X | X | 3 |
| Family outings and events | X | | | | X | | X | 3 |
| Parent mentoring | | | | X | X | X | | 3 |
| Advocacy | X | | | X | | | | 2 |
| Events for past participants | | | X | X | | | | 2 |
| Phone-based assistance | | | | | | X | X | 2 |
| Books/DVDs on adoption issues | | | | | | | X | 1 |
| Case management | | | | | | X | | 1 |
| “Faith-based” support | | | | X | | | | 1 |
| Total services per grantee | 6 | 1 | 3 | 10 | 8 | 9 | 7 | |

Counseling/therapy. A number of grantees provided various counseling or therapy services for parents and/or their children. Some grantees provided counseling to families in their homes, some provided counseling in clinics, and some employed both options. Wisconsin’s project utilized the services of a specialized social worker who made home visits and also offered specialized therapy for children referred to as “recreational enhancement.”

Support groups. Four grantees hosted support groups for parents, two of which also had support groups for children. In general support groups were not in high demand among enrolled participants.

Parent mentoring. At least three grantees used former program participants and other adoptive parents to provide advice, instruction, and support to enrolled participants. For instance, New Hampshire trained adoptive parents to facilitate the *Within Our Reach* curriculum, and also used mentor couples to recruit and support newer adoptive couples by sharing their experiences as adoptive parents and offering insights into effective parenting strategies.

Respite care. Four grantees offered respite care directly or provided funds to reimburse program participants for respite care expenses. Florida encouraged the use of grandparents as respite care providers but did not appear to use discretionary grant funds for this purpose.

Children’s group activities. A number of the grantees provided group activities for children in conjunction with or separately from marriage education. These activities provided enriching experiences for children while resolving some parents’ difficulties with finding childcare. Some

grantees organized different activities for different child age groups while other activities were geared toward all ages.

Family outings and events. Family outings and events included recreational activities such as Texas’ “Fun Day,” which also served as a recruitment event for prospective project participants. Colorado hosted a “Family Camp” as well as shorter-term activities such as ArtReach, family outings to Colorado Rockies baseball games, and an adoptive family picnic.

Evaluation Designs and Data Collection Methods

All PAS/ME grantees were required to conduct systematic evaluations of their funded projects, and a review of grantees’ final reports revealed that the grantees implemented a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Rather than focusing on just one overarching evaluation design, Exhibit 5 indicates that all grantees incorporated multiple research design approaches into their evaluations.

Exhibit 5: Summary of Evaluation Designs and Data Collection Methods

| | CO | FL | GA | NH | TX | WA | WI |
|---------------------------------|----|----------------|----|----------------|----------------|----|----|
| Evaluation Designs | | | | | | | |
| Descriptive analysis | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Pre-post test | | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Time series | x | | | | x ⁴ | x | x |
| Retrospective post-test | | | | x | | x | x |
| Waitlist comparison | | x ⁵ | | | | | x |
| Non-equivalent comparison group | x | | | x ⁵ | | | |
| Data Collection Methods | | | | | | | |
| Enrollment forms | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Surveys | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Focus groups | x | x | x | x | x | | x |
| Telephone interviews | | | x | | | | |

Design Elements

All seven grantees’ evaluations included a descriptive analysis component in which they documented the characteristics of and services received by project participants, and almost all grantees implemented some type of pre-post test in which changes in couples’ knowledge, attitudes, or skills were tracked before and after their participation in marriage education

⁴ Attempted but discontinued due to insufficient response rates for more than two data collection points.

⁵ Attempted but discontinued due to insufficient enrollment.

programming. In addition, several grantees utilized or attempted to implement time series designs with multiple data collection points, along with retrospective post-test designs in which participants were administered a single test after completing services that assessed their current knowledge and skills and then asked them reflect on the state of their knowledge and skills prior to the intervention. Several grantees had to alter their original evaluation designs due to low enrollment or incomplete data collection. All seven grantees reported using enrollment forms and written surveys as primary data collection methods, while almost all reported using some type of focus or discussion groups. One grantee (Georgia) also conducted telephone interviews.

Use of Comparison Groups

Only two grantees (Colorado and Wisconsin) successfully identified and tracked data on any type of comparison group of adoptive parents that did not participate in the marriage education program. Wisconsin implemented a waitlist comparison design in which couples that signed up for marriage education classes in the fall of 2005 but were deferred until the following session in the spring of 2006 served as the waitlisted comparison group. Comparisons were then made between the results of post-tests administered to couples that received training in the fall of 2005 and the results of pre-tests administered to waitlisted couples that received training in the spring of 2006. Colorado used a “non-PREP” comparison group (i.e., adoptive parents that did not participate in a PREP retreat) to assess differences in marital adjustment and caregiver strain; however, differences in the PREP and non-PREP groups were compared at only one point in time (following the PREP group’s completion of the marriage retreat) and no baseline measures of these variables were established.

