

## ORR Lessons Learned

### Child Care

The young Vietnamese refugee, Amerasian, and trafficking couples are too busy to come to our workshops. We try to resolve this problem by scheduling our workshops for the weekend. We also announce that we have a computer room for kids and volunteers who can care for the young children with books, drawing materials, and crayons. Having activities for both parents *and* kids also brings more young couples with young children to attend. We also urge the couples who attended our training workshop to recruit more couples, such as friends, married children, and neighbors.

### Orientation

During the first three months, the refugee family undergoes orientation—learning how to count change, use a credit card, cash a check, ride on the subway. We have added to these orientation sessions a marriage education session for couples, a mentoring class for older couples or widows, and a healthy dating/marriage expectation class for teens. Getting arriving refugees into our classes before they start work or school is a key part of our recruitment strategy.

### Gender Differences

The Hmong women who attended our PAIRS training want to practice what they learned, but their husbands do not give them the time, place, or chance to use the ideas and concepts. Culturally, Hmong men do not communicate with their spouses face-to-face and up close and thus do not see the advantages and the benefits of building communication skills between themselves and their spouses. Because Hmong men believe that those who receive the lessons such as marriage enrichment are lacking the communication skills or have a problematic marriage, they feel they will lose face in attending these programs. The men do not seek help until a problem occurs, or they deny that there is no problem.

The men need to see the outcome of the program, which can be a fun, expressive, and unconditional

loving relationship with their spouse, family members, and other people in their life. The local project officer therefore encouraged two men who had completed the training to contact other men and confirm how the program has helped them and their families.

### Cultural Expectations

People are not interested in the program because it includes other people who would hear their problems. In Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian culture, families are expected to solve their own problems without anybody's help. Our agency has started distributing brochures at all the places where B/C/S people are visiting, such as businesses and local social services organizations, requesting that they display marriage enrichment brochures openly and prominently. In addition, we are working through community leaders.

### Muslim Beliefs

Our agency has formed alliances with Muslim religious leaders and convinced them that the core concepts of the curriculum align with Muslim beliefs. The agency continues to emphasize the positive correlation between marriage enrichment and these religious beliefs in the programs.

### Advertising

Advertising for the Marriage Enrichment program in Russian community newspapers has yielded very low results. Extensive personal contact within the Russian community made up for advertising disappointment. Eventually, the local agency found that the offer of assistance in learning English while participating in PAIRS classes proved successful. The Russian refugees are motivated by the chance of learning more about the American culture and English language. In some instances, those who come for marriage enrichment training finish the classes with more knowledge in other areas.

### Recruiting Volunteers and Interns

One of our program consultants is a professor at California State University at Long Beach. From him, we learned how easy it is to recruit volunteers and interns for marriage enrichment programs as he recruited Vietnamese-speaking students to run our Relationship Enhancement skill practice sessions. He told us that there are generally more students seeking volunteer positions than the universities receive requests for opportunities. Since we attended training at the university, we were able to see the announcements sent to the School of Family Life. We found that most of the requests to the School of Family Life were from social service organizations offering opportunities not related to the family life field.

### **Resolving Transportation Problems**

Since we expected that many refugee families will have transportation problems, we decided instead to bring the classes to the community. Besides offering classes at each of our contractor's sites, we now offer classes at Catholic churches, Buddhist temples, and refugee community centers, each of which is within walking distance of refugee families. If needed, we will offer classes in refugee homes.

### **Model Inappropriate**

The model that we initially selected for implementation with refugees did not work as well as we planned because (1) the language and model of delivery of the model was geared more to middle- to upper middle-class Anglo-Americans, (2) there was very little focus on effective communication between parents and children; (3) extensive and costly adaptations were necessary to make the model applicable to refugees; (4) materials were too costly; and (5) the experiences and challenges of refugees as well as specific ways they can overcome their challenges were outside of its expertise. Therefore, we concluded that this model was not appropriate for African refugees.

We subsequently selected the Family Wellness model for the following reasons: (1) capacity to facilitate the train the trainer model; (2) ease with which cultural and linguistic adaptations could be made; (3) applicability to a wider range of cultural groups and participants (i.e. couples, unmarried individuals, couples with children, single parents, "non-traditional" families, and teenagers); (4)

content that addressed communication, conflict resolution, focus on the family and community; (5) focus on recognizing and dealing effectively with family changes (family cycle changes and migration changes); and (6) cost-effectiveness.

Staff particularly enjoyed delivery of messages through role-playing and dramatization; believed that the material, which included real examples of problems faced by refugees, reflected the lives of refugee families; and accepted that the focus on skills rather than issues was the best approach to working with refugees.

