OPRE
Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families

The BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROJECT:

Initial Implementation of a Couples-Focused Employment Program

Heather Zaveri
Alan Hershey

October 2010

MATHEMATICA
Policy Research, Inc.

BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank many people for their important contributions to this report. First, our thanks go to the staff at the Center for Urban Families (CFUF). Joe Jones, Cassandra Codes-Johnson, Moses Hammett, and Will Davis led CFUF's efforts. During interviews, they and their staff provided thoughtful insights and comments about developing a new program. We would especially like to thank the couples who took the time to speak with us about their experiences in Couples Employment.

This report would not have been possible without the ongoing support and guidance of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). We gratefully acknowledge Nancye Campbell and Seth Chamberlain at OPRE; both provided valuable oversight and thoughtful guidance. This report benefited greatly from their careful review of an earlier version.

At Mathematica, the authors benefited from the site visit expertise of Tahra Nichols and programming support from Sarah Turchin. Rob Wood and Gretchen Kirby carefully reviewed an earlier draft of this report. Amanda Bernhardt skillfully oversaw the editing process, and Donna Dorsey and Camille Finch provided exemplary production support.

We gratefully acknowledge these many contributions. However, please note that the opinions and conclusions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of OPRE, the Administration for Children and Families, or HHS.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY xi

I INTRODUCTION 1

A. Initial Interest in Supporting Couples' Employment and Relationship Needs 2

B. Implementation Study of Couples Employment 3

II THE COUPLES EMPLOYMENT DEMONSTRATION 5

A. Staffing 6

B. Recruitment 7

1. Target Population and Process for Identifying Potential Participants 7
2. Outreach and Recruitment of Couples 8

C. Service Components 8

1. Family-Focused Employment Plans 9
2. Group-Based Workshops 10
3. Couples Case Management 12

III ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION PATTERNS 13

A. Enrollment in Couples Employment 13

B. Characteristics of Participants 13

C. Participation in Case Management and Group-Based Workshops 17

IV COUPLES' INTEREST AND EXPERIENCES 21

V CHALLENGES FOR A DUAL-PURPOSE PROGRAM TARGETED TO COUPLES 23

A. Four Challenges Facing Couples Employment 23

B. Next Steps for Couples Employment 24

REFERENCES 27

Contents *(continued)*

APPENDIX A: 2008 FAMILY-FOCUSED EMPLOYMENT PLAN TEMPLATE

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION OF GROUP-BASED WORKSHOP TOPICS

APPENDIX C: COUPLES EMPLOYMENT ENROLLMENT FORMS

TABLES

II.1 Couples Employment Staffing, 2008 6

III.1 Number of Individuals Enrolled in Couples Employment, April–December 2008 14

III.2 Characteristics of Individuals Enrolled in Couples Employment, by Gender (percentage unless otherwise noted) 15

III.3 Case Management Contacts, August–December 2008 18

III.4 Initiating Attendance at Group-Based Workshops by December 31, 2008 19

III.5 Average Number of Group-Based Workshop Sessions Attended Through December 31, 2008[a] 20

FIGURES

II.1 Couples Employment Conceptual Framework.....5

II.2 Couples Employment Services 9

II.3 Selected Quotes from Family-Focused Employment Plans Illustrate Couples' Commitment to Collaboration.....11

III.1 Couples Employment Enrollment Flow, 2008 14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"I always thought about what I wanted to do, what I want. But as soon as you start [Couples Employment], both goals are on the same sheet of paper and you see what [we] both want. Mend the lives together and stop thinking as 'I' and start thinking as 'we.'" - Couples Employment Participant

Being in a marital or couple relationship can have a powerful impact on the decisions an individual makes. But as currently implemented, social service programs often target individuals, frequently overlooking how those they serve are influenced by their relationships and how those relationships may help or hinder achievement of a program's goals. For example, employment programs often target individuals, even though employment problems affect not only individuals but also their families and the individual's relationship with his or her partner, if present. A program's efforts to address an individual's employment problems may affect those relationships, and the family's response may affect the individual's success–and, in turn, the program's success–in addressing the employment issues. In contrast, recently developed healthy relationship and marriage education programs enroll couples, but these programs focus primarily on the couple's relationship and typically do not provide services to directly address other challenges the couple may face.

The Couples Employment Demonstration Program

The Couples Employment (CE) project, operated by the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) in Baltimore, Maryland, is an effort to design and demonstrate how a voluntary intervention for couples might address employment and relationship issues at the same time, to capitalize on the ways that success in each might affect the other.[1] To achieve this goal, CFUF created a flexible program model that simultaneously emphasizes joint employment planning, relationship support, and engagement of the couple in dialogue, planning, and education focused on family economic self-sufficiency and healthy relationships. CFUF has a history of providing employment services to individuals through STRIVE Baltimore[2] as well as relationship support services through Baltimore Building Strong Families.[3] In summer 2007, CFUF began planning for CE, adapting its existing strategies to treat employment as a couple and family issue to be addressed collaboratively.

The CE program model aims to enhance couples' economic success and family stability via instruction around financial issues and mutual collaboration around economic goals and family stability. CE recruits married or unmarried couples, employed or unemployed, who share child-rearing responsibilities. These couples are offered three program components: group workshops, development of a family-focused employment plan, and couples case management. Couples may participate in CE services for up to six months, with group workshop participation limited to the first three months.

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[1] Mathematica Policy Research, under contract to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is conducting an implementation study that documents CFUF's efforts to develop and offer CE. The study will continue through 2011.

[2] STRIVE Baltimore is a three-week job training program for hard-to-employ individuals, offering tools to achieve higher wages and create self-sufficient families and communities.

[3] In Baltimore and seven other sites, the Building Strong Families project is conducting a random assignment evaluation to assess marriage and relationship education and other family support services for unwed parents who are expecting or recently had a child.

Group workshops currently include two components: 1) presentations on economic self-sufficiency topics (financial literacy, budgeting, education, entrepreneurship, and housing) and 2) discussions focused on strengthening couples' relationships. Couples begin attending workshops after enrollment and may attend workshops in any sequence. Early in CE operations, these workshops were held monthly and focused only on economic self-sufficiency. Workshop frequency was changed to weekly when CE staff realized that the workshops seemed to fuel couples' enthusiasm for pursuing their goals but couples' interest waned because workshops occurred only monthly. Workshop content was also broadened to include discussion of topics related to couple relationships. Now about one-third of each workshop session focuses on relationship issues and the remainder on economic self-sufficiency. Employment development specialists (EDS) cover the material related to relationships, using the Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families Curriculum developed by CFUF for some exercises. Three contracted facilitators, each with relevant expertise, lead workshop segments on economic self-sufficiency topics related to career planning, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, education, and housing issues.

Soon after enrollment, each couple begins working with an EDS to develop a family-focused employment plan. This plan contains short- and long-term goals for each partner and specific ways the partners can support each other in reaching these goals. Goals fall into three categories: career, finances, and family. Once developed, the plan is a dynamic document that couples, with assistance from their EDS, revise and update as they progress through CE and possibly after they complete the program. The plan also guides case management efforts by EDSs, which may involve addressing couples' particular circumstances, identifying community resources, making referrals to programs at CFUF and in the community, and assisting couples with emergency situations. EDSs are expected to maintain regular contact with each couple, defined as at least one in-person contact monthly (at the couple's home or in the program office) and weekly telephone contact.

Initial Implementation Experiences

After developing the program model, CFUF implemented CE as a small program in 2008 to gauge the feasibility of this new approach for which there were no existing models to follow. CFUF fully expected to encounter challenges and that their experience would lead to program revisions during early implementation. Specific challenges encountered related to defining an integrated program model, identifying strong management, hiring staff with appropriate backgrounds, and maintaining a focus on couples.

CE enrolled 41 couples between April and December 2008.[4] The average CE participant was in his or her late 20s, was African American, and had a low level of education.[5] Three out of five participants were unemployed, and 63 percent of enrolled couples had at least one employed partner. Nearly one-quarter of participants were married, and another two-thirds stated they were engaged or committed to their current partner.

Defining a program model that integrates family stability and economic success. In implementing CE, CFUF planned to build on its existing experience offering employment and family services, previously through separate programs. The idea was to combine and extend what CFUF's other programs already offered—job readiness and employment placement through

[4] CE also enrolled 13 individuals without their partners in 2008.

[5] Low level of education is defined as no degree or a high school diploma (or its equivalent).

STRIVE Baltimore as well as relationship support through Baltimore Building Strong Families—but to offer that combination to the couple in an integrated manner. Ultimately, each CE component addressed the two focus areas, but components tended to address the areas side by side, instead of integrating them. For example, group workshops had different staff lead the relationship and economic self-sufficiency components with no attempt to link the two segments together. To resolve this, CFUF is currently developing a program curriculum that weaves employment and relationship issues together in all CE program activities, with an emphasis on the group workshops.

Identifying a strong program director. All social service programs need a strong director with an understanding of the program's vision and mission, how to pursue it, and how to evaluate if goals are being met. Identifying such a director was particularly challenging for CE because of the divergent experience and skill set the program concept demanded, and CFUF leadership had difficulties finding such an individual. In early 2008, CFUF hired a program director who brought specific experience operating a community-based relationship and marriage education program, but who understood and supported the vision of offering a program that addresses both couple/family relationships and economic stability issues. This individual refined the nascent program model, led CE into full implementation, and is currently working on improving the program model.

Achieving an appropriate staff mix. Integrating activities and services addressing both employment and relationship issues calls for staff members with diverse skills and backgrounds.[6] However, it was difficult to foresee the right balance of skills that each staff member needed to create a cohesive team. The required skills and knowledge span a broad range: an understanding of couple dynamics; adeptness in managing program operations; substantive expertise in employment and self-sufficiency services and financial literacy; experience with case management and knowledge of resources available for referrals; and skills in counseling on these topics.

CFUF found that it was difficult to identify and recruit individuals with the diverse set of skills and experience. For example, they initially sought EDSs who could integrate skills and expertise related to employment services and relationship support throughout their work with couples. Ideally, each EDS would be knowledgeable about all content areas and about how to work with couples. Recognizing that such a complex skill set was rare, CFUF determined that staff with different strengths could complement one another as part of a unit. After this decision was made, CFUF did not require EDSs to possess all these skills when they joined the CE staff. Each EDS contributed some of the required skills, and the team of EDSs worked together to address couples' needs, either by sharing case management responsibilities or by meeting frequently to discuss strategies for specific couples. As CE continues, CFUF plans to cross-train EDSs in specific areas, such as workforce development, to make up for gaps in their skill set.