Process Measures

Regardless of the research designs they employed, all seven grantees attempted to collect data on a wide variety of process and outcome measures, which are summarized in Exhibit 6 on the following page. All grantees collected descriptive data on their respective programs’ design and implementation, as well as quantitative and/or qualitative data regarding participants’ satisfaction with the marriage education program. Most grantees that provided ancillary support services also measured satisfaction with these services. In addition, all seven grantees collected data on the number of families served through their marriage education programs and other project activities. Actual enrollment figures were often compared with pre-established enrollment targets, with Florida in particular collecting detailed enrollment data and providing a thorough analysis of the reasons it achieved or missed its enrollment goals. Several grantees (Florida, Georgia, Washington, and Wisconsin) collected and reported data on the demographic characteristics of enrolled couples and children (e.g., gender, ethnicity, special needs of children), the number of children they had adopted, how many years couples had been married, and other variables. Other aspects of implementation that were studied and reported on by the PAS/ME grantees included the development and adaptation of recruitment methods and educational curricula, program sustainability efforts, and the number and positions of employees trained to deliver marriage education or other services.

Exhibit 6: Summary of Evaluation Measures

| | CO | FL | GA | NH | TX | WA | WI |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Process Measures | | | | | | | |
| Description of implementation | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Recruitment methods and results | x | x | | | x | x | x |
| No. of families served | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Participant characteristics | | x | x | | | x | x |
| Program satisfaction | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Program sustainability | x | | | | x | x | |
| Outcome Measures | | | | | | | |
| <i>Knowledge</i> | | | | | | | |
| Of child's needs | | | | | | x | x |
| Of community resources | | | | | | x | |
| <i>Marital Quality</i> | | | | | | | |
| Marital/family communication | x | x | | x | x | x | x |
| Marital satisfaction | x | x | x | x | x | | x |
| <i>Family Relationships</i> | | | | | | | |
| Parenting skills & attitudes | | x | | x | | x | x |
| Family stress | | x | | | | | x |
| Need for intensive post-adoption services | | | x | | | | |
| <i>Parents' Socio-Emotional Development</i> | | | | | | | |
| Caregiver strain (directly related to raising a child) | x | | | | | | |
| Parent emotions (general) | | | | | | | x |
| Inter-couple support | | | | x | | x | |
| Forgiveness | | | | | | | x |
| Social support | | | | | x | | |
| <i>Child Functioning</i> | | | | | | | |
| Child's school performance | | | | | | x | |
| Social support | | | | | | x | |
| Child behavior/emotions | x | | | | x | x | x |
| <i>Family Stability</i> | | | | | | | |
| Adoption disruptions | x | x | x | | x | x | x |
| No. of divorces | | | | | | x | x |

Outcome Measures

The grantees differed significantly in their efforts to track and document outcome findings, with data on no one outcome measure collected by all seven grantees. As indicated in Exhibit 6, almost all grantees collected data on improvements in family communication and marital satisfaction, and most grantees collected and reported some data on changes in couples' parenting skills or attitudes as well as regarding changes in children's behavior or emotional well-being. In addition, almost all grantees reported data on the number or proportion of adoption disruptions that occurred among enrolled families, and two grantees (Washington and Wisconsin) collected data on the number or proportion of married couples that divorced post-intervention.

Surveys. As noted earlier, all PAS/ME grantees implemented one or more written surveys or assessment instruments as part of their data collection efforts. As indicated in Exhibit 7 on the following page, the grantees planned to or actually utilized a large assortment of standardized instruments designed to measure changes in a variety of marital, familial, and psycho-social variables, with no one instrument used by a majority of grantees. Two grantees that used the PREP curriculum (Colorado and New Hampshire) utilized a battery of surveys developed specifically for use with PREP that covers a range of issues such as commitment, forgiveness, psychological aggression, and marital adjustment. In addition to standardized surveys, several grantees implemented non-standardized "home-grown" instruments, including a telephone survey regarding family functioning and well-being in Georgia and written tests regarding family functioning in New Hampshire and Wisconsin. Interestingly, Florida reported the highest number of surveys and assessment instruments, including several that assess family functioning, although its program focused almost exclusively on the provision of marriage education.

Focus groups. Six grantees conducted focus groups or other less structured discussion groups at some stage in their evaluations that varied widely in their goals, content, and format. Some grantees such as Wisconsin used focus groups for formative purposes during the first year of their projects to collect feedback on initial program activities. Similarly, Florida used focus groups on an "as-needed" basis in an effort to remain responsive to adoptive families' unique needs, while Texas organized a focus group of five children aged 6-13 to collect data regarding their experiences with and attitudes about its PAS/ME program.

