



Guidelines for Supporting Healthy Marriage Demonstration Programs

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Lead Evaluator: MDRC

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The Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has launched a project called Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM). Led by MDRC, a team of nationally known policy research organizations, and leading experts on marriage, marriage education programs, and services for low-income families, the SHM project is the first large-scale evaluation of marriage education and skills programs to benefit economically disadvantaged married couples and their children.

The main goal of SHM is to learn about the most effective ways to help couples maintain or achieve healthy marriages. It is motivated by research showing: 1) married adults in low-conflict relationships and their children do better than others on a host of outcomes; 2) low-income couples' marriages are more likely to end in separation and divorce; consequently, their children are less likely to receive the benefits of living with both parents throughout their childhoods; and 3) marriage education programs can bring about improvements in marital relationships. Because research on marriage education to date has focused primarily on middle class couples, SHM will provide important new evidence about whether these services benefit lower-income couples, and in turn their children.

SHM will study programs that provide marriage education — instruction and support to improve relationship skills and strengthen marriages — for couples who volunteer. Service providers that become part of the SHM project will recruit and serve married couples who have children and will develop culturally appropriate services that are engaging and relevant to the couples they serve. These programs will also help participating couples find services to address individual barriers to healthy marriage, such as problems with employment, housing, or health.

This document provides guidelines on the SHM program model, including the target population, program components, supports for participation, and types of potential service providers. The SHM team is committed to using these guidelines to work with organizations to develop, implement and study promising and innovative programs. We expect to have discussions with service providers who are interested in SHM throughout 2005. If you are interested in learning more about the project, please send any questions to shm@mdrc.org, and one of our team members will respond. For additional information, you can also visit our Web site at www.supportinghealthymarriage.org.

The SHM Concept

SHM is a multi-year study launched in 2003 as a part of the Administration for Children and Families' Healthy Marriage Initiative. The project will measure the effectiveness of programs that provide instruction and support for couples seeking to strengthen their marital relationships. The study will provide important new information about whether marriage education can improve marital quality, marital stability and child well-being for economically disadvantaged couples; whether services are more beneficial for some groups of couples; and what program practices help marriage education to work best.

Two main concepts form the foundation for the SHM program model. First, strengthening and improving the relationships of married couples is the core of the SHM program as research suggests that strong marriages contribute to a healthy, stable, satisfying life for couples and are a major factor in raising healthy, successful children. Second, researchers also agree that there are many factors that can contribute to strong, stable, healthy marriages — including how well couples communicate and solve problems; how well they handle stresses; and the effects of their individual backgrounds, which include each partner's strengths and vulnerabilities.

Because a married couple's relationship is affected by many factors, SHM programs will be designed to help couples in a number of ways:

- **SHM programs will provide marriage education.** Prior research has shown that marriage education can have positive effects on the relationships of couples. The marriage education component in SHM projects will teach and reinforce couples' skills including how to communicate effectively with each other, as well as how to manage conflict and emotions that can cause a breakdown in communication, often escalating into unhealthy conflict. SHM programs will help spouses increase trust and commitment to each other, acknowledge and respect each other's differences, and reinforce shared hopes and dreams for their future together with their children.
- **SHM programs will build on the couple's strengths.** There is a considerable consensus among marriage education experts that couples are most receptive to programs that help them to appreciate and build on their strengths rather than emphasizing deficits. Spouses bring strengths to their relationships that originally make them attractive to each other and these strengths contribute to the vitality of their marriages. SHM will help participating couples recognize, appreciate, and strengthen these traits. Healthy couples also have strong social support networks through their friends, neighborhood, family, or their affiliations with faith-based or other community organizations. SHM programs will help participating couples to recognize and develop these positive social networks and to use them as sources of assistance and support for their marriages.
- **SHM programs will give both members of the couple opportunities to identify and address personal challenges.** SHM programs will help husbands and wives understand the background that each of them brings to the relationship — for example, how their families of origin affect the way they treat each other and how they believe their children should be raised. These programs will also acknowledge that issues such as mental health and substance abuse can affect the marital relationship, and may require involving services outside of the marriage education curriculum. Further, each demonstration program will collaborate with local domestic violence organizations to develop an appropriate service protocol for families who need such intervention.
- **SHM programs will address external factors that can affect a couple's relationship.** The economic stresses facing low-income couples are often compounded by circumstances such as living in neighborhoods with limited opportunities for work and for safe, affordable care for their children. In recognition that environmental issues may negatively affect the stability of couples' relationships and their ability to benefit from the marriage education services, SHM programs will be designed to refer and connect participants with services to address personal and family needs.