Maintaining a focus on couples. As a program for couples, CE developed outreach and recruitment strategies intended to engage couples and attempted to define program services to address couples' needs. Initially, staff enrolled individuals, assuming that the other partner would eventually enroll. However, in 13 cases, the partners of individuals who enrolled in CE never joined. As staff gained this experience, they refined their recruitment approach by going through the enrollment process primarily with both partners simultaneously. CFUF has also had to explore what it means to serve couples in CE. In defining program components, CE staff considered how to involve both partners in each service. However, some components were more suited as couples'

[6] The staff consists of the program director, who leads CE operations and supervises all staff; three EDSs, who divide their time between outreach/recruitment and case management; and three contracted workshop facilitators.

activities than others. Developing a joint employment plan and attending group workshops are natural opportunities for partners to participate together. Case management, in contrast, often addresses the needs of an individual, such as identifying and accessing community resources to enhance his or her employability. To compensate for the individual nature of case management, EDSs developed relationships with both partners and scheduled joint meetings with couples even if the primary need involved only one of the partners. To the extent possible, case management focused on the couples' needs.

Participants' Perspectives

To understand CE from the participants' perspective, we conducted three focus groups with twelve participant couples who enrolled in CE during 2008. All focus group participants had attended group workshops and saw them as useful ways to learn about housing, budgeting, entrepreneurship, and education. Participants emphasized that CE supports their relationships by allowing them to work together on economic and financial stability through the group workshops and family-focused employment plans. Participants mentioned that the information covered during group workshops was new to them. However, it was not just receiving the information that participants valued but the opportunity to discuss the information as a couple.

Participants in all focus groups attributed an increased commitment to their relationships to the experience of learning to work together in CE. One participant summarized this heightened commitment by saying that he "got that you can accomplish more as partners than as [individuals]." Participants saw increased commitment arising from collaboration on future goals and discussions of how to handle finances and other decisions as a team.

Next Steps

CFUF's effort to offer CE—a program blending family/couple focused issues with employment and economic self-sufficiency issues—is a program with little precedent. The challenges they have faced, and new ones that will emerge, are to be expected from a program that is breaking new ground. CFUF's continued efforts to refine the program model as well as its management and operation provide an opportunity to realize in greater measure the aim of helping couples address their economic and employment goals within the context of their family/couple relationship and give them support in both areas. Future evolution of the concept could involve refined dual-purpose programs, similar to the current CE approach, or even more comprehensive models that aim to help couples address an even broader range of issues (e.g., legal issues, housing, job training and career advancement, child support issues) as proposed in the President's fiscal year 2011 budget. Further, a couples' focus could be integrated into more traditional social service programs–that typically serve individuals and often do not address or substantively acknowledge a partners' role.

I. INTRODUCTION

Employment and couple relationships are central factors in the lives of most adults, and they are often closely linked. For many adults, their relationship with a partner may influence employment choices. A family's economic success hinges on the fruitful employment of one or both partners, and the two must make individual decisions that balance family and employment demands and goals. Successful employment of the individual adult may depend on joint efforts of the couple to address these demands and goals.

Research on the connections between employment and a couple's relationship, however, is sparse. In a few rigorous studies, researchers have examined whether interventions designed to improve employment and economic outcomes also affect relationships. For example, researchers have examined the effects of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) on couples who were married or living together with a shared biological child, when they entered the study (Gennetian 2003). The program was a welfare reform initiative that included financial work incentives, a participation requirement for long-term recipients, and simplified rules and procedures. The researchers found that MFIP decreased divorce seven years after study entry for families who were receiving or reapplying for welfare. A recent study using data from an experimental evaluation of Job Corps participants found that, for young women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, an increase in employment and earnings increased the likelihood of marriage (Mamun 2008).[7]

Tests of interventions focused on couples and intended to improve employment outcomes are also rare. A non-experimental study of the Full Family Partnership Program (FFP) revealed that conventional employment services offered to both partners might improve employment outcomes and increase relationship stability (Gordon and Heinrich 2008). The program offered a basic approach to employment services for couples: serve both partners simultaneously with conventional services. The non-experimental evaluation involved comparing the outcomes for couples participating in FFP with two groups: (1) parents who received conventional employment services at the same service provider and (2) parents who received Job Training Partnership Act services in the same local labor market. Researchers found that, compared to individuals receiving employment assistance, both male and female participants increased their employment and earnings immediately following the program, females more than males. Advances were greater for couples who completed the program, which then gave them access to an extensive referral network for job placement. Based on follow-up interviews completed one year after program exit, more than three-quarters of FFP couples reported that they were still together. Couples who were still together at followup were more likely to have completed the program and have increased earnings, although given the evaluation design, this finding could not be interpreted as an impact estimate. In the long term, gains in women's earnings eroded in the two years following program completion.[8]

The Couples Employment (CE) project is an effort to define and demonstrate how an intervention for couples might simultaneously address issues related to employment and relationships and capitalize on the ways that success in each might affect the other. The CE demonstration program is operated by the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) in Baltimore,

[7] Mamun (2008) found that increased employment and earnings had no effects on men and their likelihood of marriage.

[8] It is speculated that couples who were more likely to stay together may have been more likely to experience a pregnancy and thus a longer-term disruption to employment.

Maryland. CFUF defined a CE program model that emphasizes both joint employment planning and relationship support, engaging both members of the couple in dialogue, planning, and education focused on the family's economic self-sufficiency and relationship well-being. Mathematica Policy Research, under contract to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), is conducting an implementation study that documents CFUF's efforts to develop and offer couples-focused employment services. CFUF has a history of providing employment services to individuals through STRIVE Baltimore as well as relationship support services through Building Strong Families (BSF). In summer 2007, CFUF began adapting its existing strategies to treat employment as an issue the whole family collaboratively addresses.

CFUF developed the CE program model based on their experience with the BSF program demonstration and evaluation. The BSF project, taking place in Baltimore and seven other sites, is testing marriage and relationship education and other family support services for unwed parents who are expecting or recently had a child together (Dion et al. 2008). Initial findings from implementation analyses underscored the importance of developing strategies for recruiting couples (1) through referral partnerships with agencies that serve the target population and (2) by approaching couples for enrollment together rather than individually. The implementation analysis also showed the importance of encouraging couples to attend core program workshops by, for example, offering incentives to participants and addressing participation barriers such as transportation and child care needs.

In this report, we document the initial implementation of employment-related services offered to couples by CFUF. Findings draw on ongoing communication with CFUF staff; an in-depth site visit to Baltimore in January 2009 that included focus groups with participating couples; and CFUF's management information system (MIS) data from 2008, which include client characteristics and service receipt. In this introductory chapter, we describe how CFUF became interested in providing joint employment and relationship support to couples (Section A) and briefly describe the implementation study (Section B).

A. Initial Interest in Supporting Couples' Employment and Relationship Needs

CFUF's interest in supporting couples in their pursuit of employment and relationship goals grows out of a decade of work with low-income fathers and families in Baltimore. In 1999, Joseph T. Jones, Jr., founded CFUF, originally known as the Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development, to provide parenting and workforce development services to low-income fathers. Jones had previously been a social worker for the Baltimore Health Department's Healthy Start program. There, he initiated the Men's Services program to help fathers reconnect with their families, find employment, resolve child support issues, overcome addiction, and learn parenting skills. He also helped start STRIVE Baltimore, a three-week job training program for hard-to-employ fathers participating in Men's Services. CFUF began with the goal of expanding Men's Services and STRIVE Baltimore, taking them over from the Baltimore Health Department and offering them to a broader population that included men and women.

In 2002, CFUF expanded its programs to serve couples. The first such effort, supported by the Ford Foundation, was the 50/50 Parenting Program, which offered a 10-week group workshop focused on developing communication skills. CFUF intended to enroll parents who were no longer romantically involved but wanted support in co-parenting, including help from a "coach" in developing a parenting plan for applying the skills they had learned in the workshops. To the

surprise of CFUF staff, many of the couples who enrolled in the program were still romantically involved and sought relationship support, not co-parenting support. As the grant for the 50/50 Parenting Program ended, CFUF initiated a second couples-focused program after they were selected as a site in the BSF evaluation (described earlier). As one of the BSF sites, CFUF recruits low-income, romantically involved, unmarried couples who are expecting or recently had a child together and provides marriage and relationship education services to them.

By 2007, the overall mission of CFUF had evolved from separate initiatives for parenting and workforce development to an integrated approach to connecting men and women with career paths and strong family models. The organization formalized this mission shift when they changed their name to CFUF, which emphasizes their target population of families. The organization's previous name—Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development—had given greater visibility to its mission with fathers. By 2007, CFUF staff were ready to apply lessons they had learned from offering separate family and workforce development programs. One perceived lesson was that the financial and employment challenges couples faced created a barrier to maintaining their romantic relationships. While offering some support, BSF did not address employment issues in depth. Staff also did not perceive STRIVE Baltimore as an appropriate avenue for addressing the financial and employment concerns of couples because the workshops focused on individual development.

CFUF thus saw the need for new services that addressed economic stability concerns while simultaneously offering relationship support. The envisioned services would engage couples in a collaborative process focused on employment and economic stability as well as relationship support, while providing resources, as needed, for more traditional education and employment training for the individual partners.

B. Implementation Study of Couples Employment

The aim of the implementation study is to document CFUF's efforts to introduce a couples-focused approach to employment services through CE. In this report, we describe the program model CFUF developed, the strategies used by CE staff to work with couples, the degree to which couples receive services, and how couples perceive them. Five research questions guide the study:

- **Program foundation and context.** What led CFUF to develop employment services for couples, and how does CFUF structure and manage these services?
- **Outreach and recruitment.** How does CE identify eligible couples and recruit them into the program?
- **Program operations and staffing.** What employment-related services are available to couples, how are services delivered, and who at CFUF delivers services?
- **Program participation and couples' reaction.** At what level do couples participate in CE services, and what is their response?
- **Program replication.** What lessons can be learned from CFUF's experience in offering CE to couples?

