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SIMR
Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs

SIMR Practice Brief

Road Maps for Change: Adult-Serving HMRE Grant Recipients' Rapid Cycle Learning in the SIMR Project

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services are designed to help participants build and sustain strong families. HMRE services for adult couples and individuals provide group workshops on topics such as communication, commitment, and intimacy (Stanley et al. 2020; Wadsworth and Markman 2012). Research on the effectiveness of HMRE services has shown some moderately positive outcomes for participants, with a larger evidence base available on the effectiveness of HMRE programs that serve couples (Arnold and Beelmann 2019; Hawkins et al. 2022). However, to achieve their intended effects, HMRE service providers might need support to address key implementation challenges related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement (Friend et al. 2020; Markman et al. 2022; Stanley et al. 2020).

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HMRF
HEALTHY MARRIAGE & RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), with funding from the Office of Family Assistance, contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) project. SIMR aims to (1) strengthen the service delivery of the HMRE grant recipients that participated and (2) develop lessons for the broader HMRE field on promising strategies to address common implementation challenges.

The infographics in this brief present the strategies that each grant recipient focused on in SIMR, how they changed over the course of rapid cycle learning, and lessons and insights for the field (see "What Is Rapid Cycle Learning?" on page 3).

▌ What is SIMR?

Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (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. It aims to strengthen the capacity of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) grant recipients to improve their services 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 services.

2. **Retention.** Challenges with initial and sustained participation in 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 engage in iterative, rapid cycle learning aimed at strengthening their services. These organizations 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 OPRE website.

This brief focuses on the five adult-serving HMRE grant recipients that participated in SIMR (Table 1). In-depth descriptions of what each grant recipient tested and learned in SIMR are contained in a separate study report (Friend et al. 2023). Another report and a companion brief describe the rapid cycle learning with youth-serving grant recipients. A series of practice briefs share tips for HMRE service providers, based on findings from rapid cycle learning. More information about these reports and briefs are available in the box on page 11.

Table 1. Adult-serving HMRE grant recipients participating in SIMR

Grant recipient	Location	Service population	Strategies developed and tested	Number of learning cycles completed
Anthem Strong Families	Dallas, Texas	English- and Spanish-speaking women, as well as men without children or romantic partners; focusing on those with low incomes	• Develop, enhance, and maintain recruitment partnerships • Use social media to recruit participants	2
Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County	Santa Barbara, California	Primarily Spanish-speaking couples and individuals	• Recruit Spanish-speaking men to participate in services for couples • Coach participants using a motivation-driven case management practice	3
Gateway Community Services	West Liberty, Kentucky	Families and adult individuals in rural Kentucky	• Develop, enhance, and maintain recruitment partnerships • Enhance virtual facilitation	2
Montefiore Medical Center	Bronx, New York	Primarily Latino and Black couples who have low incomes and are expecting a baby or parenting	• Develop engaging virtual services	3
The RIDGE Project	McClure, Ohio	Men and women who are incarcerated but close to reentry	• Use motivational interviewing to enhance case management and participant-staff interactions	1

▌ What is rapid cycle learning?

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—referred to as learning cycles—to pilot strategies, collect feedback from staff and 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 the learning cycles that follow. The length of a learning cycle is dependent upon the strategy being tested and the program setting.

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. 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.

As part of the SIMR study, the grant recipients developed and tested improvement strategies tailored to their specific needs, service populations, and individual contexts by using an approach to program improvement and rapid cycle learning known as Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²). LI² is an analytic and evidence-based

