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project, please visit the  
project [web page](#).

## SIMR Practice Brief

# Four Tips to Recruit Spanish-Speaking Immigrant Men into Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

Many healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs serving couples face challenges recruiting and enrolling men to participate in services with their female partner.<sup>1</sup> These programs might face additional challenges recruiting Hispanic men whose primary language is Spanish and who are first- or second-generation immigrants from Latin American countries. These men might be harder to recruit and enroll in HMRE programs because of cultural beliefs related to relationships and help-seeking, language barriers, mistrust of services, and a shortage of practitioners from similar cultural backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

Spanish-speaking immigrant men often face numerous stressors, including loss of familial and cultural support, strenuous working conditions, and discrimination.<sup>3</sup> Further, psychological stress associated with financial hardship and adapting to a different culture can decrease family cohesion, diminish the quality of parenting, and increase the risk of relationship conflict and children's academic, socioemotional, and behavioral difficulties.<sup>4</sup>

Human services programs that aim to enhance men's relationships, economic stability, and family well-being can help Spanish-speaking men buffer those stressors. However, many programs historically have struggled to recruit and fully engage Spanish-speaking men, many of whom mistrust service organizations and might not believe that these organizations are equipped to understand their cultural values and experiences.<sup>5</sup> To successfully recruit, enroll, and engage this population, HMRE programs need to understand these challenges and tailor their recruitment approach accordingly.



This brief summarizes four tips to help HMRE programs recruit Spanish-speaking immigrant men from their communities. These strategies were developed as part of the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Services (SIMR) project and were informed by research on best practices in recruitment.<sup>6</sup> The strategies were then tested and refined through three rapid learning cycles conducted in partnership with Family Service Agency-Santa Barbara (FSA-SB). FSA-SB is an HMRE grant recipient funded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance and participating in SIMR that serves Spanish-speaking adult couples and individuals. As part of its participation in SIMR, FSA-SB hired a Spanish-speaking male recruiter, strengthened its partnerships with two community organizations, and redesigned the messages and images in its recruitment materials. Collectively, these strategies contributed to positive shifts in recruiting Spanish-speaking men and achieving program goals.

It is worth noting that these tips are promising but not proven. To fit these tips to other program contexts, HMRE practitioners should test and refine any solutions through ongoing continuous quality improvement and evaluation.

### Note on term “Spanish-speaking men”

Throughout this brief, we use the term “Spanish-speaking men”. This is the term that FSA-SB uses to refer to the men they serve who are immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. There are a variety of labels to capture Spanish-speakers from different countries of origin (for example, Hispanic, Latino, etc.), but this term is the broadest and most reflective of the communities served by the organization.

### About the organization

**Family Service Agency-Santa Barbara (FSA-SB).** This grant recipient is a nonprofit operating in Santa Barbara County, California. FSA-SB offers HMRE services through the Connected Couples, Connected Families program for adult couples and individuals in romantic relationships. The program primarily serves Spanish speakers. The program's primary workshop, offered in Spanish and English, uses the PREP 8.0 and Within My Reach curricula delivered in eight weekly, two-hour sessions. The program also offers case management and additional workshops on parenting and employment services. Connected Couples, Connected Families has faced challenges recruiting Spanish-speaking men since it began in 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Wong et al. 2013

<sup>2</sup> Axford et al. 2012

<sup>3</sup> Capps et al. 2015; López-Zerón et al. 2020; Torres et al. 2012; Yoshikawa 2012

<sup>4</sup> Bamaca-Colbert et al. 2012; Bornstein and Cote 2010; Wong 2013

<sup>5</sup> Axford et al. 2012; Rhodes et al. 2018

<sup>6</sup> For example, Atouba 2019; Friend and Paulsell 2020; Giachello et al. 2007; Hogue et al. 1999; Rhodes et al. 2018

## What is SIMR?

Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Services (SIMR) is a national evaluation overseen by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, with funding from ACF's Office of Family Assistance. SIMR aims to strengthen the capacity of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) grant recipients to improve their programs by addressing implementation challenges in three core areas:

- 1. Recruitment.** Challenges related to identifying and communicating with potential participants, as well as enrolling them in the program.
- 2. Retention.** Challenges with initial and sustained participation in program services.
- 3. Content engagement.** Challenges related to sustaining participants' interest and attention during activities and services.