- **SHM programs will help couples become better parents.** Healthier marriages provide better environments for successful parenting. In particular, married couples who communicate well and know how to solve problems together are often more effective parents. SHM programs will also incorporate information about parenting skills for couples, including information on how to parent effectively as a team and ways that parenting issues can affect couple relationships. Programs will also address related issues such as the special challenges faced by couples who have children with partners other than their current spouses.

SHM Target Population

As described above, SHM will study the effects of marriage strengthening programs for economically disadvantaged married couples with children. More specifically, SHM programs will be designed to recruit, enroll, and serve couples who have the following characteristics:

- **The couple is married and has children.** As they enter the SHM program, participants will identify themselves as married. Another project funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) — the Building Strong Families evaluation — is studying programs to help *unmarried* couples who are having a child. Many other ACF-funded healthy marriage activities serve specific populations, such as couples in which one partner or spouse may have a child support order or adoptive couples in need of marriage strengthening services.

ACF's ultimate purpose in helping couples strengthen their relationships and marriages is to benefit their children. In order to understand whether that goal is being met, SHM programs will enroll couples living with at least one child under age 18, or expecting a child.
- **Both spouses are adults.** Both the husband and wife will be 18 or older to be part of the study. SHM's marriage education component is not designed to meet the special needs of married couples who are not yet adults.
- **Both spouses volunteer to participate.** SHM is for couples. Although a couple might benefit if only one of them learns the skills that will be taught through SHM programs, the couple and family are likely to benefit more if both spouses are committed to working on their marriage and both volunteer to participate.
- **The family is economically disadvantaged.** Marriage education programs have been studied extensively in the past, but most participants in these studies have not been economically disadvantaged. SHM is designed to learn whether these programs also help economically disadvantaged families, when adapted to meet their needs. Programs will seek to engage couples with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. One way to meet this objective is to work with organizations that already predominantly serve this population or locate programs in geographic areas that include large numbers of lower-income families.
- **The couple is not experiencing serious family violence issues.** SHM is not intended for couples who are in dangerous relationships. Programs will provide opportunities for the safe disclosure of domestic violence, as well as access to appropriate services when domestic

violence is disclosed. Each site will collaborate with local organizations who work with victims of domestic violence to develop an appropriate service protocol for these families.

The organizations that implement SHM programs are likely to be working already with families at particular stages of child-rearing. We therefore anticipate that some demonstration programs will serve all couples who meet the above target criteria, while others might target couples who have children of particular ages — for instance, couples with infants, young children, or adolescents. With respect to other family characteristics, however, SHM programs will serve a broad range of lower-income married couples, rather than serving narrow populations that might require very specialized interventions. For example, some SHM sites are likely to find themselves serving some couples in which one spouse has previously been incarcerated, or some couples who are struggling to recover from a spouse's infidelity, among the broader group of couples they serve. However, an SHM program is unlikely to specialize in serving *only* couples who face one of these challenges, given the study's goal of learning what kinds of programs work for lower-income married couples in general. Within these guidelines, the SHM team will work with each interested organization on a program model that both meets the organization's mission and serves SHM research needs.

SHM Program Components

The goal of SHM programs is to help interested married couples understand how to form and maintain better relationships, to become better parents for their children, and to have healthy long-lasting marriages. To accomplish this, every SHM program will include three components to be delivered over at least twelve to eighteen months: a core marriage education curriculum, extended marriage education activities that continue after the core sessions are completed, and supplemental services. All SHM components and services will be voluntary for both members of the couple and will be free of charge.

The core marriage education curriculum will cover a recommended set of topics and will be delivered primarily in a group setting with both partners of the couples present. This component will cover a broad range of topics and last at least 30 hours over several months. The SHM team will work with program sites to identify curricula that meet both the needs of their target populations and the SHM curriculum criteria discussed below. The team will also offer technical assistance to help programs adapt the curriculum they choose to the unique needs of the couples enrolled in their programs. Couples will be most motivated to attend and apply what they are learning if programs tailor their activities to be rewarding, fun, and relevant to the couples.