The findings presented here draw on qualitative and quantitative data. Mathematica monitored CE from the inception of the program, noting the lessons CFUF staff members were learning as they refined their definition of employment and relationship support to couples and worked to improve service delivery. In January 2009, Mathematica interviewed all staff involved with CE and

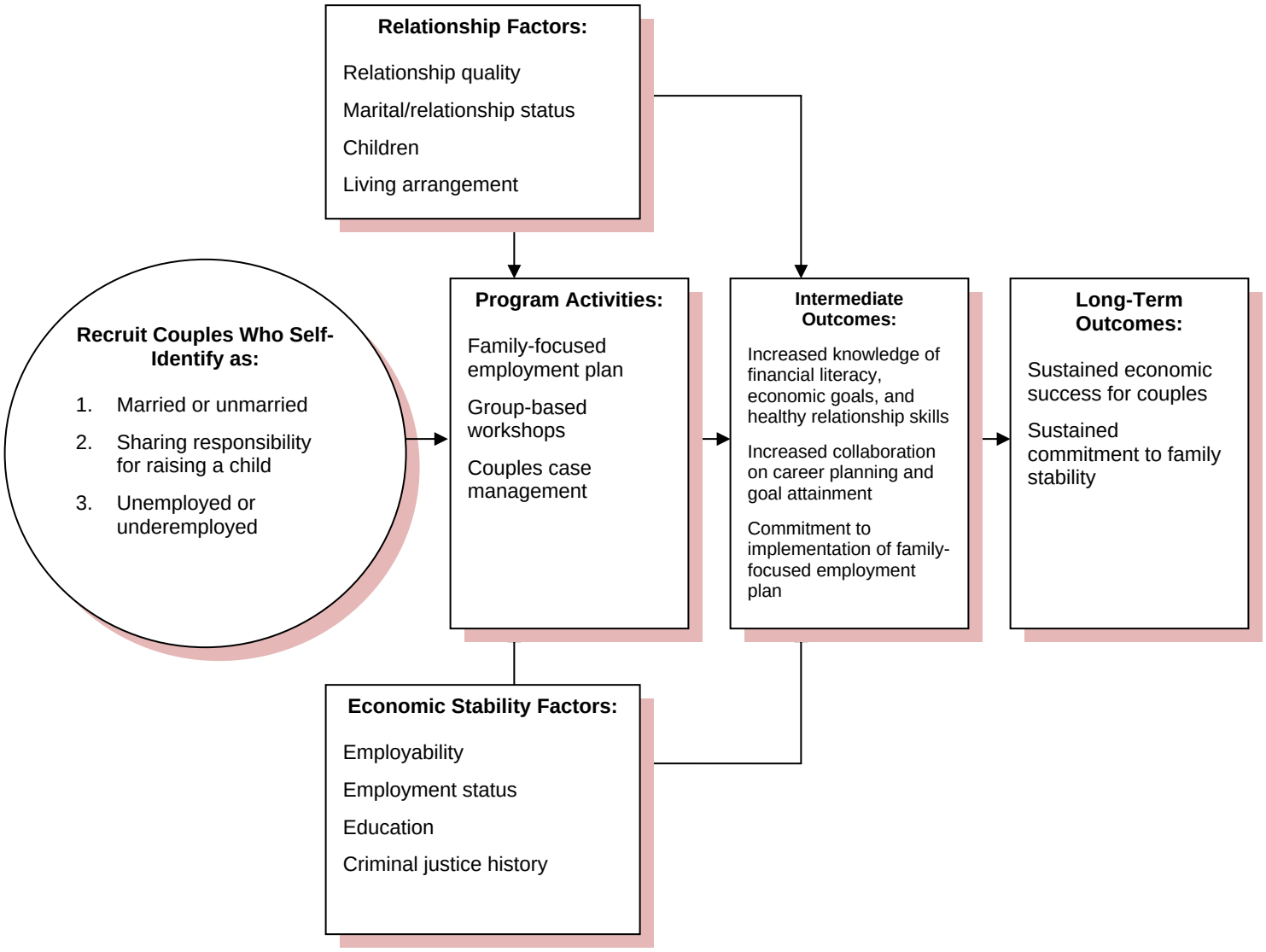
conducted three focus groups with participating couples. Mathematica also examined the family-focused employment plans that couples completed in 2008. To extend our understanding of implementation, CFUF provided data extracts from the MIS on enrollment, participation in group workshops, and case management.

The findings reported here must be understood as an early glimpse of a program model still in its developmental stages. In Chapter II, we describe the original program model and how that model evolved during the first year of implementation. The next chapter presents CE enrollment as the program began, background characteristics of enrolled couples, and couples' level of engagement as reflected in attendance at group workshops and case management sessions. In Chapter IV, we discuss findings from the focus groups, including what attracted couples to the program and their participation experiences. In the final chapter, we identify several challenges that CFUF faces as they seek to refine and strengthen the CE program.

II. THE COUPLES EMPLOYMENT DEMONSTRATION

The CE program model developed by CFUF focuses on both intermediate and long-term outcome goals for couples (Figure II.1). CE's long-term goals are to enhance couples' economic success and their commitment to family stability. To achieve these goals, CE aims to increase couples' knowledge of financial literacy, economic goals, and healthy relationship skills and strengthen couples' collaboration through implementation of a joint employment plan. CE pursues these goals by recruiting unemployed or underemployed, married or unmarried couples that share child-rearing responsibility. Program activities offered to assist couples include development of a family-focused employment plan, group workshops, and support from a case manager. Various relationship and economic stability factors may influence the nature of CE services that each couple receives and also affect each couple's attainment of intermediate and long-term goals.

Figure II.1. Couples Employment Conceptual Framework



Following a planning and pilot period, CFUF began full implementation of CE in 2008. During the first year, CE staff refined recruitment approaches and explored several strategies for delivering their planned services. This led to the adaption of the CE program model to better meet the needs and interests of couples. CFUF continues to refine the program model as CE staff gain additional experience. In this chapter, we describe the staffing structure, target population and recruitment process, and services provided during the first year of implementation.

A. Staffing

Design. CFUF identified three staff positions to support CE implementation: program director, employment development specialists (EDSs), and group facilitators. The program director would be responsible for all program aspects and would supervise staff. The EDS role would combine outreach and recruitment with case management for enrolled couples. Group facilitators would possess specialized knowledge that would help them lead the group-based workshops.

Practice. CE operates with a core staff of four full-time employees, augmented by contractual staff for group workshops (Table II.1). The full-time staff consists of the program director and three EDSs. The program director is responsible for overall CE operations and supervises the three EDSs and contracted staff. The EDSs spend approximately half their time on outreach/recruitment and half on case management.

Table II.1. Couples Employment Staffing, 2008

Position (number of staff in position)	Role and Responsibility	Hiring Status
Program director (1)	Oversee program operations; supervise staff	Full-time, regular
Employment development specialist (3)	Conduct outreach and recruitment; provide case management to couples; perform administrative duties	Full-time, regular
Group facilitator (3)	Facilitate group workshops on topics that match area of expertise	Part-time, contractual
Child care worker (varies)	Provide child care during group workshops	Part-time, contractual
Van driver (1)	Provide transportation for group workshops by driving CFUF vans	Part-time, regular

In the early stages of CE implementation, recruitment goals and staff caseloads were modest. For outreach and recruitment, each EDS was expected to enroll two couples per month in 2008,[9] and each maintained a caseload of six to eight couples for case management. Additionally, each EDS took on specific responsibilities outside of direct service. For example, one EDS with significant

[9] Outreach and recruitment expectations increased in 2009; each EDS currently aims to enroll four couples each month.

experience working at CFUF prior to CE led training for the other two EDSs in street outreach and case management expectations. Another EDS assisted the program director with administrative responsibilities.

The core CE staff had experience in social service agencies, but the target population was new for many staff. The program director had led a relationship and marriage program for low-income individuals but was new to employment services. Each EDS possessed a different background, ranging from case management and advocacy to recruitment and administration. In hiring for the EDS positions, CFUF focused on identifying candidates with case management skills and workforce development experience, recognizing that finding people with employment experience *and* a background working with couples was challenging. CFUF planned to provide a common set of training to EDSs, regardless of background, in areas such as domestic violence, workforce development, and relationship skills.

The three contractual staff members who lead group workshops bring a collective knowledge of the spectrum of workshop topics and share responsibility for presenting these topics. The facilitator responsible for workshops on housing and career advancement is a licensed real estate agent and previously led job and GED preparation workshops. Another facilitator, an independent financial advisor, leads sessions on financial literacy. The third facilitator, who leads sessions on education and entrepreneurship, has prior teaching experience and is a certified facilitator for the Loving Couples, Loving Children Curriculum used in Baltimore BSF and for the Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families Curriculum that CFUF developed for the state of Louisiana.[10]

B. Recruitment

CFUF established a target enrollment of at least 135 couples in CE between January 2007 and December 2010. The plan was to enroll 15 couples in a pilot program (2007) and 40 couples in each of three implementation years. Identification of couples was to occur through referrals from other CFUF programs and community outreach.

1. Target Population and Process for Identifying Potential Participants

Design. The eligibility criteria for CE defined the target population as married and unmarried couples who share responsibility for raising a child. While couples must have children or be pregnant at the time of enrollment, they need not share a biological child in common. Beyond these criteria, CFUF planned to recruit couples who were unemployed or underemployed and struggling to meet the financial needs of their families. All couples were to be screened for domestic violence.

Practice. CE staff screened couples according to the stated eligibility criteria but learned that additional criteria helped identify couples who were a good fit for CE. The CE program model specified recruitment of married and unmarried couples. However, the most appropriate couples were those in stable and committed relationships who were interested in working collaboratively on their economic success and building and sustaining their relationships. Absent this interest, couples were unlikely to engage fully in program activities. Although the CE program model specified that

[10] CFUF developed the Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families curriculum in conjunction with the state of Louisiana's Department of Human Resources. The curriculum, which has a hip hop theme, focuses on communication skills, conflict resolution, personal and family goal-setting, effective parenting, and planning for the future. The curriculum aims to assist low-income mothers and fathers in strengthening their relationships, exploring marriage, and providing healthy and safe environments for their children.

couples be unemployed or underemployed, CE staff learned that couples with at least one employed partner were better positioned to take advantage of information presented in career advancement, budgeting, and financial literacy workshops.

Screening individuals for eligibility has been informal. Rather than use a set screening tool to assess whether individuals match recruitment criteria, staff explain the criteria and ask potential recruits if they think they meet the criteria. As part of the eligibility assessment, individuals complete a domestic violence screening tool that CFUF developed with the House of Ruth, a local domestic violence services organization in Baltimore.

2. Outreach and Recruitment of Couples

Design. Originally, CFUF identified several sources for recruiting couples for CE. As a social service organization that offers a range of programs to a variety of people, CFUF planned to recruit from in-house programs. A primary source was to be Baltimore BSF because couples participating in BSF were likely to have strong relationship commitment and good communication skills. CFUF also planned to recruit through community outreach.