Through SIMR, Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, collaborated with 10 HMRE grant recipients (five that serve adults and five that serve youth) to conduct iterative, rapid-cycle testing aimed at strengthening grant recipients' services. These grant recipients are funded by the Office of Family Assistance from 2020–2025. Through this work, the team cocreated, tested, and refined promising strategies to address recruitment, retention, and content engagement challenges. The study had two main goals: (1) to improve the service delivery of grant recipients in the study and (2) to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges.

For more information about SIMR, see the study's [project page on the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation website](#).

## ■ Rapid cycle learning and continuous quality improvement

Grant recipients in SIMR tested strategies using a rapid cycle learning approach. Rapid cycle learning is a method for quickly and iteratively testing strategies to strengthen programming. It often involves successive cycles to pilot strategies, collect feedback from staff and program participants on how these strategies are working, and gather data to demonstrate whether the strategies are supporting improvement. Based on what grant recipients learn, staff can refine and test strategies again in a subsequent learning cycle.

HMRE grant recipients and other human services providers may be familiar with continuous quality improvement (CQI). Programs can adopt rapid cycle learning as part of their CQI process to test programmatic changes. CQI is often used to support internal improvements; whereas, rapid cycle learning can be used either for internal improvement or in partnership with researchers to build evidence for the broader field. For more information, see the report, [Developing Strategies to Address Implementation Challenges Facing Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grantees](#).

## Tip 1. Form referral partnerships with trusted community organizations



Spanish-speaking men can differ greatly depending on their language proficiency, geographic location, educational achievement, socioeconomic status, and their own interpretation of their ethnicity and culture.<sup>7</sup> Spanish-speaking men often have deep roots in a range of places, such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, and Dominican Republic.<sup>8</sup> Partnering with organizations that understand the diversity among Hispanic communities and their respective cultural values might help programs more effectively recruit Spanish-speaking men into their programs.<sup>9</sup> HMRE or similar programs can accomplish this by identifying organizations that are recognized and trusted by the Hispanic community (Box 1).

### ■ Box 1. Noteworthy features of organizations trusted by Spanish-speaking men

- Bicultural staff that demonstrate relevant linguistic and cultural competency, especially in participant-facing positions
- Male facilitators that lead groups where men can feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences
- Services that are culturally relevant to the needs and values of Spanish-speaking men and their families
- A culturally welcoming physical environment that promotes gender and ethnicity inclusivity
- Service options that accommodate different work schedules

Source: Calzada 2010; Torres et al 2012.

Programs should guide their staff to identify and form partnerships with trusted sources, such as local schools, churches, barbers, employment agencies, and community organizations that have already established networks with Hispanic families. Organizations that are purposefully inclusive of men, use strengths-based instead of risk-based messaging, and provide opportunities for men to learn from other men tend to more readily garner the trust of Spanish-speaking men and can be better referral sources for HMRE programs.<sup>10</sup> Some HMRE programs have found success serving Hispanic parents when recruiting from and co-locating their program at a location or organization that is widely recognized and trusted by the local

<sup>7</sup> Reck et al. 2013; Torres et al. 2013

<sup>8</sup> Noe-Bustamante 2020

<sup>9</sup> Calzada 2010; Torres et al. 2013

<sup>10</sup> Baker et al. 2011; Bouchet et al. 2012; Chacko et al 2018; Selekman and Holcomb 2021; Yañez and Selekman 2022

Hispanic community. For example, co-locating at a local church where the Hispanic community congregates might result in participants feeling safer while participating and more satisfied with the services.<sup>11</sup>

In SIMR, FSA-SB chose to test and refine more intensive and purposeful approaches to forming recruitment partnerships. FSA-SB leaders noted they lacked connections with community organizations that worked with substantial numbers of Spanish-speaking men. FSA-SB leaders developed a process for identifying, prioritizing, and reaching out to potential partners, and asked staff at each of FSA-SB's locations to forge new partnerships and strengthen existing ones. FSA-SB prioritized two community organizations—*Líderes Campesinas* and CommUnify—that were likely to be trusted and known entities to Spanish-speaking men (Box 2).<sup>12</sup> To learn more about how to establish referral partnerships with organizations, refer to this brief.