The second component, extended marriage education activities, will typically begin after the core curriculum is completed. Providers can design this component to include a wide range of engaging activities to reinforce and integrate the skills and concepts learned in the marriage education sessions, as well as to provide new information identified as a need by the couples or the facilitators. Booster

SHM Program Components

- Core Marriage Education Curriculum
- Extended Marriage Education Activities
- Supplemental Services

sessions, social events, peer mentoring, and marriage coaching are some examples of extended marriage education activities.

Supplemental services to couples, the third component, include ancillary services that support the goals of the marriage education program and the needs of married couples. These might include, for example, providing information and appropriate referrals for issues such as unemployment or underemployment. Some of these services might be provided directly to couples rather than through referrals, if the SHM providers offer such services.

All programs selected to be in the SHM project will include these three central components, but programs may decide to add complementary activities or approaches. For example, some programs might supplement their services with home visits. Others might find it useful to conduct couple inventories or personality assessments as tools to help couples understand both their individual similarities and differences and their characteristics as a couple.

Core marriage education curriculum

The core of an SHM program will be at least 30 hours of marriage education services provided in a group setting over several (typically three to five) months. The SHM team has reviewed a wide range of marriage education curricula being used nationally and has talked with experts who have designed, developed and offered marriage education curricula to couples. Although there is no consensus on how many hours of marriage education is optimal, approximately 30 hours should enable facilitators to cover the topics that the SHM team has identified as centrally important. By spreading the core sessions over a few months, programs can provide couples with the time they need to integrate what they are learning into their daily lives, while ensuring that couples are provided with a solid foundation of critical skills in the first few months of the program.

Core curriculum topics. There will not be one “SHM curriculum” that every program will use. However, we will be providing additional guidance about the topics that should be covered in SHM programs as we refine the program model guidelines in 2005. Below is an initial outline of curriculum topics that have been identified as important to cover in marriage education programs for low-income married couples. Some of the topics described below are not included in most current marriage education curricula but are likely to be important for strengthening the marriages of disadvantaged couples. The SHM team will be working with programs and curriculum developers to ensure that appropriate curriculum modules are available on each of these topics.

- ***Understanding marriage.*** Marriages that are healthy, stable, and long-lasting depend, in part, on couples having a shared vision of their marriage and what they would like it to be. This portion of the curriculum will cover such topics as how to define a healthy marriage and how to work together to achieve shared goals.
- ***Managing conflict.*** Communication is a central skill needed to build the strongest possible marital relationship. Couples also need to understand and learn to manage emotions when they have disagreements. This part of the curriculum will provide couples with the skills for solving problems and resolving conflict in ways that enhance their marriage, and identifying early warning

signs of marital problems so that couples can address those problems or seek help when needed.

- **Promoting positive connections between spouses.** The basis of a long-term healthy relationship often lies in developing deeper bonds of friendship and love. This portion of the curriculum will stress understanding each other's perspectives and dreams, spending and enjoying time together, creating shared goals, strengthening emotional connections, enhancing physical intimacy, and building mutual trust and commitment.
- **Strengthening relationships beyond the couple.** Although the spousal relationship forms the heart of any marriage, it is also important for couples to have strong relationships with others in their families, including their own children, parents, in-laws, and extended families. Of particular importance in SHM will be relationships resulting from step- or blended families, since relationships with step-children or children from other relationships have been found to present special challenges for couples, as have relationships with former partners. In addition, support networks are an important means of strengthening and reinforcing positive couple relationships. Faith-based or other community organizations, as well as the marriage education group itself, can provide crucial social support networks for couples.
- **Enhancing couples' ability to manage challenging external circumstances.** Couples who are living under stressful conditions, whether chronic issues or acute family crises, may find it difficult to interact in loving, supportive ways. The challenges of maintaining a healthy, mutually supportive relationship under difficult circumstances may, in fact, contribute to the particularly high rates of marital dissolution for couples with limited resources. These challenges can range from one spouse's mental health issues or substance abuse, to problems shared by both partners, such as financial stress or lack of safe, affordable housing. SHM programs will help couples to identify these kinds of challenges and find appropriate services to address them. In addition, the core curriculum will enhance couples' skills at problem-solving and coping with stress, helping them to maintain strong marriages despite challenges they may face together.
- **Strengthening parenting.** A healthy marital relationship provides a foundation for being effective parents. SHM programs will also address parenting issues directly. Programs will encourage couples to work as a team, for example, by sharing responsibilities and supporting each other in parenting decisions. Moreover, facilitators are likely to find that parenting challenges are useful "real life" examples to draw upon when they are helping couples develop a new skill, for instance in communication, problem-solving, or coping with stress. The particular way that each SHM program addresses parenting will depend, in part, on the population it is serving. For example, depending upon the ages of children whose parents are in the program, a component related to parenting could address issues from birth to adolescence.