Process Evaluations: Summary of Key Findings

The PAS/ME grantees differed widely in terms of the scope and level of detail of process evaluation findings contained in their final reports; however, most collected and reported some basic process data in the following categories:

- Parents' enrollment in marriage education programs;
- Demographic characteristics of participating parents and children;
- Barriers to project enrollment;
- Families' receipt of or participation in ancillary services;
- Development of curricula and related recruitment and educational products;

- Parents' satisfaction with marriage education programming; and
- Grantees' plans for program sustainability.

Exhibit 7: Summary of Assessment Instruments

| | CO | FL | GA | NH | TX | WA | WI |
|--|----------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>Marital Issues and Satisfaction</i> | | | | | | | |
| PREP Initial and Follow-Up Surveys | x | | | x | | | |
| Brief Commitment Inventory | | | | | x | | |
| ENRICH Couples Scale | | | x | | x | | |
| Enright Forgiveness Inventory | | | | | | | x |
| Kansas Marital, Parental, and Family Satisfaction Scales | | x | | | | | |
| Marriage and Forgiveness Knowledge Scale | | | | | | | x |
| Dyadic Adjustment Scale | x | x | | | | | x |
| Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI-R) | | x | | | | | |
| <i>Child Behavior and Development</i> | | | | | | | |
| Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS-2C) | | | | | x | x | |
| Child Behavior Checklist | x ⁶ | x | | | | | |
| Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social Emotional | | | | | | x | |
| <i>Parent Emotional Well-Being and Social Support</i> | | | | | | | |
| Caregiver Strain Questionnaire (CGSQ) | x | | | | | | |
| Beck Depression Inventory | | | | | | | x |
| Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) Social Support Survey | | | | | x | | |
| STAI Anger and Anxiety Scales | | | | | | | x |
| <i>Family Functioning/Well-Being</i> | | | | | | | |
| REAP Adopted Child and Family Survey | | | x | | | | |
| Family Functioning Style Scale (FFSS), | | | | | | x | |
| Family Empowerment Survey (FES), | | | | | | x | |
| Family Cohesion and Adaptability Scales (FACES-III) | | x | | | | | |
| Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory | | x | | | | | |
| Family Climate Survey | | x | | | | | |
| Family Stress Inventory | | x | | | | | |
| Family Stress and Support Test | | x | | | | | x |
| Other/"Home-Grown" Survey or Test | | | x | x | | | x |
| Total Number of Instruments | 4 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 7 |

⁶ Only 10 questions from this battery of over 100 items were used.

Enrollment in Marriage Education Activities

The grantees varied widely both in their enrollment targets and in their success in meeting these targets. As evidenced in Exhibit 8 below, most grantees fell well short of their original targets, and success in meeting enrollment goals appeared to be somewhat correlated with the instructional format of a grantee’s program. For example, Florida’s home-based instructional program had very low enrollment, with only 4 percent of projected couples actually enrolling in and completing the course. Colorado, which implemented a weekend retreat format, was the only grantee that exceeded its original enrollment target with a total of 321 couples. Washington (which did not set an enrollment target) enrolled the fewest couples after Florida, although it is important to note that this grantee placed greater emphasis on the provision of ancillary services than most other PAS/ME grantees.

Exhibit 8: Enrollment in Marriage Education Programming

| Grantee | Targeted Couples Enrollment | # of Couples Enrolled | Percent of Target Accomplished |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Colorado | 300 | 321 | 107% |
| Florida | 360 | 28 (13 completed) | 8% (4% completed) |
| Georgia | 1200 | 818 | 68% |
| New Hampshire | 300 | 126 | 42% |
| Texas | 250 | 123 | 49% |
| Washington | NA | 52 ⁷ | NA |
| Wisconsin | 260 | 104 | 40% |

Enrollment by race/ethnicity. Most grantees reported some information on the race/ethnicity of enrolled parents or children, which is summarized in Exhibit 9 on the following page. White couples constituted large majorities of participants among all grantees that reported this information, with African Americans comprising the next largest group. Much smaller numbers of Latinos or people of mixed ancestry participated in program services. Washington reported race/ethnicity data for children only, among whom white children made up a large majority.

Special needs enrollment. As noted earlier, the grantees used different criteria to define children as “special needs” by relying largely on their respective state child welfare agencies’ definitions. Since both Washington and Florida only enrolled families with “special needs” as defined by their respective states, special needs children by definition made up 100 percent of their enrolled children. In Georgia’s project 84 percent of children were identified as having special needs while Wisconsin reported that 75 percent of participating children had learning and/or behavioral disabilities. The remaining grantees did not report data on the special needs status of enrolled children.