### ■ Box 2. Family Service Agency-Santa Barbara (FSA-SB) partner organizations

**Líderes Campesinas** is a collective of victim advocates and outreach specialists who were previously farmworkers and organized to spread awareness about issues affecting farmworker communities and their families. The collective serves as a liaison between farmworker communities and public agencies, academia, journalists, and service providers. FSA-SB already had an established partnership with *Líderes Campesinas* in Guadalupe, California, which it then expanded to its Santa Maria, California location with the aim of reaching and recruiting more Spanish-speaking men. FSA-SB recognized that *Líderes Campesinas* could be a rich source of referrals of Spanish-speaking men because of the population it works with and its community engagement model. In particular, some people at *Líderes Campesinas* are bilingual Mixteco/Spanish speakers who could help FSA-SB bridge the language gap and serve a population of monolingual Mixteco speakers who only speak the Indigenous language of Mexico's Oaxaca region.

**CommUnify** is a nonprofit organization working to help Santa Barbara County (California) residents find sustainable solutions that improve and maintain their health, resilience, and financial security. CommUnify is one of the largest nonprofit organizations in Santa Barbara County. CommUnify works with families with low incomes but does not provide relationship education services. Recognizing this service gap, FSA-SB established a countywide partnership with CommUnify in Lompoc, California. After establishing the partnership at CommUnify's Lompoc location, FSA-SB decided to develop new connections at each of CommUnify's nine locations to amplify CommUnify's referral pool for FSA-SB's HMRE program. FSA-SB's initial strategy was to partner with the programs at CommUnify that served families, but it learned that to recruit men, it needed to partner with CommUnify's programs that served men. Thus, FSA-SB started exploring ways to partner with CommUnify's other programs and considered strategies such as providing incentives to programs that sent more referrals.

## Tip 2. Craft messages and strategies that resonate with Spanish-speaking men



HMRE and similar programs that invest time translating program materials to Spanish demonstrate respect and acknowledgement of Spanish-speaking populations, especially when they ensure their translations use terms that will be familiar to the intended audience.<sup>13</sup> However, developing messages and accompanying strategies to recruit Spanish-speaking men in a community takes more than simply translating a flyer from English to Spanish. In SIMR, FSA-SB strengthened its messaging to Spanish-speaking

<sup>11</sup> Parra-Cardona et al. 2012

<sup>12</sup> Friend et al. 2023

<sup>13</sup> Torres et al. 2016

men by increasing its understanding of these men and their motivations to participate. Other programs can consider doing the following based on FSA-SB's experience:



- ▶ **Develop a profile of the men you wish to recruit.** Spanish-speaking populations in a community might include people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, so the messages to one group might not be relevant for others. Therefore, effective messaging requires an understanding of these men's community and their values.<sup>14</sup> The SIMR team and FSA-SB leaders brought in Spanish-speaking male workshop facilitators to participate in interactive activities designed to inform the organization's understanding of Spanish-speaking men in the communities FSA-SB serves. For one core activity, FSA-SB staff developed a participant persona—based on a suggested best practice in recruiting for HMRE programs<sup>15</sup>—that explored the demographics and traits, family and relationship context, neighborhood context, and needs and goals of the men they were hoping to recruit (Figure 1). From this activity, FSA-SB staff learned that the Spanish-speaking men they were often recruiting were agricultural workers with low incomes who worked long hours; had limited formal education but vast life experiences; and valued their families, self-reliance, and their faith. FSA-SB leaders and the SIMR team used this information to help their staff understand the motivations of the men and contexts in which they live.

**Figure 1. FSA-SB participant persona for Spanish-speaking men**



<sup>14</sup> Farquhar et al. 2014; Rhodes et al. 2018

<sup>15</sup> Friend and Paulsell 2020





- ▶ **Engage with Spanish-speaking men to understand how HMRE programming aligns with their lives.** Human services programs are increasingly recognizing that those with lived experience are experts who should be consulted in all aspects of programming.<sup>16</sup> The SIMR team and FSA-SB leaders embraced this concept and actively sought direct feedback from Spanish-speaking men who had participated in their program to understand the types of messages and marketing materials that would resonate with them. Through these interactions, FSA-SB learned that these participants wanted to know about the program’s benefits or “what’s in it for me?” first so they could easily determine whether services were worth their time. In addition, participants said they were motivated by benefits related to their families rather than their romantic relationships specifically—namely, benefits related to their relationships with their children, or how their relationship with their partner influenced the overall well-being of their family. Men expressed that highlighting services that could help them better provide for their family, such as employment and financial coaching services, also motivated them to enroll.