Core curriculum format. Many experts believe that the way that marriage education is delivered is at least as important as what is covered. SHM facilitators will have skills and experience appropriate to the curriculum they are using. They will understand the needs of economically disadvantaged couples and demonstrate an ability to motivate, empathize, and be non-judgmental. Facilitators are most likely to establish rapport with both the husbands and wives participating in the program if they work in male /

female teams who share a similar cultural background with the couples in the group. This is particularly important since many programs find that engaging men in marriage education or similar programs requires special attention to providing an environment that is inviting to men. Finally, SHM facilitators will be trained to identify any issues that require outside intervention and will know how to appropriately handle the referral processes developed by the program.

Although we expect that all programs will cover the core marriage education topics through group meetings, the methods used to teach these skills to participants may vary considerably. Different curricula emphasize different approaches to teaching. For example, some programs structure their sessions to begin with a short lecture, followed by demonstration of a new skill by the facilitator, followed by an interactive exercise for each couple to practice. Other programs regularly use group discussions to generate new insights for the couples. The most effective curricula will maximize learning by using a mix of approaches, including in-person demonstrations and role modeling, videos, direct practice of new skills by couples, coaching of couples in developing skills, and group discussions.

Because we anticipate a wide variety of educational backgrounds of participants, SHM programs will generally keep lecturing to a minimum in favor of interactive activities that are interesting and help participants build and practice their skills. When new information is presented, the most engaging curricula provide it in a variety of formats, such as news articles, videos, and exercises that generate discussion about the topic. Materials for many marriage education curricula (such as handouts and videos) might need to be adapted to make them more useful for the income, educational, and ethnic diversity that might be present among SHM couples. These adaptations can take a number of forms, such as using materials that are relevant to the everyday lives of economically disadvantaged couples, that are concrete and that allow for more instructional time. As the SHM team, service providers, and curriculum developers work together, a high priority will be placed on developing materials that are culturally sensitive toward the couples being served.

In addition to the core set of group sessions involving couples, programs might choose to use unique approaches for particular aspects of the curriculum. For example, while both members of each couple will participate in most sessions together, there might be times when wives and husbands meet in separate groups. Similarly, while spouses are the primary participants in the program, some programs may find it beneficial to include additional family members, such as children, parents, or others, in selected program sessions.

Extended marriage education activities

Marriage education activities that continue once the core curriculum is completed are important because some previous research suggests that extending marriage education may increase the positive effects of these programs. The goal is to offer activities that couples will find fun and motivating and that will keep them actively engaged while they continue to learn, to strengthen their marital relationships, and to receive assistance with specific issues that may arise in their marriages over time. These activities should be offered frequently over the course of a year. Some providers might offer more intensive programs that last longer.

The following is a brief description of some extended marriage education activities that programs might sponsor.

- **Booster sessions.** Booster sessions are an extension of the marriage education program. These extra sessions might be used to reinforce lessons that were taught in the initial core curriculum, to teach new lessons that might be appropriate, or to answer questions that might have come up while using the skills. Alternatively, a range of extra classes might be offered, with each one appropriate for only some couples. For example, one class might be appropriate for couples with a new child, another class might be for couples who were recently married, and another class might be offered to provide extra help for newly blended families.
- **Peer mentoring or peer coaching.** Couples might be paired with other couples trained to provide ongoing mentoring. A particular advantage of this approach is that couples have access to personalized assistance and information from peers who have had similar experiences. This type of component can be challenging to implement, however, as it requires substantial oversight and coordination by the program and considerable commitment by the mentor couples. As an alternative, some programs encourage marriage education “graduates” to return to future marriage education sessions to help coach other couples who are practicing new skills. This has the added benefit of helping couples who have completed the core curriculum to maintain their positive engagement in the program and to solidify their own skills even further.
- **One-on-one coaching.** A coach who is a member of the program’s paid staff could meet with a couple individually to help them learn skills or work on challenging issues in their relationship. This interaction could take place either at the program’s facility or in the couple’s home. As with peer mentoring, one-on-one coaching has the advantage of allowing couples to work on particular issues that are important to them on their own schedule.
- **Group social events or community service activities.** Some programs might make a special effort to encourage each group of couples to become its own support system for one another. Providing booster sessions that are social events, opportunities for community service, or some combination of social interaction, community service, and/or educational information, could help groups develop into long-term support networks.
- **Date nights.** Many couples, particularly those with young children, might have trouble finding the time to spend alone working on their relationships. Programs might help by providing them with child care for “date nights” or by providing vouchers for entertainment.
- **Family activities.** Some programs may want to include the children or other family members of couples in particular activities. This could involve using specialized educational modules designed for family members, or simply including the family in recreational activities sponsored by the program.

While SHM programs are required to provide marriage education services beyond the core curricula, there is no specified format for the activities. The above list is just a starting set of ideas — program providers are welcome to innovate in designing these activities so that they appeal to the participants in their local programs. In fact, to maximize participants’ “ownership” of the program and their interest in

continuing with these activities, programs may want to ask potential participants for their input on how to design these extended activities and to adjust them as participants provide feedback over time.

Similarly, while SHM programs are required to provide these extended activities for at least a year, providers are encouraged to think creatively about working with couples over an even longer term. For example, some programs may want to offer continuing activities as an ongoing resource for couples that have no “end point” rather than as a time-limited set of services. Although the best evidence suggests that working with couples over an extended period can provide important benefits, it does not suggest what form that longer-term follow-up should take, nor is there any good evidence about how long couples can be expected to sustain involvement in this type of program. It is likely that different couples will benefit from different types of extended activities, and the SHM project hopes to learn more about the most effective strategies for participation and retention by observing different approaches.

Supplemental Services

Because SHM services will be provided to economically disadvantaged couples, many couples in SHM may face challenges related to lack of financial resources, marital distress more severe than marriage education is designed to address, or other problems. These problems have the potential to affect a couple’s relationship and their children’s well-being, as well as to limit the couple’s ability to attend marriage education sessions or to use the skills they are learning. The supplemental services component of the program will be designed to provide couples with access to a range of services and supports to address a full range of challenges to their marital relationship.

In particular, programs will have the capacity to link couples to supplemental services and sources of support in the community. One way to accomplish this could be by designating a staff member as a case manager or family coordinator, but programs may use different approaches depending upon their own service delivery structures. SHM programs can help couples gain access to these services not only by making an effort to learn about their problems and by knowing where the services exist, but also by building strong connections to those services. They might develop linkages and agreements with a variety of social service agencies, such as family services agencies, employment-related agencies, hospital-based parenting programs, and other community and faith-based groups to ensure adequate and timely access to services. Follow-up to ensure that the couple received appropriate services must be a key component of the referral process.

If the organization providing SHM services has the resources, it could provide some supplemental services directly, especially if the SHM program is housed in a large social service agency. For example, a program run by mental health professionals might be able to work one-on-one with individuals and couples around issues related to depression, substance abuse, severe marital distress, or domestic violence. Or a program associated with a workforce development program may be able to help the couple find work-related supports.

Program Supports For Participation

A marriage education program based in solid research and delivered by a dynamic instructor will have no effect if couples do not attend. SHM programs will work creatively to recruit couples and keep them active

in the program over time. Locating the program in a pleasant environment; designing activities that are fun and motivating; hiring warm, engaging staff; and making sure that couples leave each session with immediately useful new skills and information are all important foundations for getting and keeping couples excited about the program.

Potential barriers to participation will vary for different populations in different geographic areas, but they might include both attitudinal barriers and logistical ones. On the attitudinal side, couples may initially view participation as an admission that there are problems in their marriage, as can often be the case with marriage counseling or mental health services. Recruitment materials should be designed to counteract this and other perceived stigma. As the SHM team works with programs, we will provide technical assistance about recruitment, marketing, and engagement that is specific to each site's target population and circumstances.

Even couples who are eager to participate in SHM programs may face logistical barriers — in particular, lack of time or money to attend. Programs will be prepared to help couples address these issues. As a starting point, program planners will structure the sessions to make it as easy as possible for both working and non-working parents to attend.

SHM programs will also offer a number of specific supports to help couples to participate consistently:

- **Child care.** Since both members of couples are expected to attend marriage education classes, child care may be needed for families with younger children. SHM programs will be prepared to arrange for child care to be provided near or at the location where classes are taught or provide vouchers that parents can use with a provider that they choose.
- **Transportation.** SHM couples may lack means of regular transportation. SHM programs will be sensitive to problems with transportation when they decide where and when to hold their activities. Programs might conduct group sessions near neighborhoods where SHM couples live or near convenient public transportation. SHM programs might also provide transportation or transportation vouchers.
- **Incentives for participation.** Even in a well-run, engaging program, it is likely to be a challenge to keep participants active for an extended time. Programs may try to boost attendance by offering incentives, such as gift certificates or raffles, for couples who attend.

SHM Service Providers

SHM services can be provided by a variety of organizations. Discussions with leading experts on marriage education programs and services for low-income families suggest that SHM service providers might include community-based and social service organizations that are faith-based or secular; health services organizations or clinics; as well as governmental or educational entities. It is likely that other types of organizations would be appropriate service providers as well.

SHM programs will operate on a large scale, serving several hundred participants during the course of the evaluation. In some cases, one SHM “site” might be made up of more than one service provider. A group of organizations could work together so that: (a) each is responsible for delivering part of the

program services or (b) each delivers the entire program and the organizations combine their enrollment to make up one SHM site.

However, in order to be considered a site in the SHM project, the collaborating organizations will agree on a common curriculum and program model and, preferably, a shared philosophy of serving economically disadvantaged married couples. There will be a connection between the organizations that includes regular communication to insure consistency over time, and the group will designate one organization as the “project lead” to work with the SHM study team. This lead organization will facilitate communication between the participating locations and members of the SHM team as they work together to build an innovative and effective marriage education program.

MDRC
19th Floor
16 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016-4236
(212) 532-3200
www.mdrc.org

SHM Project Director
Virginia Knox
shm@mdrc.org

The Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation Team

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The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) is the principal advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs designed to improve the economic and social well-being of children and families.

Lead Evaluator

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through research and the active communication of findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs. MDRC helped pioneer the use of scientifically rigorous research methods to determine whether policies and programs make a difference and why. The organization is known for asking tough questions, collecting reliable evidence, and providing objective, clear answers. Over the years, MDRC has worked in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, Canada, and the United Kingdom. About a quarter of a million people have participated in MDRC studies.

MDRC's current projects focus on five policy areas: K-12 education, family well-being and child development, low-wage workers and working communities, welfare and barriers to employment, and young adult and post-secondary education. In some cases, MDRC develops, manages, and evaluates multi-site demonstrations — pilot programs — to field test new programs before they are widely adopted. In other cases, MDRC evaluates new or ongoing government or community programs. These projects include major studies of state and county welfare reforms; innovative approaches to alleviating poverty; and studies of education reforms intended to boost academic achievement and access to college, particularly for students from low-income families.

Partner Organizations

Abt Associates, Inc., founded in 1965 and headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with offices in Bethesda, Maryland, and Chicago, is an employee-owned company that provides research-based services for domestic and foreign governments, corporations, and institutions. Abt's approximately 1,100 professional, program, and support staff conduct qualitative and quantitative studies in both the public and private sectors. Abt has completed projects in 75 countries and has earned a reputation for delivering practical, measurable, high-added-value results.

Abt has conducted major large-scale random assignment experiments on programs for children and families, including the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP), Even Start, and the Child Care Subsidy Experiments (CCSE). In CCSE, Abt is currently leading a team (which includes MDRC) responsible for canvassing promising state and county policies that could be studied in random

assignment experiments. Abt has also used a wide array of quantitative and qualitative research methods for policy analysis. Past projects have applied techniques ranging from ethnographies to national surveys, case studies to meta-analyses, cost-benefit analysis to microsimulation modeling.

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization established in 1979 whose primary goal is to improve the quality, scope, and use of research and statistical information concerning America's children and families. It is one of the nation's leading sources of credible data, state-of-the-art measurement development, and high-quality research on children. It has worked with multiple federal agencies to help design and document national surveys, develop and test survey questionnaires and instruments, and conceptualize and assess the impacts of programs.

Optimal Solutions Group (OSG), a certified Small Disadvantaged Business, is an economic and social policy research consulting firm located in Baltimore, Maryland. OSG serves federal, state, and local government agencies; businesses; and foundations. The firm has extensive experience designing and implementing statistical surveys and focus groups, performing research and program evaluation in the policy areas of criminal justice, economic development, education, social welfare, and workforce development, and has technical expertise in assessing performance management and designing, integrating, and training staff on MIS case management software.

McFarland & Associates Inc., a certified Small Disadvantaged Business, is a technical and professional services company located in Silver Spring, Maryland, with extensive experience providing logistical support for conferences, meetings, and reviews sponsored by federal government and state agencies.