approach to managing program improvement (Derr et al. 2017). Throughout the three phases of LI², researchers collaborate with practitioners to (1) identify the root causes of a challenge (Learn); (2) create innovative program improvement strategies that are participant-centered, informed by science, and sustainable (Innovate); and (3) test and refine the strategies using rapid cycle learning methods (Improve).
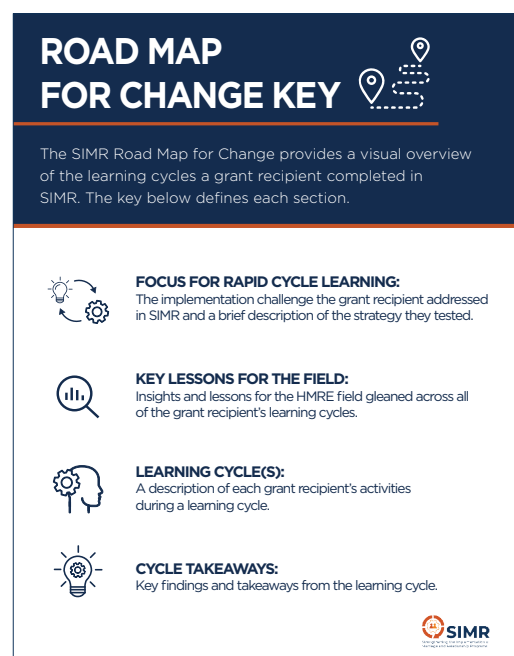
During the Improve phase in SIMR, adult-serving grant recipients conducted between one and three learning cycles (see "What is Rapid Cycle Learning" above). They collected different types of data to assess the success of the strategies they were testing, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys of staff and participants; workshop observations; program data; and data from the nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management) system sponsored by ACF that grant recipients use to record participants' characteristics and participation in services, monitor their service use, and make decisions that are informed by data.

Through their work with the SIMR team, grant recipients did the following:

▶ **Addressed pressing implementation challenges.** Three grant recipients focused on improving recruitment. Two focused on improving engagement in virtual services. Two others focused on improving engagement in case management.

▶ **Increased their capacity to collect and use data to inform decision making.** Through rapid cycle learning, grant recipient staff administered feedback surveys to participants, tracked recruitment data, and analyzed social media metrics. They then reviewed these data with the SIMR team and developed insights to refine their improvement strategies.

▶ **Developed skills for identifying and responding to emerging implementation challenges.** At the end of each learning cycle, the SIMR team met with the grant recipients to review and interpret their data and determine next steps. When new challenges emerged, the grant recipients were able to pivot to address them in later learning cycles.

▶ **Developed tools and strategies to support strong implementation through the rest of the grant period.** Grant recipients created promising tools and strategies to develop recruitment and referral partnerships, enhance case management, deliver engaging virtual services, and encourage peer and staff-participant relationships. At the end of SIMR, the grant recipients planned to continue using these tools and strategies.

Navigating the road maps for change

The infographics contained in this brief, called "Road Maps for Change," illustrate the rapid cycle learning activities that each adult-serving grant recipient completed in SIMR, including the strategy that grant recipient staff tested during a learning cycle, what they learned about the strategy, and how the strategy or the focus of the grant recipient changed for the learning cycles that followed. The top part of each graphic shares the grant recipient's focus for rapid cycle learning, including the general implementation challenge identified and the strategies tested to address the challenge. The top part of each graphic also shares key lessons for other HMRE service providers and the field from the grant recipient's rapid cycle learning. The bottom part of each graphic depicts the grant recipient's activities and takeaways from each learning cycle completed. For more detailed information about grant recipients' rapid cycle learning activities, see the study report (Friend et al. 2023).

ROAD MAP FOR CHANGE KEY

The SIMR Road Map for Change provides a visual overview of the learning cycles a grant recipient completed in SIMR. The key below defines each section.

FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING:
The implementation challenge the grant recipient addressed in SIMR and a brief description of the strategy they tested.

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD:
Insights and lessons for the HMRE field gleaned across all of the grant recipient's learning cycles.

LEARNING CYCLE(S):
A description of each grant recipient's activities during a learning cycle.

CYCLE TAKEAWAYS:
Key findings and takeaways from the learning cycle.

SIMR

Next steps

Through their collaboration as part of SIMR rapid cycle learning, the SIMR team and the five adult-serving grant recipients that participated generated insights and lessons to inform strong service delivery that are relevant to other HMRE grant recipients. The tools and strategies that grant recipients developed provide starting points for other organizations that want to strengthen their own HMRE services. Findings from SIMR suggest that adult-serving grant recipients could consider strategies that:

► **Strengthen recruitment efforts** by identifying and developing new partnerships to support recruiting efforts and by strengthening existing partnerships.