- ▶ **Consider whether the imagery used with the messages reflects the population being recruited.** HMRE and similar programs often use images alongside messages to help account for diversity in reading skills and to give prospective participants a better idea of what the program offers.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is important to ensure that images resonate with Spanish-speaking men. For example, FSA-SB leaders asked Spanish-speaking men to review the marketing materials they used to recruit for their program. In doing so, the men pointed out that the families in stock images did not represent them and their families, and that they would rather see pictures of real families doing activities in their communities—such as going to the beach or a park. This led FSA-SB leaders to switch stock photos with pictures of program participants on the program’s marketing materials (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. FSA-SB original stock image (left) and modified (right) print marketing image**



<sup>16</sup> Minkler 2012; Skelton-Wilson et al. 2021

<sup>17</sup> Friend and Paulsell 2020; Torres et al. 2013



- ▶ **Deliver messages in a way that demonstrates cultural values.** Organizations can garner trust from Spanish-speaking men by instilling prominent cultural values in their recruitment efforts, and infusing them into the program and throughout the organization more generally.<sup>18</sup> Table 1 highlights how FSA-SB incorporated some of these cultural values into its approach to recruitment. FSA-SB identified these cultural values through their extensive work with the Spanish-speaking community in Santa Barbara County.

**Table 1. Embedding cultural values into recruitment practices: Examples from FSA-SB**

Important cultural values for Spanish-speaking men	Translating cultural values into recruitment practices: FSA-SB examples
<b>Familismo:</b> Loyalty, solidarity, and reciprocity among family members. The needs of family supersede individual needs.	FSA-SB enhanced its marketing materials and messages to emphasize how HMRE programs can help men improve family relationships.
<b>Personalismo:</b> Emphasizes individual, warm, personal ways of relating to others.	FSA-SB hired a dedicated recruiter and aimed to establish personal connections with men during outreach and recruitment efforts.
<b>Confianza:</b> Refers to trust and intimacy in interpersonal transactions, and the belief that the other person has one’s best interests at heart.	FSA-SB hired staff with similar demographics and experiences to build trust, and aimed to establish trust with potential participants during recruitment and outreach.
<b>Respeto:</b> Defines the boundaries of behavior, and encourages deferential attitude toward people based on age, gender, authority, or position.	FSA-SB aimed to recognize men’s assets and strengths and crafted recruitment messages that reflected that. Staff also used formal or informal pronouns and honorifics as appropriate.

### Tip 3. Consider hiring a male recruiter from the community



A suggested recruitment practice in HMRE programs is to have a dedicated recruiter lead engagements with the community and potential participants.<sup>19</sup> Best practices from the field also support hiring men in various roles, such as recruiters, facilitators, and case managers, as a strategy for enhancing recruitment of men.<sup>20</sup>

As part of its SIMR work, the FSA-SB team hired a Spanish-speaking male as a recruiter. When hiring this staff member—called a community engagement specialist—FSA-SB leaders chose someone with specific characteristics that align with the following guidance from the broader field:



- ▶ **Having a shared cultural background.** Recruiters with a shared background can promote trust and a sense of familiarity.<sup>21</sup> Using same-ethnicity staff can be a successful strategy to enhance recruitment of specific groups or hard-to-reach communities.<sup>22</sup> This might be a particularly promising strategy to use with Spanish-

<sup>18</sup> Benito-Gomez and Rojas 2020; Calzada 2010; Torres et al. 2013

<sup>19</sup> Friend and Paulsell 2020

<sup>20</sup> National Fatherhood Initiative 2018

<sup>21</sup> Rhodes et al. 2018

<sup>22</sup> Axford et al. 2012; Parra-Cardona et al. 2012; Rhodes et al. 2018

speaking men, as common barriers to their participation in programs include mistrust of services and language barriers.<sup>23</sup> In prior research, outreach workers recruiting for a program with Indigenous farmworkers noted that finding common ground by asking prospective participants about their native town and sharing about their background was an important step before discussing the program. The outreach workers reported that this approach helped establish rapport before describing program services.<sup>24</sup> Drawing on a recruiter with ties to the community or who has additional characteristics in common might bring other benefits. For example, using parents as recruiters for a parenting program has been identified as a best practice.<sup>25</sup>



**As a male, I brought a different aspect, in terms of how to approach men and grab the attention of a man.**

*FSA-SB's community engagement specialist*



- ▶ **Coming from the communities served.** The recruiter hired by FSA-SB to improve outreach and enrollment among Spanish-speaking men was from one of the three Spanish-speaking communities that the organization had prioritized for recruitment. Originally, FSA-SB leaders advertised for a recruiter who held a bachelor's degree. However, upon further discussion and reflection with the SIMR team, leaders acknowledged that connections to the community and experience in marketing or sales were more important than having a degree. FSA-SB supervisors shared that it's important for recruiters to have community-organizing skills or a disposition oriented toward building relationships with communities. In focus groups for SIMR, staff favored recruiters with deep understanding of and strong ties with the diverse Hispanic communities they served.