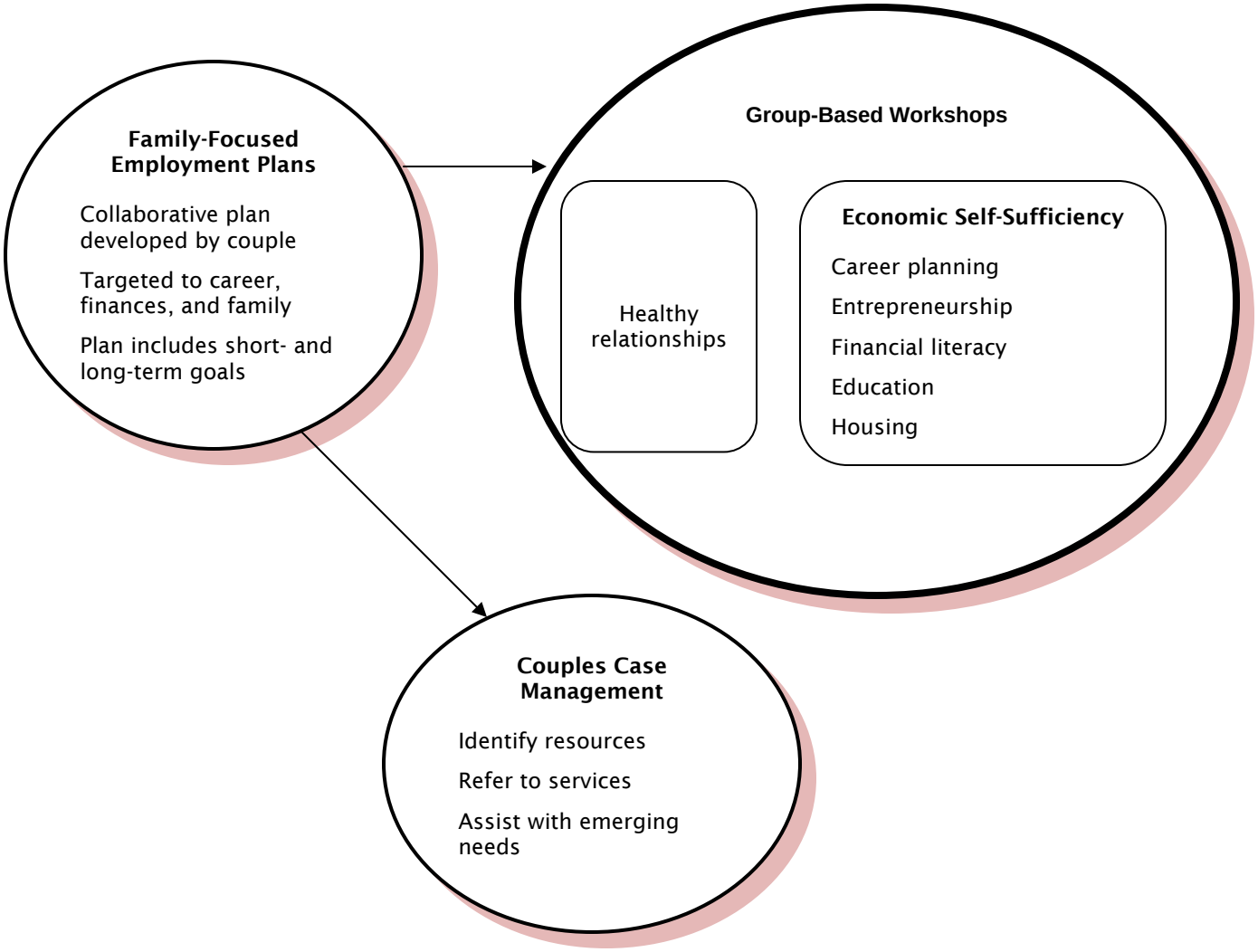
Practice. CFUF used their internal referral sources to recruit couples for CE, two of which were particularly promising for CE. Individuals who are in a romantic relationship and are completing STRIVE Baltimore were likely candidates for CE. As intended, CE staff also used Baltimore BSF as a recruitment source. However, CE staff members lowered their expectations for the number of couples they will recruit from BSF after recognizing that not all BSF couples are ready to plan together for their future financial stability. This experience has guided CE staff to give greater attention to assessing couples' interest in working together toward common goals.

CFUF has long engaged in community outreach as a recruitment strategy. CE staff members conduct outreach to inform people in the local community about CE services and to identify interested couples. EDSs visit a variety of community agencies to inform staff about the program; they also canvass the streets in Baltimore neighborhoods for potential couples. The EDSs request that interested individuals complete a recruitment information card, providing name, address, telephone number, email address, age, gender, best contact time, relationship status, and their partner's name. Based on this information, CE staff members contact the individuals within 24 hours to move forward in the enrollment process.

C. Service Components

CE services consist of three components: development of a family-focused employment plan, attendance at group-based workshops, and participation in couples case management (Figure II.2). As an initial activity, each couple works with an EDS to develop a family-focused employment plan that identifies short- and long-term goals for each partner and determines approaches the couple can use to support one another in reaching these goals. Couples are then expected to participate in group-based workshops and case management meetings with their EDS. Workshops are intended to address economic self-sufficiency issues, including employment concerns. The workshops are also a venue for addressing relationship skills. Case management, focused on each individual couple, is a way to identify couples' needs and the resources necessary to address them. Couples may participate in CE services for up to six months, although group workshop participation is limited to the first three months. An initial design guided the early stages of CE implementation in each service area, but some services were revised as the program progressed.

Figure II.2. Couples Employment Services



1. Family-Focused Employment Plans

Design. Soon after enrollment in CE, couples were to work with their assigned EDS to develop a family-focused employment plan. The plan was to be a collaborative document that identified short- and long-term goals for each member of the couple and strategies for supporting one another to attain these goals. The 2008 employment plan template (Appendix A) included three areas for goal identification: career, finances, and family. Once developed, the EDS would use the plan to guide case management, particularly for identifying community resources that would benefit the couple and providing referrals.

CE staff considered the plan to be a dynamic document that couples would revise and update as they progress through CE and, possibly, after completing the program. The EDS would guide initial plan development by engaging the couple in a discussion of their dreams and goals. The EDS would learn more about each goal, identify steps the partners might take to reach each goal, and

determine a realistic timeframe. The plan asked couples to identify both short- and long-term goals in career advancement, finances, and family so that immediate steps could be taken. As each member identified personal goals, the EDS guided the couple to recognize specific ways they could support each other to attain their objectives.

Practice. As planned, EDSs worked with enrolled couples to complete family-focused employment plans soon after their enrollment in CE. EDSs guided each member of the couple in identifying their short- and long-term goals related to career advancement, finances, and family and encouraged couples to identify strategies to support one another in goal attainment. In 2008, 24 couples completed a family-focused employment plan. Review of the completed plans reveals the types of goals individuals included in their plans and the extent to which couples listed common goals.

The 24 couples who completed an employment plan recorded individual and joint goals relating to career, finance, and family. For at least one partner, nearly all (23) of the 2008 plans identified a specific career area to pursue, and 22 included a goal related to further education, such as pursuing a GED, researching and selecting a technical training program, or completing a bachelor's degree. In the finance area, partners identified goals to reduce or eliminate debt, repair credit (often initiated by obtaining a credit report), save money, and establish bank accounts and budgets. In the family area, goals included progress in the couples' relationship, often through engagement or marriage, improved relationships with their children, and additional family time.

In the financial and family areas, three-quarters of the 2008 plans portrayed common goals between partners. Couples listed joint financial goals such as establishing joint bank accounts or developing a joint budget. In the area of family, more than half of the plans had both partners listing a family goal that involved progress in the couple's relationship—often to become engaged or married—while in other cases such a goal might have been espoused by one partner but not both. The remainder of the plans, however, showed no commonality, as couples recorded individual goals but no joint goal or strategy.

Accompanying each goal area, couples identified how they would support one another in achieving their goals. Comments recorded in the plans often amount to a display of commitment to the relationship and to working collaboratively on economic success (see Figure II.3 for examples).

2. Group-Based Workshops

Design. In developing the CE program model, CFUF envisioned monthly group-based workshops as ancillary seminars on topics pertinent to employment and financial literacy that would complement the work couples do in their family-focused employment plan and case management meetings. The workshops were at first seen as providing information on topics such as financial literacy, budgeting, savings, and family self-sufficiency. Facilitators with relevant background knowledge would lead seminars, and CE couples would have the opportunity to attend all topical seminars over the course of their six-month participation.

CFUF did not at first define the details of these workshops, such as the curriculum that would be used. Instead, they planned to use the initial implementation period to guide workshop development.

Figure II.3. Selected Quotes from Family-Focused Employment Plans Illustrate Couples' Commitment to Collaboration

"It starts with us. We need to spend time together and talk more with each other as a couple. This should affect the way we interact with the kids."

"… tackle all financial goals together instead of having separate goals."

"Work together and decide how we want to achieve our goals."

"As we have been doing, [her] understanding has helped me with patience, not to obtain things the fast way…. [He] is very encouraging and has helped me to relax and refocus my goals. I try to gently push him to keep moving toward his goals."

"We have very high hopes, and we need to continue to support each other so we don't get discouraged."

Practice. The group workshops evolved in several ways. First, they are now offered more frequently than originally planned—weekly instead of monthly. CE staff made the change because they quickly realized that the workshops seemed to fuel couples' enthusiasm for pursuing their goals; couples' interest waned if workshops occurred only monthly. With this shift, CE staff shortened the period couples could attend group workshops from six months to the first three months in the program since couples could now attend all workshops during a three-month period.

Second, in response to couples' feedback and stated interests, CE staff broadened workshop content to focus not only on economic self-sufficiency but also on relationships. About one-third of each workshop focuses on relationship issues and the remainder on economic self-sufficiency. The two topics are relatively unintegrated in the workshops in that separate staff members address them using materials from different sources. EDS staff cover material related to relationships while contracted facilitators deal with economic self-sufficiency topics.

The content of workshop sessions also solidified as options were considered and tried. One EDS plans the relationship segment for all workshops, although there is no structured curriculum. The Exploring Relationships and Marriage Curriculum is used as a source of some exercises, though not all EDSs are trained in the curriculum. The contracted facilitators have each selected the materials they use to address career planning, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, education, and housing issues (see Appendix B for details on workshop content). Facilitators considered using established curricula but concluded that available options required more time than was available in the workshop sessions and were not tailored to the specific circumstances of the CE population.

Couples can begin attending workshops at any point after CE enrollment and are not required to attend workshops in a specific sequence. As a result, couples in workshops may or may not know each other from previous sessions. Staff members make substantial efforts to promote participation. They begin inviting couples to group sessions immediately after their enrollment and encourage attendance by addressing common barriers, such as by providing transportation and offering on-site child care by licensed providers. Staff members continue to invite couples to workshops throughout their first three months in the program.

The composition of workshop groups varies from week to week. Staff members estimate that, on average, four to five couples attend each week and at least one of these couples is attending for the first time. The veteran couples in attendance help introduce the newcomers to the format and expectations of the group through informal conversation prior to the start of a workshop and by modeling during group discussions.