⁷ Of these 52 participants, 43 attended a workshop and an additional 9 received some other form of marriage education.

Exhibit 9: Race/Ethnicity of Program Participants

| Grantee | Participant Type | White | African American | Latino | Mixed Race | Other |
|---------------|------------------|-------|------------------|-----------------|------------|-------|
| Colorado | Parents | 83% | 3% | 11% | 0% | 3% |
| Florida | Parents | 83% | 17% | NR ⁸ | 0% | 0% |
| Georgia | Parents | 56% | 42% | NR | 0% | 0% |
| New Hampshire | Parents | NR | | | | |
| Texas | NA | NR | | | | |
| Wisconsin | Couples | NR | 18% | NR | 2% | NR |
| Washington | Children | 61% | 12% | 7% | 16% | 4% |

Barriers to enrollment. As reported earlier almost all PAS/ME grantees fell well short of their original enrollment goals, a problem that was attributed to a wide variety of causes. Exhibit 10 below suggests that no one barrier contributed to low enrollment in a majority of sites, although three grantees (Florida, Georgia, and New Hampshire) cited couples' time constraints as a significant impediment.

Exhibit 10: Enrollment Barriers

| Barrier | CO | FL | GA | NH | TX | WA | WI |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Lack of time | | X | X | X | | | |
| Lack of perceived need for education/services | | X | | X | | | |
| Insufficient outreach | | | | | | X | |
| Childcare issues | | | | | | X | |
| Families' negative feelings about agencies | | X | | | | | |
| Lack of cooperation among social service agencies | | X | | | | | |
| Prior participation in marriage education programming | | | | | | X | |
| Fewer children available for adoption than anticipated | | | | X | | | |
| Inconvenient service locations | X | | | | | | X |

Other enrollment barriers identified by a least two grantees included a lack of perceived need for marriage education or services among targeted couples and inconvenient service locations. Florida identified the most impediments to enrollment, including couples' lack of time and a mismatch between adoptive parents' needs and the education and services that were offered to them. Additional barriers reported by Florida included negative perceptions of the grantee organization and affiliated agencies, as well as a lack of cooperation and service coordination among local social service agencies. A backlog of pending termination of parental rights (TPR)

⁸NR = "not reported."

cases in local courts limited the number of children that were available for adoption in New Hampshire, thus reducing the number of adoptive couples eligible for project services. In an effort to free up more children for adoption an additional judge was eventually hired to help process these TPR cases; however, program enrollment continued to lag throughout the duration of the grantee's project. Despite exceeding its enrollment goals, Colorado reported an ongoing need for more post-adoption services in rural areas.

Addressing enrollment barriers. New Hampshire reported extensively on the types of recruitment activities that were most successful in engaging families. Regular and positive communication with state child welfare agency staff appeared to be important, as evinced by the many program participants who indicated on evaluation forms that they had learned about the PAS/ME program through their child welfare case manager. Overall, New Hampshire found that person-to-person recruitment was more effective than print media such as newsletter articles or flyers, with former PREP participants and child welfare caseworkers playing a major role in this regard. In Wisconsin, geographic barriers to participation were addressed in part by developing and implementing marriage education workshops in a Webinar format, although some couples felt that Webinars lacked many of the benefits of face-to-face instruction.

Provision of Ancillary Services

Several grantees reported on the number of ancillary services they provided in conjunction with marriage education programming. Highlights from grantees' final evaluation reports regarding the provision and receipt of ancillary services are summarized below.

- Colorado served 520 children and 1,110 adults with an array of post-adoptive services, including 57 people who attended the grantee's Family Camp.
- During the first two years of New Hampshire's project approximately 8 families per month received ancillary post-adoption services, far fewer families than originally anticipated.
- In Texas, 161 families received counseling, 142 families participated in a "Family Fun" day, and 113 families received respite care over the five-year grant period.
- Washington provided post-adoption services to 88 adopted children. During the first four years of its grant 80 percent of participating families received five or more services, with case management, parent education, respite care, recreational enrichment, and school advocacy constituting the most frequently received services. Each year between 157 and 172 parents participated in educational programs concerning the special needs of adopted children.
- Wisconsin reported that 314 families attended training, support groups, or family training events.

Development of Educational Products

Several grantees used grant resources to develop and disseminate educational materials in various media formats. For example, Wisconsin created a DVD version of its *Our Home, Our Families* instructional program. Colorado created the *Strengthening Adoptive Relationships* (STAR) curriculum, which includes videos of 12 adoptive couples sharing their experiences, and posted it for free use on its website (see <http://Colorado.org/star-videos>). Colorado also developed several specialized curricula for adoptive families, including workshops for LGBT couples as well as on the topics of forgiveness, respite care, and the school needs and issues of adopted children. In addition to developing the REAP curriculum, Georgia created a comprehensive list of resources for adoptive families in both CD and book form.