**It has to be somebody who's from the community – that's key.**

*Leadership at FSA-SB on the characteristics of a recruiter*

## Tip 4. Leverage and formalize word-of-mouth outreach through program ambassadors



Engaging current participants and graduates to support recruitment can draw on existing trust and credibility. One promising recruitment strategy is word-of-mouth, through which program participants or graduates share information about the program with their family, friends, and acquaintances.<sup>26</sup> Word-of-mouth recruitment uses what many people feel are legitimate sources of knowledge—their trusted social network. It also normalizes participating in relationship or parenting workshops or services, which might otherwise feel stigmatized.<sup>27</sup> Word-of-mouth recruitment might be particularly effective in Spanish-speaking communities, including among men, as prior research on Spanish-speaking families has demonstrated cultural preferences for more personalized approaches over business-like approaches, such as advertising.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Axford et al. 2012

<sup>24</sup> Farquhar et al. 2014

<sup>25</sup> Martinez et al. 2012

<sup>26</sup> Bouchet et al. 2012; Farquhar et al. 2014; Reck et al. 2013; Stahlschmidt et al. 2013

<sup>27</sup> Axford et al. 2012; Stahlschmidt et al. 2013

<sup>28</sup> Bouchet et al. 2012



In SIMR, FSA-SB formalized a process to encourage word-of-mouth referrals by developing a program champions initiative (Box 3). Champions were couples who had completed FSA-SB’s Connected Couples program together and were from key communities served by the organization. Champions had the option to commit to a variety of activities to support the program to allow couples’ flexibility in their type of involvement while ensuring that expectations were clear (Box 3). In SIMR rapid-learning cycles, staff at FSA-SB noted that alumni’s enthusiasm for the program carried over into their outreach and recruitment efforts.

### Box 3. Launching FSA-SB’s program champions initiative



Before SIMR, staff at FSA-SB shared that word-of-mouth referrals were a promising source of new participants but were not officially encouraged by the program. In a focus group for SIMR, FSA-SB participants also reinforced that hearing about the program from friends or family was an effective outreach method for recruiting men. Through SIMR, the FSA-SB team decided to formalize this form of outreach and launched its program champions initiative.

The team developed three tiers of participation to account for participants’ differing capacity to support the program. Staff wanted to allow flexibility but also have clear expectations, so champions understood what was being asked of them. Examples of activities for each tier include:

- Bronze (Bronce) tier. Passing out flyers and sharing about the program with family, friends, and acquaintances
- Silver (Plata) tier. Passing out flyers and sharing about the program with family, friends, and acquaintances; Using social media accounts to share information about the program with their networks
- Gold (Oro) tier. Attending the first workshop of new cohorts to share their story in the program, as well as attending recruitment events for the program

#### Program Champion Levels

Niveles (Levels)	 Recibe materiales (Receive materials)	 Comparte (Share)	 Siguenos (Follow us)	 Asiste talleres (Attend workshops)	 Asiste eventos (Attend events)
Bronce (Bronze)	✓	✓			
Plata (Silver)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Oro (Gold)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Workshop facilitators and family advocates (or case managers) worked together to identify champions in each of the three main regions of the county. They sought out couples who had participated in workshops, helped out facilitators (for example, stayed after class to help clean the room), and showed passion for the program. Program champions first attended an orientation with FSA-SB’s community engagement specialist to learn more about appropriate messaging and expectations. The community engagement specialist also regularly checked in with champions.

## Considerations

This brief describes tips that HMRE or other practitioners might consider to enhance recruitment of Spanish-speaking men. These strategies are evidence informed but were developed for the specific context of the grant recipients in SIMR. To use these strategies, HMRE practitioners will need to think carefully about the needs and challenges of their service populations and staff, and adapt as necessary. Involving staff and participants in developing the strategies is important to get them on board and invested in the strategies. In addition, it is important to remember that Spanish-speaking men are a diverse group, with various cultures and experiences. Practitioners should carefully consider the communities they serve to understand the characteristics and diversity of Hispanic men.

We provide more information about the SIMR study and findings from other SIMR sites in the reports for the study, as well as through practitioner guides on the [Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation SIMR web page](#).

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