► **Intentionally shift to virtual services** by equipping facilitators and participants to be able to troubleshoot technological challenges and by supporting facilitators in their efforts to deliver virtual content in an engaging manner.

► **Reinforce virtual workshop content** by providing brief skill coaching sessions outside of workshop sessions.

► **Strengthen case management practices** by leveraging and enhancing participants' internal motivation.

Grant recipients interested in adopting any of these strategies can do so using a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to adapt the strategy to their specific context and then iteratively test it on a small scale to refine the strategy design and implementation.

Road Map for Change

ANTHEM STRONG FAMILIES

ANTHEM STRONG FAMILIES **BeTheChampion**

FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Recruitment: Develop, enhance, and maintain recruitment partnerships; build social media recruitment campaign

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Consider an intentional approach to partnership development that focuses on proactive communication
- Consider using social media in conjunction with other recruitment and outreach methods

Learning Cycle 1

Increase the number of referrals from partner organizations:

- Create a process to establish new partnerships
- Develop partner-specific marketing materials
- Participate in training on partnership development

Cycle 1 Takeaways

- Staff reported greater confidence in ability to form partnerships
- Anthem engaged with 10 new partner organizations
- Partners were satisfied with initial communication and clear roles, but noted ways to improve regular communication

Learning Cycle 2

Identify best practices for recruiting young adults through Instagram:

- Obtain input from participants on content
- Develop a social media plan

Cycle 2 Takeaways

- Obtaining participant feedback was important for crafting messages that resonated with young adults
- Amplified posts got more views than regular posts, but users did not generally engage more actively with amplified posts
- Social media strategy did not increase program enrollment among young adults

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Road Map for Change

FAMILY SERVICE AGENCY OF SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Recruitment: Improve enrollment of Spanish-speaking men in relationships
- Content Engagement: Enhance engagement in case management services

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Recruiting Spanish-speaking men for HMRE programs may require a multipronged approach
- Tasking small teams with specific elements of a recuitment strategy is a promising approach
- Using a motivation-driven approach is a promising way to engage participants in case management, but support is needed to implement the model well

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Learning Cycle 1

Increase the number of referrals from partner organizations:

- Create a process to establish new partnerships
- Participate in training on partnership development
- Assign specific staff to manage the partnership process
- Develop partner-specific marketing materials

Cycle 1 Takeaways

- Staff reported greater confidence in ability to form partnerships
- Established successful new partnerships with two organizations

Learning Cycle 2

Identify best practices for recruitment in referral partnerships, direct outreach, program champions, and marketing:

- Continue partnerships development process and level up existing partnership
- Create staff-led team to develop direct recruitment approach and recruitment pitch
- Develop outreach strategy for program champions
- Enhance marketing materials to attract Spanish-speaking men

Cycle 2 Takeaways

- Established six new partnerships and leveled up two partners
- Hired a devoted recruiter and enhanced direct recruitment
- Staff recruited participants to serve as program champions to help with recruitment
- The combined recruitment efforts resulted in the most promising recruitment month in July 2022, enrolling 37 men and 38 women

Learning Cycle 3

Identify supports needed for staff to implement a motivation-driven approach to case management

- Participate in training on Goal4It!™, an evidence-informed coaching and case management model
- Revise existing processes and workflows to align with Goal4It!™
- Use Goal4It!™ with staff in supervisory meetings and with participants in case management meetings

Cycle 3 Takeaways

- Staff saw promise in the model, but desired more guidance and support to implement it consistently