Satisfaction with Services

In general, participants in all seven projects were highly satisfied with the quality of the grantees' marriage education programs. For example, follow-up survey data collected by Texas indicated that participants rated project services as effective in building resiliency and relationship skills. In New Hampshire, 72 percent of participants rated the content of their PREP workshops as "excellent" and 27 percent rated it as "good." In Georgia, 44 out of 48 participants who participated in a final weekend marriage retreat rated it as "very useful," with the remaining 4 rating it as "useful." Although Florida had very low enrollment and completion rates, those couples that did enroll and complete its marriage education program reported very high levels of satisfaction with both the program itself and with the staff who provided it.

Preferred Instructional Formats

In reviewing the marriage education programs implemented by the grantees, it is evident that no one instructional format was consistently successful and well received, with several grantees switching formats at least once. For example, Georgia found that a two-day retreat was less feasible for couples and thus shortened its program to a one-day program. New Hampshire found that a "romantic getaway" for adults only was better attended than a "family retreat" that included children's activities, in part because couples welcomed an extended break from their children as well as the opportunity to meet and connect with other adoptive couples. Similarly, participants in Washington's program reported that opportunities to connect with other adoptive couples became a source of ongoing and mutual emotional support.

Program Sustainability

As indicated earlier, several grantees used grant funds to develop materials that could be used indefinitely to sustain core educational activities; nonetheless, most grantees identified post-grant funding issues as a challenge to the sustainability of their programs, especially in environments of fiscal instability and uncertainty. Some grantees approached the sustainability issue by modifying their programs to be less costly. For example, Washington reduced the overall costs of

its PAS/ME program in 2008 by providing case management services in one central office location instead of in families' homes, establishing an adoption hotline to sustain information and referral activities, and replacing costly weekend retreats with classroom-based workshops. As a substitute for the more expensive PREP curriculum, Texas trained 20 volunteer adoptive couples to deliver an alternative curriculum called *Wellness and Survival Skills for Families*, which allowed them to continue supporting newly adoptive families at little cost. Other grantees sought additional funding sources to sustain program activities. Georgia, for example, planned to continue providing marriage education programming on a fee-for-service basis, while Wisconsin applied for and received a separate grant to develop and pilot a curriculum for LGBT adoptive parents.

Outcome Evaluations: Summary of Key Findings

Given the wide range of outcomes studied by the seven PAS/ME grantees and the variety of data collection tools used to measure them, direct comparisons of outcome findings across the grantees are generally not feasible. Problems with the quality and completeness of grantees' data place further limitations on a comparative analysis of outcome findings; for example, many grantees struggled with low survey response rates, which compelled some to alter their research designs (e.g., drop data collection intervals or shorten the timeframe between intervals). Despite ambitious plans to evaluate their programs using the myriad of surveys and data collection tools identified in Exhibit 7, low enrollment and other implementation problems compelled many grantees to collect and report data using a much more limited set of instruments. These challenges notwithstanding, most grantees were able to report some outcome findings in the areas of knowledge/awareness of communication and relationship skills, marriage quality, family relationship quality, parents' social and emotional functioning, child functioning, and family stability. Information in each of these outcome categories is summarized below within the constraints of the disparate ways in which the grantees defined, collected, analyzed, and reported their findings.

Knowledge and Awareness

Several grantees collected data from couples immediately after the completion of marriage education on changes in knowledge of critical communication and relationship concepts, as well as regarding their intention to apply this knowledge in their daily lives. These findings tended to be quite positive. For example, an average of 98 percent of couples that completed a workshop offered through Wisconsin's program reported increased knowledge, skills, and awareness, and 99 percent reported improved understanding of the challenges that adoptive parents experience. In Washington, 85 percent of parents who participated in weekend workshops indicated increased awareness of the value of working on their marital and family relationships. Similarly, 85 percent of survey respondents in New Hampshire reported that they had gained knowledge that would improve their relationships, 93 percent reported that they would invest more time in their relationships, and 89 percent reported that they would work more as a team with their marital partners.