The potential role of the contracted facilitators has broadened somewhat beyond the group sessions. Two of the three facilitators are available outside of workshop sessions to provide assistance in specific areas. One facilitator, a licensed real estate agent, can help couples find housing. The facilitator who is an independent financial advisor offers free help to couples on financial literacy issues, such as reviewing and repairing their credit rating or developing a savings and investment plan. As of early 2009, however, only a few couples have approached either facilitator about assistance outside of workshops, and no couple has followed through with a meeting.

3. Couples Case Management

Design. Low-income families often face complex and challenging circumstances that may contribute to employment instability and relationship problems as well as impede the family's ability to participate in CE. To address this concern, the CE program model planned to assign an EDS to each couple to provide individualized case management, addressing the specific circumstances facing each couple, identifying needed resources, making referrals to available programs at CFUF and in the community, assisting couples with emergency situations, and working with them to revise the family-focused employment plan. Case management would occur at the family's home, at the program office, and by telephone. EDSs were to maintain a high level of contact with each couple, defined as at least one in-person contact monthly and a weekly telephone contact.

Practice. As anticipated, couples often experienced circumstances that required extensive support from EDSs. With their low caseloads, EDSs were available to provide couples with intensive attention when needed. Their efforts often involved not only direct contact with one or both partners but also contact with community organizations on behalf of the couple. For example, a few couples facing housing concerns were aided by their EDS, who spent significant time contacting organizations that provide housing services.

The major challenge EDSs have faced in their case management role has been the complexity of the issues couples face and the need to apply skills in addressing both relationship problems and employment concerns. For example, one couple entered CE several months after the male partner's release from prison. This couple sought support for mending their relationship following a long period of separation as well as assistance for the male partner in furthering his education. Ideally, the EDS would possess prior experience working with couples and addressing both relationship issues and employment problems. However, none of the EDSs have such a combination of training or experience in their background. As a result, CFUF encourages the EDSs to blend their expertise and share case management responsibilities for individual couples and to meet frequently to discuss the issues and challenges identified by specific couples. Additionally, CFUF continues to support EDSs' skill development in both areas.

III. ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION PATTERNS

As a new program, CE needed to first define a program model and then determine if it appealed to couples. The program's appeal can be gauged by whether couples express interest and enroll as well as the extent to which they engage in the activities provided. In this chapter, we present the number of couples enrolled in CE, their characteristics, and their level of participation based on CFUF's MIS data.

A. Enrollment in Couples Employment

CE enrollment involves several steps. Staff members first identify interested individuals through community outreach or referrals. The staff members describe CE as a program for couples in committed relationships who want to work together on their financial self-sufficiency, and they ask the individuals if they are in such a relationship and interested in learning more. Individuals who respond affirmatively provide contact information to staff, which is entered into CFUF's MIS for all potential program participants. Thus, although CE is a program for couples, the initial recruitment stage often involves engaging individuals who are in a committed relationship.

Staff initially enrolled interested individuals, assuming that the other partner would eventually enroll. However, this approach was not always successful and led to 13 individuals being enrolled without a partner. As staff gained experience, they refined their recruitment approach, primarily by insisting on enrolling both partners at the same time. As a result, they were better able to avoid enrolling individuals without their partners.

Using the contact information obtained, CE staff then attempt to reconnect with interested parties to continue the enrollment process. Each person is asked to complete a demographic form and a program "pretest" that is completed at both program entry and exit (see Appendix C). Both partners are asked to complete their own enrollment paperwork.

During 2008, CE identified 173 individuals as interested in the program (Figure III.1). Of these, 55 percent enrolled. CE staff members were unable to reconnect with many individuals who expressed initial interest due to their unstable relationships or living arrangements. Recruitment began in the second quarter of 2008 and occurred at a relatively stable pace during the rest of the year, with an average monthly enrollment of four to five couples (Table III.1). In total, CE enrolled 41 couples and 13 individuals during 2008. This enrollment pace exceeded CFUF's initial expectation of 40 couples.

B. Characteristics of Participants

Enrollment data (Table III.2) suggest that CE participants are similar to other participants at CFUF.

Figure III.1. Couples Employment Enrollment Flow, 2008

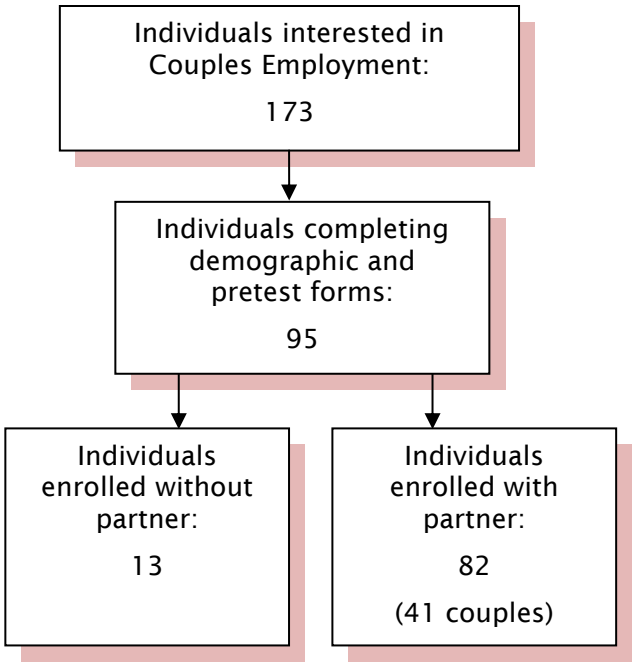


Table III.1. Number of Individuals Enrolled in Couples Employment, April–December 2008

	Individuals		Couples	
	Number	Average Monthly Enrollment	Number	Average Monthly Enrollment
Number Enrolled During:				
April 1–June 30	11	4	13	4
July 1–September 30	1	<1	12	4
October 1–December 31	1	<1	16	5
Completed Enrollment	13		41	

Source: Data extracted from CFUF MIS for all individuals enrolled through December 31, 2008.

On Average, CE Participants Are African American, Are in Their Late Twenties, and Have a Low Level of Education. The average age of participants is 29, although the women are slightly younger than the men. Reflecting the typical population served by CFUF, nearly all CE participants are African American. Eighty-six percent of participants have a low level of education; 41 percent have no degree and an additional 45 percent have a high school diploma (or its equivalent). Only 13 percent of participants have any education or training beyond high school. Limited education was more common among men than among women.

Table III.2. Characteristics of Individuals Enrolled in Couples Employment, by Gender (percentage unless otherwise noted)

	Female	Male	Overall
Demographics			
Age (average)	27.3	30.4	28.9
Race and ethnicity			
African American	96	100	98
Hispanic	2	0	1
White	2	0	1
Other	0	0	0
Educational Attainment			
No degree earned	35	48	41
High school diploma or GED	44	46	45
Technical school certificate	8	2	5
Associate's degree	4	0	2
Bachelor's degree (or higher)	8	4	6
Employment Status and History			
Currently employed	45	37	41
Ever employed	98	93	96
Ever employed full-time	92	85	88
Couple Relationship			
Relationship status			
Married	22	22	22
Engaged	12	16	14
Committed	49	51	50
Not committed or unsure of status	16	11	14
Self-Assessed Relationship Quality			
Excellent	29	29	29
Good	39	44	41
Okay	24	18	21
Bad or poor	8	9	9
Family Structure and Living Arrangements			
Have children	90	93	91
Children under 18 years of age	73	83	78
Children 6 years of age or younger	63	67	65
Marriage and cohabitation			
Married	23	22	23
Unmarried, cohabiting	58	51	55
Unmarried, not cohabiting	19	27	23
Housing arrangements			
Stable housing	55	53	54
Living with relatives or friends	29	33	31
Temporary housing/homeless	10	11	11
Other (independent living, foster care)	6	2	4

Table III.2 *(continued)*

	Female	Male	Overall
Economic Stability			
Have banking account	69	52	61
Have checking account	61	47	54
Have savings account	53	31	43
Have credit card	18	13	16
Have retirement account	8	7	7
Have investments (stocks or mutual funds)	4	0	2
Bank debt prevents opening bank account	10	19	14
Bills generally paid on time			
Strongly agree/agree	60	64	62
Strongly disagree/disagree	30	31	30
Undecided	10	5	8
Have budget	44	52	48
Follow budget all or most of the time	30	37	33
Reviewed credit report	51	48	49
Reviewed credit report in last six months	35	23	29
Number of Individuals	**49**	**46**	**95**

Source: Data extracted from CFUF MIS for all individuals enrolled through December 31, 2008. Pretest and demographic forms are included in Appendix B.

Note: Not all percentages equal 100 due to rounding.

CE staff did not ensure that enrolled couples include at least one partner who was employed, although this criterion was to be considered as they identified potential participants. Only 63 percent of enrolled couples had at least one employed partner (not shown). Overall, two out of five individuals enrolled were currently employed, and nearly all participants had been previously employed.

Most Participants Were in Serious Relationships That They Assessed as Positive in Quality. Nearly one-quarter of participants were married, and another two-thirds stated they were engaged or committed to their current partner. However, 14 percent stated they were not in a committed relationship with their current partner or were unsure of their relationship status; the majority of these participants were enrolled in CE with their partners. Most participants described their relationship's quality as excellent or good, although women were slightly less positive; about two-thirds of women described their relationship quality as excellent or good, compared to nearly three-quarters of men.

Not All Participants Were Parents, but in All Couples at Least One Partner Had a Child. CE enrolled couples where at least one partner had a child or the couple was pregnant at the time of program enrollment. About 91 percent of participants said they were parents, with about two-thirds of participants having a child under age six. In 83 percent of couples, both partners had a child.

About Half of Participants Described Their Housing as Stable, and Three-Quarters Were Cohabiting with Their Spouse or Partner. More than half of the participants stated that they were unmarried and cohabiting. Participants who did not describe their housing as stable lived in varied situations: thirty-one percent reported living with relatives or friends, 11 percent reported living in temporary housing or being homeless and 4 percent reported other housing arrangements.

Many Participants Had Financial Accounts. Six out of 10 participants had some kind of bank account; 54 percent had a checking account and 43 percent had a savings account. Other financial tools—credit cards, retirement accounts, or other investments—were much less common.

Economic Stability Was a Challenge for Nearly Half of the Participants. Nearly half of the participants said they had a budget, but many were not able to follow it consistently. About two out of five participants did not agree with the statement, "My bills are generally paid on time." Having bank debt that prevented opening a bank account was a barrier for 14 percent of participants; this was more common among men.

C. Participation in Case Management and Group-Based Workshops

As described above, once enrolled, couples are invited to participate in CE services for six months, beginning program activities immediately following enrollment, as all activities are ongoing and open entry. During the first three months, couples are expected to receive case management and develop a family-focused employment plan, and they can attend weekly group workshops. The second three-month participation period focuses on progress toward goals outlined in the employment plan and continued case management.