Road Map for Change

GATEWAY COMMUNITY ACTION
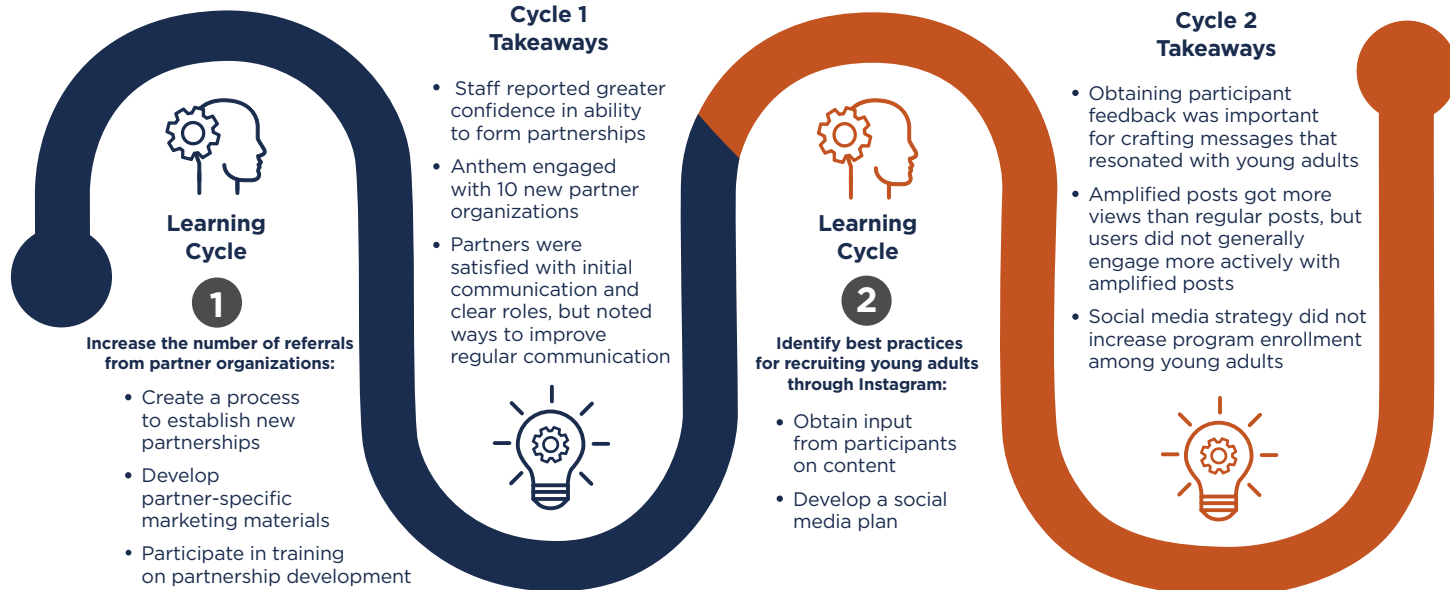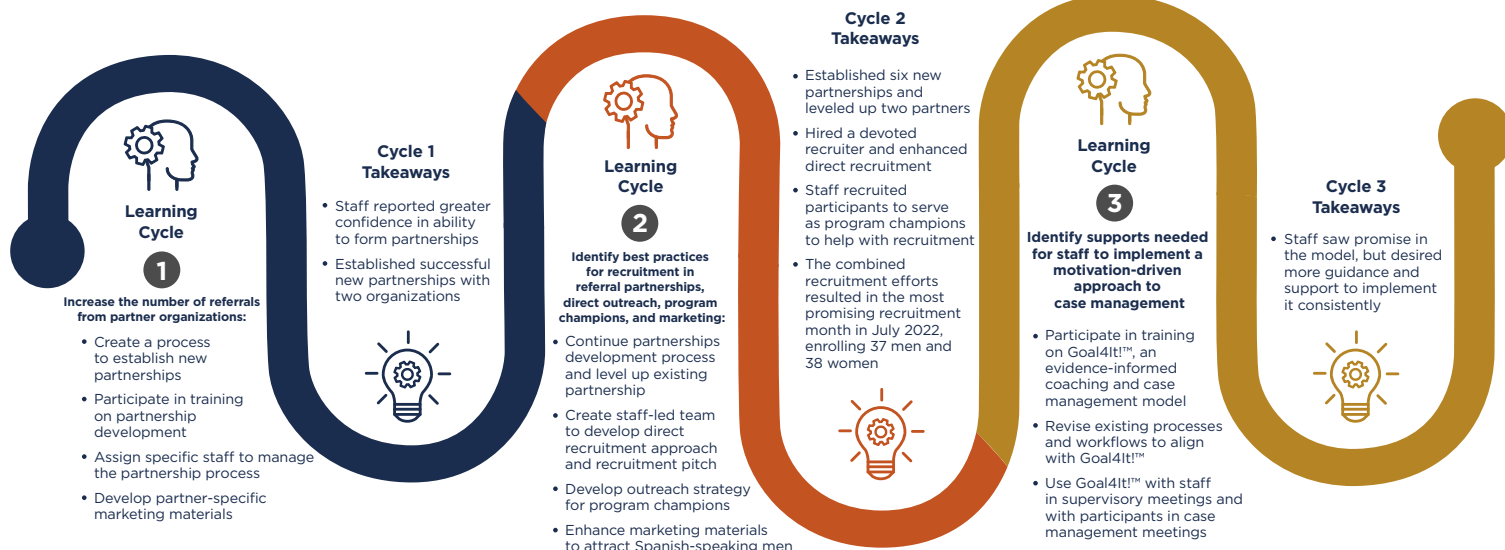