Marriage Quality

Changes in marriage quality, such as evidence of improved communication and marital satisfaction, were generally measured at least three months after the conclusion of marriage education programming. Overall the grantees reported only small improvements in marriage quality, in part because most couples reported having well-functioning marriages to begin with. Results from PREP surveys administered in Colorado revealed statistically significant increases in the domain of Positive Communication between initial assessment and a two-year follow-up; however, there were no significant changes in average scores in the PREP survey domains of Negative Communication or Insults and Yelling, with average scores in these domains already low at baseline. Colorado also reported no significant changes in average scores in the Relationship Quality domain between initial assessment and a two-year follow-up. In Wisconsin, average marital satisfaction increased among couples immediately following completion of a marriage workshop, declined slightly during subsequent follow-ups, but then increased again at a five-year follow-up. Parents participating in Texas' program registered significant improvements in the Idealistic Distortion domain of the *ENRICH Couples Scale* while other test domains showed no significant improvements. Survey data collected in New Hampshire revealed limited improvements in marital satisfaction due to high baseline pre-tests but more significant improvements in communication skills. In Georgia, 80 percent of families reported increased marital satisfaction both three and six months after participating in the REAP marriage education program, although no significant changes were observed in the Marital Communication and Conflict Resolution domains of the *ENRICH Couples Scale*. After six bi-weekly sessions in the Washington program, couples reported significant improvements over baseline in communicating with humor, compromising, and spending time together as friends, but no significant changes in other domains of marriage quality.

Family Relationships

Variables in this category include self-reported parenting skills, attitudes about parenting, general family functioning, and the need for more intensive post-adoption services. In general, couples reported improved family relationships and attitudes over time. For example, a retrospective post-test completed by adoptive couples participating in New Hampshire's project revealed significant positive changes in all questions regarding family relationships and parenting attitudes. The one exception was for the item "We question our decision to adopt/become foster parent," which had very low scores at both time points. Wisconsin reported a 27 percent reduction in the number of times parents reported losing their temper and a 49 percent reduction in the frequency with which parents reported being unsure of how to handle their children's behavior. Overall, 97 percent of families that participated in Wisconsin's workshops felt that their family functioning had improved over time. Parents in Washington's program indicated that in-home case management services had improved their parenting skills and that parent education workshops had helped them understand their adopted children's behavior and adjust their disciplinary techniques and expectations accordingly. On average, these parents believed it was "mostly true" that they handled parenting challenges well and that they felt more confident in their ability to help their children grow and develop normally. In Georgia, a full 88 percent of participants in the grantee's marriage enrichment program were

assessed as not needing additional or more intensive post-adoption services, thus exceeding its goal of 75 percent.

Parents' Social/Emotional Well-Being

As in other outcome areas most grantees reported modest improvements in parents' socio-emotional well-being and adjustment. For instance, Colorado used the *Caregiver Strain Questionnaire* (CGSQ) to measure parental stress directly related to raising children with emotional or behavioral problems over a two-year period. The grantee observed small but statistically significant decreases over time in average scores in the domains of Objective Strain (e.g., financial stress) and Internalized Subjective Strain (e.g., guilt, worry), but no significant changes in the Externalized Subjective Strain domain (e.g., negative emotions about the child) or in the remaining CGSQ domains. In Wisconsin, data collected over a five-year period using the *Beck Depression Inventory* and the *STAI Anger and Anxiety Scales* revealed no significant changes in parents' anxiety and anger and only small reductions in depression, although ratings of these negative emotions were generally low at baseline. However, Wisconsin couples did report more social connections with other adoptive couples and substantial gains in their capacity to extend forgiveness to their spouses and children.

Child Functioning

In general, grantees observed modest and often inconsistent improvements in children's behavior and well-being, thus confirming findings from earlier studies (e.g., Kramer & Houston, 1998) that children's emotional and behavioral issues do not resolve themselves upon the finalization of an adoption and that ongoing services may be necessary. Children participating in Texas' program demonstrated significant improvements in the Interpersonal Strengths and Family Involvement scales of the BERS-2C but no significant changes in other scales. In Wisconsin, children from the first two cohorts of participating families showed substantial decreases in depression and anxiety over a one-year period, as well as a 39 percent reduction in the frequency of fights and a 29 percent reduction in the number of times they got into trouble at school. Parents in Washington's program made no significant changes in their ratings of their children's behavior on the BERS-2C, although the six-month period between initial and follow-up assessments may have been too short to detect significant differences.

Divorce Rates

Although marital stability was one of the stated long-term goals of this grantee cluster, only two grantees (Washington and Wisconsin) reported any findings on this outcome. The fact that most PAS/ME grantees did not report findings regarding marital stability was likely due to the long-term nature of this outcome, which made the collection of reliable data more difficult. Wisconsin reported that of the 84 couples that participated in its program and for whom follow-up data were available, only 1 had divorced while 3 had separated. None of the 52 couples that participated in Washington's program had divorced by the end of its project.