Case Management.[11] From August to December 2008, the intensity of case management varied widely, and the standards CE staff had set for weekly telephone contact and at least monthly face-to-face contact with all enrollees were not met (Table III.3). Among enrolled couples, about two-thirds were ever contacted or had a meeting outside of group workshops. On average, couples received a combined total of almost 15 contacts from program staff over the five-month period; women tended to have more case management contacts than men.[12] The total number of contacts for a couple ranged from 0 to 52. The average number of monthly contacts for couples was about 4.[13] The frequency of case management contact was particularly low for individuals enrolled without a partner.

[11] Data on case management sessions and attendance at group workshops is from CFUF's MIS. The MIS for the CE program has been implemented in stages, making data on different aspects of participation somewhat inconsistent. Data on attendance at workshops have been available from the start of the program, while data collection on case management sessions began in August 2008.

[12] Includes couples/individuals who had no case management contacts.

[13] The median number of total contacts with a couple is 3. The median number of total contacts among couples ever contacted is 20. The median number of monthly contacts is 6.5 among ever-contacted couples.

Table III.3. Case Management Contacts, August–December 2008

	Individuals Enrolled Without Partner: Number (Percentage)	Individuals Enrolled With Partner: Number (Percentage)
Contacts with Individuals and Couples		
Total number of individuals or couples, August-December 2008	11	29
Number of individuals/couples ever contacted by employment development specialist outside of group workshops (percentage)[a]	3 (27)	18 (62)
Average number of contacts with an individual/couple[b]	0.8	14.5
With both members of couple[c]	--	8.1
With women only	--	3.7
With men only	--	2.7
Average number of monthly contacts while individual/couple is enrolled[d]	0.7	3.9
With both members of couple[c]	--	2.2
With women only	--	0.9
With men only	--	0.8
Couples completing family-focused employment plan (percentage)	--	57
Mode of Contact		
Total number of contacts	9	421
Number of contacts by (percentage)[e]		
Telephone	7 (78)	298 (71)
Home visit	1 (11)	71 (17)
Office visit	1 (11)	52 (12)

Source: Data extracted from CFUF MIS for all participants enrolled through November 30, 2008.

Note: Case management activity occurred throughout the year, but data entry into the MIS did not begin until August 2008.

[a]Percentage of program enrollees ever contacted by a staff member by December 31, 2008.

[b]Total number of contacts by December 31, 2008.

[c]Contacts were classified as occurring with both members of the couple when two records were included (one for the female and one for the male) where the date and mode of the contact matched and the contacts took place within 10 minutes of each other. We conducted the analysis several ways to confirm that the number of contacts with both members of the couple was relatively insensitive to the definition.

[d]Total number of contacts by December 31, 2008, divided by the sum of the number of months each couple was actively participating in CE through December 31, 2008.

[e]Percentage of all contacts through December 31, 2008.

Staff most often contacted couples by telephone but also by conducting home or office visits. A tangible output of case management contacts was the family-focused employment plan, which 57 percent of the 41 enrolled couples completed by the end of 2008.

Group-Based Workshops. CE offered its first workshop in March 2008. From March to June, workshops occurred monthly. Beginning in July, workshops generally occurred weekly, and the last 2008 workshop occurred in mid-December. Our analysis of group attendance addresses two main questions: whether couples attend workshops and how many they attend.

About two-thirds of couples ever attended a group workshop, whereas only slightly more than a third of individuals who had enrolled without their partner ever attended. Among couples enrolled by November 30, 2008, 66 percent attended at least one group workshop as a couple (Table III.4).

Table III.4. Initiating Attendance at Group-Based Workshops by December 31, 2008

	Number Ever Attending With (percentage):			
	Both Partners	At Least One Partner	Never Attended	Total
Individuals	N/A	4 (36)	7 (64)	11
Couples	19 (66)	20 (69)	9 (31)	29

Source: Data extracted from CFUF MIS for all participants enrolled through November 30, 2008.

Note: Analysis limited to couples enrolled between April and November 2008, so all couples had a minimum of one month to attend group workshops. There was not a specified number of workshops couples were to attend; instead, they could have attended as many workshops as they choose during a three-month period. The range in workshops attended was between 0 and 21.

Across all enrolled couples, the average number of workshops attended was about five (Table III.5). However, among those who attended at least one workshop, either one or both member of the couple attended eight workshops, on average. Within this group, partners attended five workshops together. This suggests that if a couple was represented at a group workshop, they usually were attending together.

Table III.5. Average Number of Group-Based Workshop Sessions Attended Through December 31, 2008[a]

		Couples			
	Individuals	Either Member of Couple	Female Partner Only	Male Partner Only	Both Members
All participants	0.7	5.3	1.6	0.6	3.1
Participants who attended at least one workshop (initiators)	2	7.7	2.3	0.9	4.6
Total Number in Sample	**11**		**29**		

Source: Data extracted from CFUF MIS for all participants enrolled through November 30, 2008.

Note: Analysis limited to couples enrolled between April and November 2008, so all couples had a minimum of one month to attend group workshops. There was not a specified number of workshops couples were to attend; instead, they could have attended as many workshops as they choose during a three-month period. The range in workshops attended was between 0 and 21.

[a]A sizeable proportion of individuals and couples never attend group-based workshops. For this reason, the analysis of the average number of group-based workshop sessions attended uses two denominators: (1) "all participants" include all individuals and couples, regardless of whether they attended any sessions, and (2) "initiators" include only individuals and couples who initiated attendance—that is, the individual or at least one member of the couple attended one or more group-based workshops through December 31, 2008.

IV. COUPLES' INTEREST AND EXPERIENCES

Much of this report relies on information from program staff, but some questions can only be answered by program participants. Why did they decide to participate? What were their expectations of the program? What did they think of the services they received? What kinds of skills did they learn? These questions are important because the success of the program is largely dependent on attracting and engaging couples in services they find helpful and appealing. The answers can provide insights into how low-income couples experience a service previously unavailable.

We conducted three focus groups with current and former participant couples who had enrolled in CE during 2008. In total, we spoke with 12 couples, representing 29 percent of those enrolled in 2008. In these focus groups, we asked about program expectations, reactions to the workshops, experiences with completing a family-focused employment plan, and views of the assistance provided by staff. While focus group participants are not representative of all CE participants, they do illustrate general experiences and reactions to the program. Throughout these discussions, participants emphasized that CE supports couples' relationships by providing an opportunity to work together on economic and financial stability.

Couples Valued Opportunities to Improve Relationships and Work Together. Focus group participants first heard of CE as a program that emphasized finances and family and offered group workshops addressing these issues. Participants described their perception that the workshops would offer opportunities to work on building a stronger relationship and provide assistance with housing, employment, and budgeting. One participant illustrated this view with the comment: "Especially in a relationship, you need to work together. It won't work if you're separate."

Focus group participants said that after hearing a description of CE before entering the program, they were most interested in the chance to focus on their relationship and to work together on financial stability. For one focus group participant, focusing on the relationship meant being supportive of his/her partner by attending group workshops, even if they were not initially of interest. Several male participants recalled their initial skepticism but agreed to participate to support their partners. One female participant stated that she was interested in attending "anything that brings us [her and her partner] together." Another female participant emphasized this point by describing an interest in "anything that could benefit us, even if it's not right away."

Group Workshops Viewed as Central Component to CE; Employment Plan Development Seen as Useful. CFUF described the family-focused employment plan as the central feature of CE, and group workshops as a way to help couples achieve goals identified in the plan. Participants described both the group workshops and employment plans as helpful, but some saw the workshop as more central. In two of the focus groups, participants more strongly emphasized their involvement in group workshops, a view that varied from CFUF's original intention for the program. In the third focus group, participants asserted their belief that all program components were equally important. A participant in this group stated, "Can't take out a piece because everything works as one. If you don't have goals set together, it won't work."

All focus group participants had attended group workshops and viewed this as a key program component that allowed them to learn about housing, budgeting, entrepreneurship, and education. Participants mentioned that the information covered during group workshops was new to them. However, it was not just receiving the information that participants valued but the opportunity to discuss the information as a couple.

Several participants offered examples from workshops that focused on housing issues. One participant appreciated that the facilitator of this workshop emphasized the need to buy a house you can afford. Another participant described how the housing workshop taught how to prepare for buying a house. This participant stated, "I probably would have gone out and tried to buy a house instead of doing the checking…. Now, I'll prepare before I do these things. We want to buy a house together and are working on it. We sent out for a credit report."

Most focus group participants had completed a family-focused employment plan with their partners and saw it as a dynamic document that they continued to work on and update over time. One couple described being in the process of updating their plan after each partner had achieved several of the goals. In one focus group, none of the participants described themselves as having "finished" the plan, but this reflected the group's perception that plan completion meant they had achieved the goals stated in the plan. One participant explained that the plan had short- and long-term goals and that their long-term goals were still being addressed. Another participant described challenges with the plan that reflected the importance he and his partner placed on the plan. This participant stated, "It's hard to work on the goal because she's used to a certain way of living and used to doing certain things. Stepping outside of the norm is difficult; it will become easier."

Across the focus groups, most participants viewed the employment plan as a core program activity, as CFUF had intended. However, not all participants viewed the employment plan this way. A small group of participants completed a plan but did not view it as a joint document. One couple illustrated this by explaining that they had completed their plan independently and had not revisited the plan or discussed the goals as a couple. Others could not even recall if they had completed one. One couple described misplacing the plan and stated that they had not talked with staff about it.

Program Viewed as Being for Couples. Focus group participants were asked whether it was important to participate in the program as a couple. Participants, particularly those in two focus groups, agreed with the view of CE staff that participating as a couple was important to get the most from CE. In one focus group, couples compared CE to STRIVE Baltimore to explain why it was important to participate as a couple; they described STRIVE Baltimore as being about one's self, but CE "gives couples something to do together." According to these participants, through the group workshops, couples start to think in the same way and learn "to bring things together," as one member stated.

Participants Reported Strengthening Commitment to Their Relationship Through CE. Participants across focus groups highlighted their increased relationship commitment, often by learning to work together, and attributed this change to participating in CE. A participant summarized this heightened relationship commitment when he stated that he "got that you can accomplish more as partners than as [individuals]." One way participants described this increased commitment was through collaborating on future goals and discussing how to handle finances and other decisions as a team. One participant emphasized this by saying, "I always thought about what I wanted to do, what I want. But as soon as you start the program, both goals are on the same sheet of paper and you see what [we] both want. Mend the lives together and stop thinking as 'I' and start thinking as 'we.'" Another participant described this by saying that you "learn how to work with the partner…. The program gives different scenarios, and we would talk about what each were doing wrong and the solution."