LifeElevated
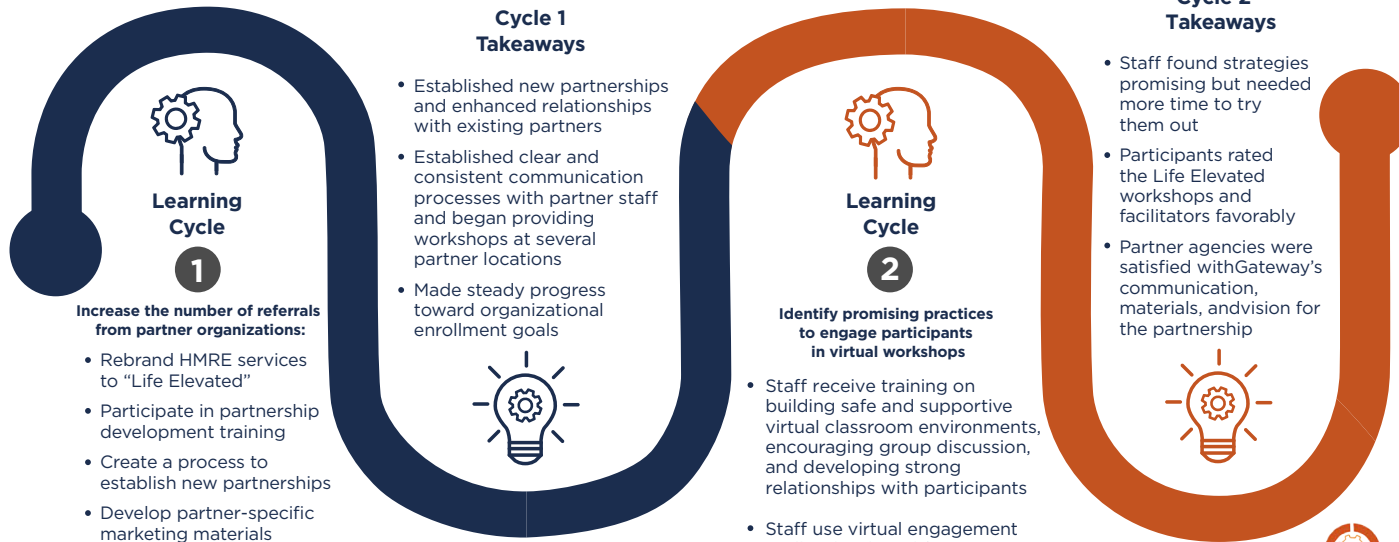Gateway Community Action
Empowered. Encouraged. Elevated.

FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Recruitment: Develop, enhance, and maintain recruitment partnerships
- Content Engagement: Enhance virtual facilitation

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- A sustained, intentional, and well-documented approach to partner development may help increase recruitment
- Consider offering services at partner organizations that serve a similar service population to reach more people
- Virtual engagement strategies may need to be adapted in situations where participants do not have their own devices and cannot use features like breakout rooms or chat
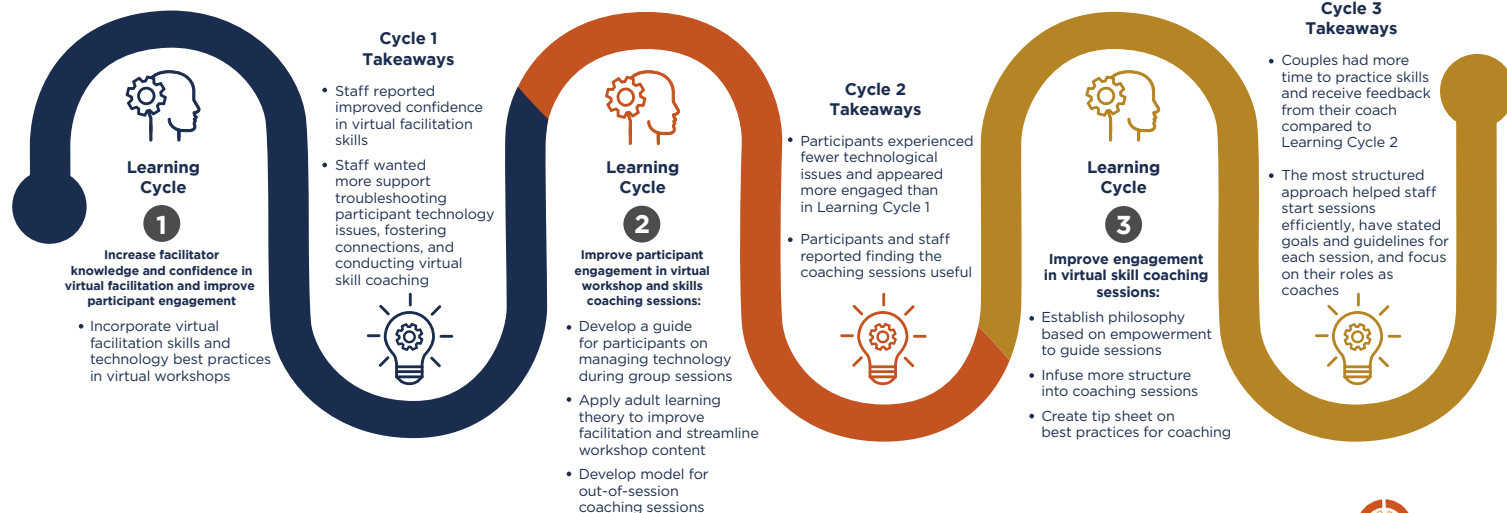
Learning Cycle 1

Increase the number of referrals from partner organizations:

- Rebrand HMRE services to "Life Elevated"
- Participate in partnership development training
- Create a process to establish new partnerships
- Develop partner-specific marketing materials

Cycle 1 Takeaways

- Established new partnerships and enhanced relationships with existing partners
- Established clear and consistent communication processes with partner staff and began providing workshops at several partner locations
- Made steady progress toward organizational enrollment goals

Learning Cycle 2

Identify promising practices to engage participants in virtual workshops

- Staff receive training on building safe and supportive virtual classroom environments, encouraging group discussion, and developing strong relationships with participants
- Staff use virtual engagement toolkit developed for SIMR

Cycle 2 Takeaways

- Staff found strategies promising but needed more time to try them out
- Participants rated the Life Elevated workshops and facilitators favorably
- Partner agencies were satisfied with Gateway's communication, materials, and vision for the partnership

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Road Map for Change

Supporting Healthy Relationships
BUILDING FUTURES AROUND FAMILIES

MONTEFIORE MEDICAL CENTER

FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Content Engagement: Test virtual facilitation strategies to increase facilitator knowledge and confidence and improve participant engagement

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Consider how to adapt in-person services to a virtual setting, such as by streamlining the curriculum or allowing more time to cover curriculum content
- Consider adding virtual skills coaching to reinforce workshop content
- Consider ways to minimize participants' environmental distractions

Learning Cycle 1

Increase facilitator knowledge and confidence in virtual facilitation and improve participant engagement

- Incorporate virtual facilitation skills and technology best practices in virtual workshops