Adoption Disruptions

Adoption stability was perhaps the most important long-term goal of the PAS/ME projects. As indicated in Exhibit 11 below, very few disrupted adoptions were reported among participating families. The two disruptions reported by Georgia were the result of children in pre-adoptive placements who were later reunited with their families or other relatives. Texas reported 12 adoption disruptions, although it was unclear whether these had occurred among program participants exclusively or within a broader population of adoptive parents. A disruption rate of 1.5 percent among families that participated in Colorado’s project compared favorably to a rate of 1.74 percent (25 out of 1,712 adoption finalizations) among adoptive couples in this grantee’s service area that did not participate in its PAS/ME program.

Exhibit 11: Adoption Disruptions

| CO | FL | GA | NH | TX | WA | WI |
|-----------------|--------------|------------------|----|----|---------------|--------------|
| 9/616 (1.5%) | 0/28 (0%) | 2 /411 (0.5%) | NA | 12 | 0/100 (0%) | 0/88 (0%) |

Summary

Between 2004 and 2009 seven non-profit organizations in disparate geographic regions implemented programs to provide marriage education and supportive services to adoptive and fostering couples, with a long-term goal of improving permanency and well-being outcomes for children in public child welfare agency custody. Although all seven projects included a marriage education component as required by the terms of the Federal grant, they otherwise differed considerably in terms of their target populations, the content and format of their marriage education curricula, and in the types of ancillary services they provided. Enrollment in marriage education programming varied widely across the grantees but was generally lower than expected.

Most participating couples reported high levels of satisfaction with the marriage education and support services they received, as well as immediate gains in knowledge and awareness of key communication and relationship concepts. Over a longer term some positive but modest changes were reported in marital satisfaction, communication, and emotional well-being, due in part to relatively high rates of marital satisfaction and low rates of negative emotional functioning at baseline. Some positive changes in children’s behavior and well-being were also observed, although overall gains were minimal. However, in general parents reported improved confidence in managing their children’s behavior and substantial gains were often measured in overall family functioning. In addition, the grantees reported very few divorces or disrupted adoptions.

Recommendations

The experiences of the PAS/ME grantees suggest that there are no “one size fits all” recipes for implementing successful marriage education programs or for meeting the diverse needs of

adoptive and fostering families. However, their efforts do reveal some overarching lessons, several of which are echoed by findings from the experiences of other post-adoption service grantees (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2005), that may contribute to the successful development of similar marriage enrichment and post-adoption service programs in the future. The most salient lessons learned by the 2004 PAS/ME grantees are highlighted below.

- ***Conduct an initial needs assessment.*** The characteristics and needs of the population targeted for PAS/ME services must be taken into account well before program development or implementation begins. A failure to assess and respond to the needs and interests of adoptive and fostering families is reflected in the challenges that many PAS/ME grantees experienced in recruiting and retaining participants. In addition to studying these issues before launching a new program, it is imperative to reassess needs on a continual basis following implementation to ensure that the program remains responsive and relevant to participants. Although a formal and systematic needs assessment may not be feasible given constraints on time and resources, a brief examination of gaps in needed services or in the expressed needs of foster families may suffice.
- ***Maintain flexibility.*** The experiences of the PAS/ME grantees speak to the importance of a flexible approach to service delivery that can adapt to unexpected challenges and to the changing needs and circumstances of the target population. Most notably, several grantees switched or modified the instructional formats of their marriage education programs when it became clear that the original formats were not effective in attracting and retaining targeted adoptive parents. In addition, several grantees sought to increase enrollment by expanding their original target populations to include foster caregivers as well as adoptive couples.
- ***Educate target audiences about the benefits of marriage education.*** Adoptive parents do not always see the value of marriage education; they may believe that their marriages are already strong and stable and that any strains can be ameliorated by addressing their children's emotional or behavioral problems. As suggested by focus group feedback received by one grantee, parents may even resent the implication that their marriages need improvement. This resentment may arise in part from assumptions and misconceptions about the nature of marriage education, for example, that it is the same as couples' therapy or that it is only for uneducated or dysfunctional couples. Promoting marriage education as a rewarding opportunity to enrich and invigorate spousal relationships, rather than as condescending remedial instruction, may help reframe its purpose and value in the eyes of potential participants.
- ***Provide "adult time" for couples.*** A common theme that emerged across the PAS/ME grantees was the value that couples placed on opportunities to spend time alone without their children, as well as on opportunities to connect with other couples that had adopted or were fostering children. The benefits of social networking were particularly evident among grantees that implemented retreat-style programs, which reduced couples' feelings of isolation and promoted bonding with other couples in similar circumstances. Grantees such as Wisconsin and Washington observed that these bonds often lasted long after the couples' formal participation in marriage education programming.

- ***Provide critical support services.*** Adoptive couples can face daunting challenges in meeting the needs of children who have often experienced severe emotional trauma and who may have a host of physical, cognitive, and behavioral issues. Although marriage education can provide a foundation for couples to discuss their children's issues constructively, it is no substitute for support services that meet children's needs directly. Helpful ancillary services for adoptive families include respite care, parent and child therapy, workshops that provide specialized instruction on relevant parenting topics, support groups, and case management. These supportive services are particularly crucial given that behavioral issues and parents' unrealistic expectations are among the leading causes of adoption disruptions and dissolutions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2004).
- ***Plan ahead for sustainability.*** Given the time-limited nature of CB discretionary grants it is important for grantees to consider strategies for sustaining all or some program components once Federal funding ends. For example, several PAS/ME grantees created and piloted new curricula or developed media products that could be used long after the formal termination of their projects, while one grantee trained adoptive parents to serve as volunteer instructors. Grantees can also use positive evaluation findings to leverage additional grant money for continued or expanded programming, as Wisconsin did by winning a grant to develop a DVD-based curriculum for LGBT adoptive couples.

Positive evaluation results can help build the case for continued or expanded marriage education and post-adoptive services; evaluations that are designed and implemented with sufficient rigor and detail are more likely to document positive results in a conclusive and credible manner. The experiences of the seven PAS/ME grantees highlight several ways in which the rigor and usefulness of evaluations of similar programs can be enhanced in the future.

- ***Gather useful descriptive data.*** Some grantees collected and reported ample data on the characteristics of participating families while others collected more limited information. The collection and analysis of these data may help identify relationships between the demographic and case characteristics of targeted families and short- and long-term evaluation outcomes, including program completion, satisfaction with services, and changes in individual, marital, and family functioning. A thorough understanding of the effects of these variables can in turn facilitate the implementation of appropriate modifications to a program's content and structure. Examples of data that may be helpful to collect include the race/ethnicity of parents and children, the number of children (both adopted and biological) in the home, the ages of children in the home, children's disabilities or special needs, the length of time that adopted children have lived with their adoptive families, and length of time since adoption finalization.
- ***Implement the most rigorous evaluation design possible.*** Although the PAS/ME grantees collected large quantities of information using a wide range of data collection methods, as a group their evaluation designs lacked the rigor necessary to draw definitive conclusions regarding the effects of their programs on key child and family outcomes. Most grantees relied heavily on descriptive analyses and pre-post tests, and only two grantees (Colorado and Wisconsin) implemented evaluations that involved some type of comparison group (although other grantees attempted but failed to create comparison groups due primarily to

low program enrollment). Without a comparison group it is much more difficult to attribute observed positive changes in a target population to the intervention itself, as opposed to extraneous factors such as natural increases in the coping skills of adoptive parents and the normal maturation and adjustment of adopted children. Although the research “gold standard” of a randomized controlled trial is often not feasible in the context of time-limited and small-scale demonstration projects, every effort should be made to identify and track outcomes on a population of cases that shares enough characteristics with the project’s target population to provide a credible basis for measuring that project’s likely effects.

- ***Watch out for high baseline scores.*** Despite high levels of satisfaction among program participants most grantees reported limited improvements in outcomes such as improved marital satisfaction and communication. Meager changes in these areas were due in part to high baseline scores on surveys in which couples reported having high marital satisfaction and good communication skills already. These high scores may be due to self-selection biases (i.e., couples with healthier relationships were more likely to participate in marriage education) or they could reflect reluctance on the part of some couples to admit to problems in their relationships. In addition to these factors, the grantees’ heavy reliance on traditional pre- and post-tests likely rendered their evaluations vulnerable to psychometric phenomena such as “response-shift” effects in which a respondent’s frame of reference or evaluation standard changes significantly during an intervention (Howard, 1980). For example, a spouse may rate herself as having excellent communication skills on a pre-service test but after participating in a marriage education workshop develops a much fuller understanding of the meaning and attributes of effective communication. Since her understanding of what “effective communication” means has changed as a result of the workshop, her original rating of her communication skills is rendered less valid. Alternative methods such as retrospective post-tests may mitigate response-shift effects by ensuring that program participants have a clear and consistent understanding of key concepts before they are asked to rate changes in knowledge, awareness, attitudes, or behavior related to those concepts.

Despite their limitations, the findings summarized in this report suggest that post-adoption and marriage education programs—when informed by the recommendations noted above— can be fruitful and worthwhile investments. One of the keys to success is frequent assessment before implementation to ensure that the proposed program meets the needs of the target population, during initial implementation to determine whether expansion of the target audience or program modifications are necessary, and after successful implementation to plan for long-term sustainability.

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