V. CHALLENGES FOR A DUAL-PURPOSE PROGRAM TARGETED TO COUPLES

For any organization, starting a new program brings challenges: hiring appropriate staff; defining services; implementing processes to deliver services; specifying, recruiting, and engaging the target population; and others. CFUF encountered these typical challenges. However, because there were no existing couples-focused models to turn to for ideas or solutions to challenges, the staff struggled in identifying workable solutions in some areas. In first section of this chapter, we identify four such challenges, discuss why each was a challenge for CFUF, and describe how CFUF is addressing the challenge. Specific challenges related to defining an integrated program model, identifying strong management, hiring staff with appropriate backgrounds, and maintaining a focus on enrolling and serving couples. We then discuss next steps for Couples Employment in section B.

A. Four Challenges Facing Couples Employment

Defining a Program Model That Integrates Family Stability and Economic Success. CFUF sought to build CE on its existing experience offering employment and family services, previously through separate programs. The idea was to combine and extend what its other programs already offered—job readiness and employment placement through STRIVE Baltimore and relationship support through BSF—but to offer it to couples, not individuals, in an integrated manner. While placing employment planning at the program's center, CFUF anticipated that CE would integrate employment services with relationship support to help couples work together in defining and achieving couple-related goals.

While each CE component addressed the two focus areas, components tended to address the areas side by side instead of in an integrated manner. Group workshops incorporated both areas by opening with an exercise focused on supporting relationships and then transitioning to the session's economic self-sufficiency topic. The available workshop time was to be split, with one-third of a workshop focusing on relationship support and the remaining two-thirds addressing economic self-sufficiency. In the family-focused employment plan, each member of the couple identified personal goals in the areas of career, finance, and family. The plan then attempted to integrate the two areas by asking couples to list strategies for supporting one another in working toward these personal goals. Approaches for addressing both kinds of issues in case management were expected to be more ad hoc since the case management needs of couples varied.

CFUF will be developing new curricula to weave program activities together more thoroughly, linking work on relationship skills with efforts to address employment goals. CFUF had not identified any existing curricula for CE workshops that staff believed would effectively link these two objectives. CFUF will use the early phase of operating the CE program to guide curriculum development. A standardized curriculum could benefit CE in three ways. First, the curriculum will provide a comprehensive package guiding CE implementation. Second, the curriculum will integrate relationship support content into employment and economic self-sufficiency topics, instead of addressing each topic separately. Third, CFUF will include in the curriculum exercises for couples to complete throughout the program to further their understanding of employment and financial-related topics; these topics will become a platform for applying relationship skills in joint problem-solving.

Identifying a Strong Program Director. All social service programs need a strong director who understands the program's mission and can pursue it effectively. CFUF experienced some "false starts" when hiring a program director, as their initial selection lacked this program vision and the skills to implement it. In early 2008, CFUF hired another program director who brought experience operating a community-based relationship and marriage program. This individual refined the nascent program model and led CE into full implementation. This process of gradually identifying a director who is well-suited to a new program is not unusual, but it can slow realization of a program model.

Achieving an Appropriate Staff Mix. The degree to which CE successfully integrates employment and relationship topics largely depends on its staff's ability to pursue both of the program's objectives. It was difficult to foresee the right balance of skills that staff would need to achieve this integration. The required skills and knowledge span a broad range: the ability to address couple dynamics; manage operational demands; and counsel others on the topics of employment, self-sufficiency, and financial literacy.

CFUF recognized the difficulty of finding such versatile staff. To some extent, staff with different strengths could complement one another as part of a unit. The workshop facilitators, in particular, could apply their content knowledge and group facilitation experience, and the sum of the facilitators' efforts could constitute a series of workshops covering the desired range of topics. However, the EDSs needed to integrate skills and expertise related to employment services and relationship support throughout their work with couples. Ideally, each EDS would be knowledgeable about all content areas and about how to work with couples. Recognizing that such a complex skill set would be rare, CFUF did not require EDSs to possess all these skills when they joined the CE staff. Each EDS contributed some of the required skills, and the team of EDSs worked together to address couples' needs, either by sharing case management responsibilities or by meeting frequently to discuss strategies for specific couples. As CE continues, CFUF will train EDSs in specific areas, such as workforce development, to make up for gaps in their skill set.

Maintaining a Focus on Couples. As a program for couples, CE developed outreach and recruitment strategies intended to engage couples and defined program services to address couples' needs. Initially, staff enrolled individuals, assuming that the other partner would eventually enroll. However, in 13 cases individuals enrolled in CE but their partners never joined. As staff gained experience, they refined their recruitment approach, primarily by moving through the enrollment process with both partners simultaneously, thus avoiding enrollment of individuals who do not participate with their partner.

CE attempts to involve both members of the couple in all services, but some components lend themselves more easily to serving couples than others. The employment plan and group workshops offer natural ways to focus on a couple: couples must develop a joint employment plan, and partners participate in group workshops together. In case management, however, staff try to schedule meetings with both partners but often end up addressing partners' needs separately, with the intention of helping each partner advance the common needs of the couple.

B. Next Steps for Couples Employment

The current target is to enroll and serve 40 couples per year, though CFUF is considering increasing these targets. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and Mathematica will continue to monitor CFUF's progress with CE and assess model implementation. The next stage of

the implementation study will focus on the CE program during 2007 to 2010, reflecting on the full implementation period, not just the initial period covered in this report. As implementation progresses, CE will continue to refine the CE model. CFUF, ACF, and Mathematica will continue to assess the feasibility of the goals and objectives established for CE and the extent to which they need to be modified or reconsidered.

CFUF's effort to offer this new program is pioneering work. The challenges they have faced, and new ones that will emerge, are to be expected from a program that is breaking new ground. CFUF's continued efforts to refine the program model as well as its management and operation provide an opportunity to realize in greater measure the aim of working with couples together and integrating employment services with relationship support.

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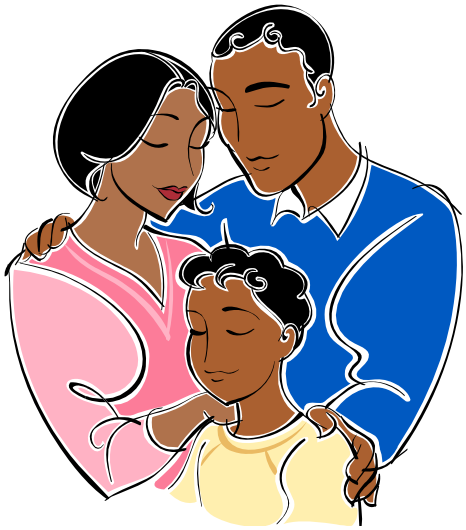
APPENDIX A

2008 FAMILY-FOCUSED EMPLOYMENT PLAN TEMPLATE

Center for Urban Families



Get Ready to Live Your Dream!

Partners for Success

Family-Focused Employment Plan

Partner 1: _____

Partner 2: _____

Date of Enrollment: _____

Date of Plan Completion: _____

Career Goals

What are Career Goals?

A career goal may be related to education, training, employment, or all three.

What are Long-Term Goals?

A long-term goal is for a major accomplishment that you hope to achieve. It may take one, two, or even three years to accomplish.

Examples of long-term career goals are:

- Finding a job in a specific field or with a career path
- Obtaining a degree or certificate to prepare you for a career
- Starting your own business
- Leaving employment to stay home with your children.

What are Short-Term Goals?

Achieving a long-term goal often requires small steps along the way. These small steps can be identified as short-term goals.

Examples of short-term career goals are:

- Learning more about possible jobs in a certain field
- Talking with someone who works in a field you are interested in
- Identifying what education or training is needed for a specific job
- Contacting schools or training programs
- Applying to a school or training program

_____'s Long-Term Career Goal:		**_____'s Long Term Career Goal:**	
I hope to achieve this goal by:_____		I hope to achieve this goal by:_____	
Short-Term Goals To Achieve Along the Way:			
Goal:	Date to be Achieved:	Goal:	Date to be Achieved:

How will we support each other in obtaining our career goals?

As a couple, achieving one's short- and long-term goals takes cooperation between and support from both partners.

Finances

What are Financial Goals?

A financial goal may be to open a bank account, save for a down payment, paying off debt, saving for college, etc.

What are Long-Term Goals?

A long-term goal is for a major accomplishment that you hope to achieve. It may take one, two, or even three years to accomplish.

Examples of long-term financial goals are:

- Buying a car or house
- Paying off debt
- Saving to send your child to college
- Planning for retirement

What are Short-Term Goals?

Achieving a long-term goal often requires small steps along the way. These small steps can be identified as short-term goals.

Examples of short-term financial goals are:

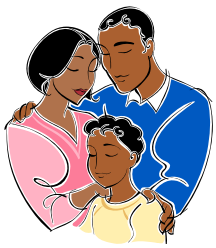
- Open a savings, checking, or investment account
- Review credit report
- Save for a down payment on a car, home or apartment
- Create a budget

_____'s Long-Term Financial Goal:		**_____'s Long Term Financial Goal:**	
I hope to achieve this goal by:_____		I hope to achieve this goal by:_____	
Short-Term Goals To Achieve Along the Way:			
Goal:	Date to be Achieved:	Goal:	Date to be Achieved:

How will we support each other in obtaining our financial goals?

As a couple, achieving one's short- and long-term goals takes cooperation between and support from both partners.

Family Goals



What are Family Goals?

A family goal may be to reconcile family relationships, get married, find affordable childcare, etc.

What are Long-Term Goals?

A long-term goal is for a major accomplishment that you hope to achieve. It may take one, two, or even three years to accomplish.
Examples of long-term family goals are:

- Establish a better relationship with a family member
- Getting married
- Going on a family vacation

What are Short-Term Goals?

Achieving a long-term goal often requires small steps along the way. These small steps can be identified as short-term goals.

Examples of short-term family goals are:

- Finding affordable childcare
- Spend more quality time with family
- Become more active with your children's school or schoolwork

_____'s Long-Term Family Goal:		**_____'s Long Term Family Goal:**	
I hope to achieve this goal by:_____		I hope to achieve this goal by:_____	
Short-Term Goals To Achieve Along the Way:			
Goal:	Date to be Achieved:	Goal:	Date to be Achieved:

How will we support each other in obtaining our family goals?

As a couple, achieving one's short- and long-term goals takes cooperation between and support from both partners.

APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTION OF GROUP-BASED WORKSHOP TOPICS

CE 2009 Workshops

Couples Employment workshops cover 5 topic areas during a 12 week cycle. Within the topic areas, sessions provide content relevant to each topic area as described below.

<u>Financial Literacy</u> – Exposes couples to basic principles of finance, with the goals of increasing financial knowledge, establishing/repairing credit, increasing savings, creating a budget, and beginning steps toward investing.

1. Credit
2. Budgeting
3. Banking

<u>Career Advancement</u> – Focuses on providing couples with the skills necessary to obtain gainful employment, wage and career growth.