Cycle 1 Takeaways

- Staff reported improved confidence in virtual facilitation skills
- Staff wanted more support troubleshooting participant technology issues, fostering connections, and conducting virtual skill coaching

Learning Cycle 2

Improve participant engagement in virtual workshop and skills coaching sessions:

- Develop a guide for participants on managing technology during group sessions
- Apply adult learning theory to improve facilitation and streamline workshop content
- Develop model for out-of-session coaching sessions

Cycle 2 Takeaways

- Participants experienced fewer technological issues and appeared more engaged than in Learning Cycle 1
- Participants and staff reported finding the coaching sessions useful

Learning Cycle 3

Improve engagement in virtual skill coaching sessions:

- Establish philosophy based on empowerment to guide sessions
- Infuse more structure into coaching sessions
- Create tip sheet on best practices for coaching

Cycle 3 Takeaways

- Couples had more time to practice skills and receive feedback from their coach compared to Learning Cycle 2
- The most structured approach helped staff start sessions efficiently, have stated goals and guidelines for each session, and focus on their roles as coaches

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Road Map for Change

The RIDGE Project

RIDGE | The Ridge Project ®
Building a Legacy of Strong Families

FOCUS FOR RAPID CYCLE LEARNING

- Content Engagement: Use motivationalinterviewing techniques to enhance case management and participant–staff interactions

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Motivational interviewing techniques have the potential to help HMRE staff have empathetic and patient interactions with participants
- HMRE service providers may need organizational support to implement motivational interviewing techniques consistently well
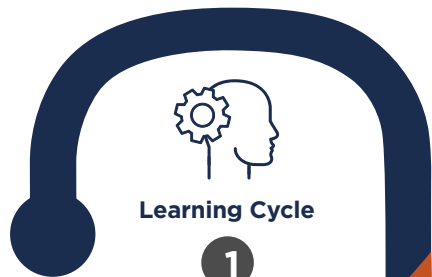
Learning Cycle

1

Build staff knowledge and skills to use motivational interviewing strategies

- Participate in two-day training led by certified motivational interviewing instructor
- Use motivational interviewing techniques in case management meetings to set goals with participants before their release from incarceration

Cycle 1 Takeaways

- Staff reported skill gains and success using motivational interviewing with participants who are incarcerated
- Staff found motivational interviewing most useful for uncovering challenges, building motivation, trust, and self-regulation skills, and re-engaging participants
- Some staff began to apply motivational interviewing techniques in group workshop sessions to spark discussion and engagement

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◼ For more information

The SIMR team has produced a series of publications and resources for researchers and practitioners who are interested in learning more about SIMR, rapid cycle learning, and program improvement. All of these SIMR reports and briefs are available on the OPRE website:

- **Developing Strategies to Address Implementation Challenges Facing Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grant Recipients.** This report describes the design of the SIMR study and how participating grant recipients used LI^2 to design and test strategies to address implementation challenges.

- **Strategies for Addressing Common Implementation Challenges in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs: A Guide for Supporting Program Improvement Efforts.** This guide presents promising approaches and strategies for addressing implementation problems common to HMRE services, based on a literature review and active engagement with researchers and practitioner experts.

- **Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Youth: Findings from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs Project.** This report describes the rapid cycle learning process and findings for five youth-serving HMRE grant recipients.

- **Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Adults: Findings from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs Project.** This report describes the rapid cycle learning process and findings for the five adult-serving HMRE grant recipients.

- **Iterating to Improve: Lessons from Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Grant Recipients.** In this digital essay, grant recipient staff who participated in SIMR share their insights and advice for conducting rapid cycle learning.

- **Practice briefs.** The SIMR team developed a series of eight practice briefs to share tips, insights, and practical applications of SIMR findings with other HMRE practitioners on the following topics:

  - Leveraging partnerships to improve recruitment

  - Recruiting Spanish-speaking men

  - Supporting co-facilitation in the classroom

  - Providing skill coaching to reinforce workshop content

  - Adopting a motivation-driven approach to case management

  - Delivering engaging virtual workshop sessions

  - Using data to guide program improvement

  - Supporting HMRE staff

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