### **Apartment Complex**

Refugees generally seek out housing in apartment buildings with large concentrations of refugees. We use the bulletin boards there to announce the sessions, contact families there to ask them to talk to other families, and then hold the sessions right at the apartment complex. We find that bringing the course to the people allows for 90-minute sessions for five or six weeks which is the best way to teach marriage education. Refugees will stop attending multi-sessions courses if they have to provide transportation.

### **Similar Programs**

In one of our cities, we encountered competition with other agencies providing similar programs. We then moved to create an advisory board rather than a coalition. This allowed all members to brainstorm and provide creative ideas and change the competitive environment to one that is more cooperative.

### **Choosing Staff/Presenters**

The paid staff for this project is responsible for many aspects of this project. In light of the amount of time needed to train trainers, outreach in the community, and provide timely reports, more manpower is needed to perform the tasks of this project. We responded by enlisting VISTA volunteers and other agency staff to assist with outreach, training, and event planning activities. Subsequently, we trained 15 staff and volunteers and are in the process of assisting with project activities.

### **Lack of Enthusiasm**

Due to lack of information and misconception about the project, mainstream as well as refugee organizations in the Las Vegas community were hesitant to participate. It took great perseverance to overcome this. We engaged in routine education about the project that reflected our commitment to helping refugee families and organized small groups of individuals and community leaders to engage in intimate conversations about the refugee family. The refugee family, as opposed to the couples' marriage, became the focus of these conversations.

We observed a gradual shift in the community's perception of the project reflected in openness to discuss and problem solve with our organization.

### **Dating**

The Slavic site used their connections with local churches to host "couples nights"—elegant evening affairs where couples sat at tables by romantic candlelight and learned about marriage skills. The environment was comfortable—at the local church, fun, elegant, romantic—and people asked for more!

### **Camping Trip**

The Slavic site has organized a camping weekend for intensive trainings for couples, scheduled for this summer. Response has been very encouraging.

### **Coalition with CPS**

The Cambodian project has found great success at developing relationships with local Child Protective Services, who send a regular flow of clients with recommendations or requirements that they participate in trainings. Although some clients are reluctant and resentful when they arrive, most express satisfaction that the training was interesting and helpful.

### **Enlisting Existing Organizations**

The Mien group found it effective to contact existing ESL classes, senior groups and youth programs to ask to provide the training to these groups. The groups were already convened and already knew each other, so it was relatively simple to facilitate and conduct the trainings.

Curricula, however, had to be adapted for each group.

### **Ongoing Adaptation**

At first, we found it difficult to identify a "research-based" curriculum that seemed suitable for the diversity of cultural groups we aimed to serve. Although we settled at last on a curriculum that was developed with mainstream American audiences in mind, we benefitted from the adaptations already made by pilot sites from the previous grant cycle. We encouraged each site to adapt the curriculum further to suit the interests and needs of its ethnic community. We have heard from each site director that it was very valuable to have a curriculum as a starting base, but that they continue to learn how best to make lessons interesting and appropriate. This is an on-going learning process which has been interesting and fruitful.

### **Unsolved Challenges**

It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of our programs. Participants tell grantees that they like the courses, but we wonder whether they actually practice their new-found skills at home. What will be the long-term impact on their families and on their lives? This we have not found a solution to yet. We would like to develop some effective evaluation tools, but we have not yet settled on the best approach to this.

### **College Interns**

Each community program was encouraged to call local colleges to request an intern. These interns were then put to work in fund raising and resource identification. After certification, they have also helped in training couples. Because they were not working on ORR funds, they are able train non-refugees as well as refugees. We are allowed to count these course completions in our monthly reports.

### **Mentor Couples**

Refugee funds may be used only for refugees. Once a refugee obtains citizenship, he is no longer eligible to be served by refugee social service funds. ORR therefore encouraged grantees to train couples who have become citizens as mentor

couples willing to act as a community resource to recently married couples and newly arriving couples. Because the benefit accrues to the refugee community, this is an acceptable use of refugee funds.

### **Diverse Refugee Communities**

Ten years ago, our arrivals were predominantly from Cuba and Vietnam. Arrivals from these countries have since slowed to a trickle, and most of our arrivals are now from the Middle East. We have hired an Arabic-speaking project officer to teach new arrivals. Although he cannot speak Vietnamese or Spanish, he is able to convene training sessions in English for these established couples and train them as mentor couples. Members of these communities then train the new arrivals from Cuba and Vietnam.

### **Train the Trainer**

In order to boost the number of couples trained, the Chicago and Atlanta projects decided to involve other local refugee organizations in the program. The Chicago project, for example, invited 14 other Chicago-area refugee organizations to send their staff to a large meeting where they were introduced to the new program. Subsequently, 40 local area staff members were trained as marriage educators in the Power of Two by the program Director, Susan Heitler. With such a large group, the Chicago group was able to negotiate sizeable discounts for training materials and training fees.

The local refugee organizations then taught couples in their respective ethnic communities. By the end of the first year, Chicago had trained 1,238 people in healthy marriages courses, including groups of Soviets, Iranians, Iraqis, Somalis, Afghans, and Bosnians.

### **Teens**

In summertime, most teens have a great deal of time on their hands. We sign them up for marriage and healthy dating courses. We require that the parents sign a release form and take note of the names and phone numbers of the parents. After the teen activity is over, we call the parents and ask them to attend a parenting course for themselves.

### **VISTA and Americorps Volunteers**

ORR gave each grantee specific instructions on hiring VISTA/Americorp volunteers. We hired these volunteers and used them to train non-refugees, thereby expanding and leveraging the reach of marriage education funds.

### **Contact the State Coordinators**

Grantees have been encouraged to contact State Refugee Coordinators for refugee social service funds to augment these grants. So far, six Coordinators have put out about \$120,000 altogether.

### **Re-Work the Concept**

Relationship skill building and marriage education are alien to the majority of refugee communities and teach communication skills based on the American communication style. All educational models need to be culturally adjusted to the needs of refugees.

Following the training of our project staff in PAIRS and the Power of Two, we developed curricula that incorporated not only the experience of marriage education programs in the U.S., but that also traditions, experiences, values and needs of the targeted refugee populations. Presentations were made in the native language of the target group and included discussions and scenarios relevant to their past and present experiences.

### **Recruitment**

The overwhelming majority of newcomers to the U.S. work in low-paying jobs and lack access to reliable transportation, and may be playing new roles in their families. Often, it is not possible to schedule multi-day trainings. Many agencies find recruitment for classes difficult. Training and introductory sessions almost always take place at facilities near apartment houses where refugees live. Many program directors made arrangement with landlords or community centers to obtain their cooperation for using the facilities for training.

### **Small Businesses**

Small businesses are the life blood of the ethnic community. They have many contacts and relationships that you can exploit to support your activities. Offer to train them in the first group and ask them to talk it up in the community.

## **Target the People Who Know People**

Nobody knows more about the state of the family than the people who work on their hair and nails. We identified ethnic barber shops and beauty parlors and offered training to their staff at the beginning. We got them to promote the program to their many customers. Properly trained and satisfied with the instruction, these professionals can promote these courses *by the hour*.

## **The Clergy Are on Your Side**

The clergy spend a great deal of their professional lives in counseling couples, both in pre-marital sessions and pre-divorce proceedings. As a general rule, they are very interested in lowering the divorce rate and quite happy to help with these courses, which they view as not only furthering their spiritual aims, but also reducing their workload. Most will allow use of their facilities for instruction. In addition, they will do outreach within their congregations and arrange for the agency to train their members as mentor couples.

## **Ethnic Stereotypes**

Typically, Russians believe that happy families do not participate in any kind of marital education/consultation activities. Participation signals problems within the family. The project officer must therefore identify several community leaders with strong and vibrant marriages. Discuss with them the problem and ask them to attend a special session. Train these three or four strong families first and ask them to talk it up throughout the community. When others see that happy and secure families have attended these sessions, they will lose their inhibitions.

## **Confidentiality**

Refugees tend to keep their problems inside family and are not accustomed to talk about family conflicts with outsiders. Many people feel that they would be endangered.

- In our outreach activities, we assured refugees that these sessions are skill-building courses, *not* therapy or group encounter. Participants are not expected to discuss personal or family problems in the sessions

- To alleviate fears, we began one-on-one meetings with couples prior to the start of classes, which eased the confidentiality-related fears. We asked these couples to spread the word in the community about the program. Over a period of a few weeks, word of mouth information became quite positive
- Therefore, we always steered our discussions away from personal problems during the sessions. We reminded attendees that the purpose of the sessions is to produce a frank and open communication *within* the family, not *outside* the family. We asked attendees at early sessions to emphasize this when they speak with persons who have not yet attended a session.

## **Indifference**

Many refugees believe that marriage education is not relevant to their immediate needs.

For this reasons, in our training curricula, we include chapters on specific effects of immigration and pre-immigration stress on the family system. Other topics which attract refugee attention are parenting, refugee family and American laws, and adjustment to the American social system. Also, In order to improve recruitment, the programs incorporate healthy marriage activities into their other programs, such as arrival orientation.

## **Youth Don't Have Time**

During the school year, many youths are too busy with school work and social activities to follow through with commitments to health dating/family conciliation/marriage expectation courses. For this reason, we have developed special summer sessions when the youth have abundant free time.

## **Language problems**

Our community has many different ethnic groups with different languages. To train as many as possible, we imitated the Chicago project (above) which arranged to train its coalition members as marriage educators. The staff of the other organizations then conducted marriage education classes in their own languages.

## **Financial Education**

We partnered with a local refugee organization that

had been awarded an Individual Development Account (IDA) grant from ORR. The refugees thus receive financial education from the IDA grantee and marriage education from us.

### **Earned Income Tax Credit**

Most refugee families with children are eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit, but few are familiar with it and almost nobody can get through the worksheet. ORR is preparing material for use by grantees to assist low-income refugees to ensure that refugees apply for this rebate. Grantees can use this opportunity to promote the marriage education program.

### **Homework**

We teach our sessions in several formats, with both all-day sessions and weekly two-hour sessions. For the all-day session, we split out each couple is a corner of the room and ask them to practice their skills on a specific exercise. We do this three or four times during the day, moving then from a specific work book exercise to a more personal family problem. For the weekly sessions, we give them exercises for homework to practice briefly every day. Most are willing to do this and see the value of it.

### **Too Darn Busy**

Couples often have chaotic split work schedules, which preclude them from attending courses together. Also, in some instances, cultural demands do not allow women to discuss family issues in front of men. We therefore developed special curricula for one-gender groups with the full use of role-playing.

### **Teenagers**

Participation was low because refugee couples didn't believe that they needed a marriage education course. We therefore developed a session on handling teen-agers and re-advertised program as "How to Understand Your Teenager." Refugee families readily signed up for this course because they are concerned about their teenagers. The first four hour session of this course describes techniques for conflict resolution with teenagers. In the second four-hour session, the presenter tells participants that the tension between parents is a major cause of teen defiance. This session went on

to teach participants skill-building techniques for couples. The couples readily accept marriage education sessions as long as they are packaged as a parental exercises.

### **Introductory Workshops**

In several sites the initial strategy was to target one ethnic group only and start training couples in marriage education without previous preparation (no introductory workshops). This approach resulted in low numbers of people trained. The project learned that direct implementation of models without previous broad education campaign slows down the educational process with refugee populations.

### **In-kind Exchange**

A nearby Hispanic church is very interested in our work and wanted us to train them. However, since we receive refugee funds, we cannot use these funds to train non-refugees. But it's okay to train non-refugees if we get something in return. So we trained six of their church members in exchange for free use of their parish hall on Saturdays. ORR allows us to count both the Hispanic members that we trained as well as the couples that *they* subsequently trained.

### **Reluctance to Attend**

In our community, burned-out refugees are reluctant to commit to another activity. In an effort to make training easily accessible and enjoyable for participants, we developed a shorter, one-time training session to introduce the concepts. We used this to entice them into longer, more intensive, multiple-session courses.

### **Translation**

Translating program materials is a difficult and time-consuming process. Many agencies are not equipped to do so and can't afford to give extra time to their workers for that. As a consequence, we developed simple and brief hand-outs and flyers. The emphasis is on the interaction with the audience.

### **Evaluation**

When administering the pre- and post-tests, some projects encountered resistance and objections to

the formulation of the questions, wording of the answers, and overall need for a survey form. In response, survey forms were adjusted and reworded in native languages of participants. The presenter also made a point of explaining the purpose of the surveys so that participants were not threatened or suspicious of the information gathering. This including reiterating the project's commitment to maintaining confidentiality and pointing out that no names are collected on the forms.

hope. After a while, we approach them privately and ask them to bring their husbands to the training sessions. If the husband refuses, we ask her to come anyway to be trained as a mentor.

### **Recruitment Problems**

Refugees often fear any kind of authority figures, and are reluctant to seek help from them. To prevent this, we used **informal** locations for sessions (libraries, apartment buildings, café-shops) to ease mistrust of “authorities.”

### **Promotion**

To promote our program, we

- Developed an introductory mini-session which we then used for various community activities to bring more people to the longer sessions:
- Held introductory sessions in conjunction with significant community events (Mom's night out, Cultural event for seniors, Prairie Middle School Theater Play, national holidays of our ethnic groups, religious holidays)
- Conducted introductory presentations of the program at the Citizenship Classes, ESL classes, during conferences and different consortium meetings.
- Developed posters and flyers for community buildings.
- Contacted ethnic radio stations and newspapers to mention our new classes.

### **Support Group**

We developed a support group consisting of refugee wives who meet every Wednesday to talk about their problems. We don't train them with skill-building techniques, but just encourage them to talk about their problems and learn from each other. It really helps, especially for the ones that are unhappy and lonely and it gives them some