1. Job Searching 101 – participants are shown how to search for jobs by using the internet, as well as how to approach job searching through visiting agencies for direct hire.
2. Resume development

<u>Housing</u> – Provides couples with information that will lead toward obtaining stable housing, as well as prepares families for homeownership.

1. Renting
2. Understanding the home buying process
3. How to prepare to buy a house

<u>Education</u> – Exposes couples to the different types of educational opportunities available that will lead to career growth and economic stability.

1. Discuss different types of Adult Ed./Trainings and higher education institutions
2. Financial Aid

<u>Entrepreneurship</u> – Encourages couples to understand the first steps toward business ownership.

1. This workshop explains the three different types of entrepreneurs; traditional, self, and progressive. Couples also use this time to write down what product they will sale, what the target population will be, what needs to be purchased for start-up, and other basic of business development.

APPENDIX C

COUPLES EMPLOYMENT ENROLLMENT FORMS

Center for Urban Families (CFUF)

Couples Employment Project
Pre/Post Test

Clients should complete this assessment at the beginning and end of the program.

1. **I am: Please check one.**

   - ❑ Not committed to my partner for the long-term or considering marriage
   - ❑ Committed to a long-term relationship, but not considering marriage
   - ❑ Considering marrying my partner
   - ❑ Engaged to my partner
   - ❑ Married to my partner
   - ❑ Unsure about the status of my relationship

2. **How would you describe your relationship presently?**

   - ❑ Excellent
   - ❑ Good
   - ❑ Okay
   - ❑ Bad
   - ❑ Poor

3. **How well do you communicate with one another?**

   - ❑ Excellent
   - ❑ Good
   - ❑ Okay
   - ❑ Bad
   - ❑ Poor

4. **How well do you and your partner work together to solve problems?**

   - ❑ Excellent
   - ❑ Good
   - ❑ Bad

5. **Do you have children?**
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

If yes, do you raise your children with the biological parent?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

6. **Where do your child(ren) live? Please check one.**

- ❑ My partner and I live together with our children.
- ❑ My partner and I live together and our children reside elsewhere.
- ❑ My partner and I live separately and our child(ren) reside with me.
- ❑ My partner and I live separately and our child(ren) live with my partner.
- ❑ My partner and I live separately and our child(ren) reside with neither of us.

7. **How often do you see your child(ren)? Please check one.**

- ❑ Never
- ❑ Several times per year
- ❑ Once or twice a month
- ❑ Once or twice per week
- ❑ Everyday

8. **Current housing situation: Please check one.**

- ❑ We are living together
- ❑ We live in separate homes
- ❑ We are living together with parents or grandparents
- ❑ We are living together with friends/relatives/roommates
- ❑ We live together in a shelter or temporary housing
- ❑ We have no stable living situation as a couple

9. **What is your current Employment Status? Please check one.**

- ❑ Full time
- ❑ Part time
- ❑ Unemployed and looking
- ❑ Unemployed but not looking for employment
- ❑ Unemployed due to disability

10. **If you and your partner decided to combine your finances, who would be responsible for making financial decisions? Please check one.**

- ❑ Me
- ❑ My Partner
- ❑ My Partner and I Together

11. **Do you have a budget?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

12. **If you have a budget, do you stick to it:**

- ❑ All of the time
- ❑ Most of the time
- ❑ Some of the time
- ❑ None of the time
- ❑ Not Applicable

13. **How much do you agree with each of the following statements?**

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Undecided
I have employment goals					
My partner supports my career goals					
I have financial goals					
My partner supports my financial goals					
I have education goals					
My partner supports my education goals					
I have family goals					
My partner supports my family goals					
I have problems managing my finances					
I have adequate child care					
I need help with gaining employment					
My bills are generally paid on time					
I'm in need of reliable transportation					
I'm current with my child support order(s)					
I have a good relationship with my child(ren)					
I have a good relationship with my partner					

14. **Have you ever reviewed your credit report?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

15. **Have you reviewed your credit report in the last six months?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

16. **Do you have any of the following: Please check all that apply.**

- ❑ A Checking Account
- ❑ A Savings Account
- ❑ A Credit Card
- ❑ Retirement Account
- ❑ Investments (Stocks, Mutual Funds)

17. **Is a bank debt preventing you from opening a bank account?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

If yes, what is the amount of that debt: $_____

18. **Do you own a home?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

19. **Have you ever been denied a mortgage loan?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

20. **Have you attended any job-readiness programs in the past year?**

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

If yes, please name program (s): _____

center for urban families
helping fathers and families work

Customer Application & Intake Form
The Center for Urban Families (CFUF)

Application Date __/__/__

Prefix: Mr., Mrs., Ms.

First Name: _____

Middle Initial: _____

Last Name _____

Suffix: Jr., Sr., I, II, III, and IV

Address 1: _____

Address 2: _____

Zip Code: _____

Email: _____

Referral Source: _____

SSN: ____-__-____

DOB: __/__/_____

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Race: Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American, Asian, Indian, Pacific Islander, and West Indies if Other **(please explain)** _____

Marital Status: Single, Married, Widowed, Separated, Divorced, Domestic Partner

Home: _____

Work Phone: _____ext. __

Cell Phone: _____

Pager: _____

What is your age? _____ (age at enrollment)

Are you required to attend this program? Yes No
If yes, please describe: _____

Do you have?

☐ A Valid driver's license
☐ A Photo ID
☐ A Social security number
☐ A Birth certificate
☐ Reliable transportation

Which CFUF programs are you particularly interested in?

☐ 50/50 Parenting
☐ Healthy Relationships and Marriage
☐ Maryland Re-Entry Partnership (REP)
☐ Men's Services Responsible Fatherhood
☐ Project Bridge
☐ STRIVE Baltimore
☐ Ex-Offender Programs
☐ Couple's Employment

Where did you hear about the program?

☐ Advertisement/Media
☐ Attorney
☐ Child Support Agency
☐ Contacted by Program Staff
☐ Community Organization
☐ Department of Juvenile Justice
☐ Department of Parole and Probation
☐ Department, Public Safety & Corr. Services
☐ During Community Outreach Activity
☐ Faith-Based Organization
☐ Friend
☐ Health Professional
☐ Program Graduate or Participant
☐ School
☐ Social Services
☐ Spouse, ex-spouse, or girlfriend/boyfriend
☐ Substance Abuse Treatment
☐ Walk-in
☐ Other

If Faith, Community-based or other please define
_____

Have you gone to MOED for job search and placement assistance? Yes No

Do you live in a high poverty area? Yes No

Would you like help with any of the following:

- ☐ Additional education or training
- ☐ Child support payments or debt
- ☐ Finding a job
- ☐ Getting on the right track
- ☐ Getting to see your child (ren) more often
- ☐ Help w/ anger management/support & counseling
- ☐ Improve relationship with the mother/father of my children
- ☐ Medical care/health insurance
- ☐ Parenting skills/Being a better parent
- ☐ Substance abuse treatment counseling
- ☐ Talking with others in my same situation
- ☐ Other

What is your current housing situation?

- ☐ Stable Housing Arrangements
- ☐ Foster Care
- ☐ Independent Living
- ☐ Temporary Housing/Homeless
- ☐ Friends/Relatives

During the past 12 months have you received?

- ☐ TANF (Formerly TCA)
- ☐ State/Local General Assistance
- ☐ Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- ☐ Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)
- ☐ Unemployment Insurance
- ☐ Workers Compensation
- ☐ Veteran's Administration (VA) Benefits
- ☐ TEMHA
- ☐ Other **(please explain)**_____

What is your monthly income? $_____

Are you currently employed? Yes No

If no, what date did you leave the last job?__/__/_____

Is the job expected to end within 6 months? Yes No

If yes, when did you start your current job? __/__/_____

Do you have more than one job? Yes No

Are/were you self-employed? Yes No

Were you self-employed, full-time or part-time? Full-time Part-time

Have you ever been employed? Yes No

Have you ever been employed full-time? Yes No

What's your longest full-time employment: _____ **(in months?)**

What is the highest wage/hr you have ever earned? $_____

Employment status in the past 12 months:

- ☐ Employed full-time
- ☐ Employed part-time
- ☐ Employed on temporary basis or occasional work
- ☐ Did not work

In the past 12 months, how many months of full-time work: ___

Are you currently looking for another job? Yes No

Are you available to work weekends? Yes No

In which industries are you seeking employment?

- ☐ Health
- ☐ Computer Technology
- ☐ Administrative
- ☐ Hospitality
- ☐ Finance, Insurance and Real Estate
- ☐ Construction and Maintenance
- ☐ Other if other, please specify: _____

What shifts do you prefer?

- ☐ 1st shift: 8:00am – 4:00pm
- ☐ 2nd shift: 3:00pm – 11:00pm
- ☐ 3rd shift: 11:00pm – 7:00am

What is the best time to reach you?

- ☐ Mornings
- ☐ Afternoons
- ☐ Evenings
- ☐ Weekends
- ☐ Anytime

Are you enrolled in school? Yes No

Highest grade completed?

- ☐ Below 8th
- ☐ 8th
- ☐ 9th
- ☐ 10th
- ☐ 11th
- ☐ 12th
- ☐ High School/GED
- ☐ Some College
- ☐ AA Degree
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree and above

Highest degree earned:

- ☐ No degree earned
- ☐ High school diploma or GED
- ☐ Technical School Certificate
- ☐ A.A. Degree
- ☐ 4-Year Degree+

Do you have any medical problems or conditions? Yes No

If you have medical problems please describe: _____

Do your medical problems keep you from working? Yes No

Are you or is your girlfriend pregnant? Yes No

Do you have children under 18? Yes No

Do you have (a) child (ren) between 0-6? Yes No

Have you ever been?

- ☐ None
- ☐ Convicted of a felony
- ☐ Convicted of a violent crime
- ☐ Convicted of spousal or child abuse
- ☐ In an alcohol or drug abuse program
- ☐ Arrested for DUI or DWI
- ☐ Convicted of a misdemeanor

Were you incarcerated? Yes No

If yes, most recent release date: _____

Are you currently incarcerated? Yes No

Do you have any current charges pending? Yes No

Are you currently?

- ☐ On Parole
- ☐ On Probation
- ☐ Not on Parole or Probation

Do you currently reside with someone who has been convicted a felony or misdemeanor? Yes No

Are you currently or have you previously been involved in gang activity? Yes No

Have you used illicit drugs in the past 30 days? Yes No
If yes, please indicate: _____

Do you currently have a problem with substance abuse? Yes No

Have you ever had a problem with substance abuse? Yes No

Are you currently taking any medications that we need to know about? Yes No

(For example, Methadone, Percocet, Oxycontin, etc)
If yes, please indicate:

Please do not write below the line:

Applicant Assessment Notes: