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FAMILY STRENGTHENING RESEARCH





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Table of Contents

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES..... 3

OFFICE OF PLANNING, RESEARCH, AND EVALUATION 3

DIVISION OF FAMILY STRENGTHENING 4

DFS PORTFOLIO HIGHLIGHTS 5

SUPPORTING FATHERHOOD 7

 CHaRMED - Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads7

 FCL - Fathers and Continuous Learning.....7

 SIRF - Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs8

 Fatherhood TIES - Testing Identified Elements for Success in Fatherhood Programs8

RAPID LEARNING METHODS 9

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS..... 10

 BUILD - Building Usage, Improvement, and Learning with Data in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs10

 FRAMING Research - Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research 10

 MAST R&D - The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center.....11

 REFRAME - Race Equity for Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Programs to Empower Black Families11

 Secondary Analyses of Strengthening Families Datasets Grants 11

 SARHM - Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth.....11

 STREAMS - Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services.....12

 SIMR - Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs13

NURTURING CHILDREN THROUGH FAMILIES 14

 HomVEE - Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness14

 MIHOPE - Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation14

 MIHOPE Long-Term Follow-up.....15

 MIHOPE 3G - Elementary School Follow-up15

 SAS-HV - Supporting and Strengthening the Home Visiting Workforce15

 REACH - Understanding and Expanding the Reach of Home Visiting15

 HomeEc - Supporting Family Economic Well-Being through Home Visiting.....16

CIRCLE-HV - Center for Indigenous Research Collaborations and Learning for Home Visiting 17

MUSE - Multi-Site Implementation Evaluation of Tribal Home Visiting..... 18

TRC - Rribal Early Childhood Research Center 19

TEI - Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute 19

CW-SEED - Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data 20

R3 - Expanding Evidence on Replicable Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families..... 20

R3-Impact - Replication of Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families-Impact Study 20

SUPPORTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSITIONS TO ADULthood..... 21

 PYP- Personal Responsibility Education Program: Promising Youth Programs 21

 PMAPS - Personal Responsibility Education Program: Studies of Performance Measures and Adulthood Preparation Subjects 21

 PLESD - Personal Responsibility Education Program: Local Evaluation Support and Dissemination 22

 PREP PLUS - Personal Responsibility Education Program: Performance Leads to Understanding Success..... 22

 SRAENE - Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation 22

 SRAE PAS - Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Performance Analysis Study 23

 TLP -Transitional Living Program Evaluation Studies..... 23

 YARH Phase III - Building Capacity to Evaluate Interventions for Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness: Phase III 24

 Chafee SOTA - Chafee Strengthening Outcomes for Transition to Adulthood..... 24

 Chafee Phase II - Planning a Next Generation Evaluation Agenda for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: Phase II..... 24

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT 26

CROSS-CUTTING PROJECTS..... 27

 Develop Teaching Materials Based on OPRE's Research and Evaluation 27

 Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts..... 27

 OPRE Methods Inquires 27

 Tribal TANF-Child Welfare Coordination Guidance and Support 28

 Applying a Co-Regulation Framework to ACF Programs that Serve Youth and Young Adults..... 29

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for Federal programs that promote the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals, and communities. ACF aims to foster health and well-being by providing federal leadership, partnership, and resources for the compassionate and effective delivery of human services.

ACF programs aim to:

- Empower families and individuals to increase their economic independence and productivity
- Encourage strong, healthy, supportive communities that have a positive impact on the quality of life and the development of children
- Create partnerships with front-line service providers, states, localities, and tribal communities to identify and implement solutions that transcend traditional program boundaries
- Improve access to services through planning, reform, and integration
- Address the needs, strengths, and abilities of vulnerable populations, including people with developmental disabilities, refugees, and migrants

OFFICE OF PLANNING, RESEARCH, AND EVALUATION

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) studies ACF programs and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects. These include evaluations of existing programs, evaluations of innovative approaches to helping low-income children and families, research syntheses, and descriptive and exploratory studies. OPRE aims to build and disseminate knowledge about effective approaches to helping children and families with low income. OPRE conducts research and evaluation projects primarily through grants and contracts and collaborates with ACF programs offices, HHS's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), other Federal entities, and State, Tribal, and community partners. OPRE also supports the use of administrative data for research and evaluation and works to improve the quality of data shared between offices and agencies.

OPRE includes four divisions:

- The Division of Economic Independence focuses on welfare, employment, and family self-sufficiency.
- The Division of Child and Family Development focuses on child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, and child abuse and neglect.
- The Division of Family Strengthening focuses on teen pregnancy prevention, youth development, healthy marriage, responsible fatherhood, family violence, runaway and homeless youth, and home visiting.
- The Division of Data and Improvement focuses on improving the quality, usefulness, sharing, and analysis of data on ACF programs.



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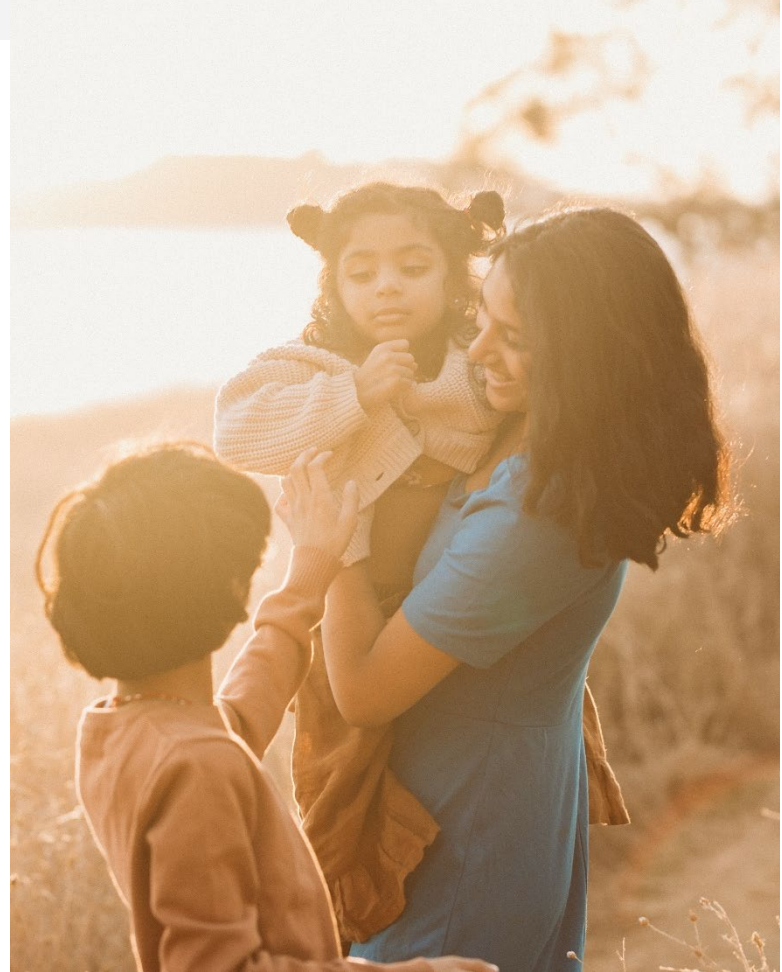
FAMILY STRENGTHENING RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

To improve human services programs that aim to strengthen relationships and promote child, family, individual, and community well-being, OPRE's Division of Family Strengthening (DFS) builds evidence and understanding through collaboration and planning to support the use of data, evaluation, and research. DFS has the primary responsibility for research and evaluation related to strengthening relationships, supporting fatherhood, nurturing children through their families, reducing teen pregnancy, supporting positive youth development, and preventing family violence. OPRE's research in family strengthening includes mothers, fathers, couples, families, children, and youth.

DFS aims to:

- Identify and evaluate ways that ACF programs can strengthen skills, relationships, and collaborations with families, children, individuals, and communities;
- Address the risks for poverty, social isolation, and violence while strengthening relationships within families, between families and providers, and within communities; and
- Make data meaningful for DFS program partners and the communities they serve.

Within these areas, DFS invests in experimental impact evaluations, process evaluations, and descriptive and theory-building research projects aimed at informing the design and implementation of programs and measuring development to improve our ability to capture outcomes. DFS also invests in building capacity in the research and evaluation field to answer policy-relevant questions.



DFS works in close partnership with a number of other offices, such as:

In ACF:

- The Office of Family Assistance;
- The Family and Youth Services Bureau;
- The Administration on Native Americans;
- The Children's Bureau; and
- The Office of Child Support Enforcement.

In HHS:

- The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health;
- The Maternal and Child Health Bureau in the Health Resources and Services Administration; and
- The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

DFS also engages in activities to disseminate rigorous research on family strengthening topics to a diverse range of parties, including federal and state policymakers, program administrators, researchers, and intermediary organizations. DFS has particular strengths in areas related to building evaluation capacity and strengthening research and evaluation with American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities.

DFS Portfolio Highlights from Fiscal Year 2022:

Strengthening Relationships & Supporting Fatherhood

- Published a final report from the [Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads \(CHaRMED\) Study](#), which compiled resources for supporting healthy relationships in fatherhood programs.
- Implemented [rapid cycle evaluation](#) to identify common obstacles and opportunities for improvement in both Responsible Fatherhood (RF) and Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs.
- Awarded a [new contract](#) to identify core components of fatherhood programs that are most effective at improving the lives of fathers and families who participate.
- Released white papers and briefs that highlight the effects of HMRE programs for youth and the importance of community engagement in fatherhood program evaluations.
- Developed an educational [animated video](#) to provide an introduction to self- and co-regulation for program staff.
- Published impact findings from the [Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services \(STREAMS\) evaluations](#), including innovative approaches such as technology-based interventions using text messages to promote positive behaviors.

Supporting Children Through Families

- Released [cost data on the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting \(MIECHV\) program](#) in a report and in a Restricted Access File that is now available for secondary analysis.
- As part of the Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE), initiated a new project to examine the [benefit-cost of home visiting programs](#) and [the effects of MIECHV-funded home visiting programs on elementary school-aged children](#).
- Conducted listening sessions with families and subject matter experts to expand knowledge of [virtual home visiting](#) to understand how providers were adapting to families' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Strengthened understanding of tribal home visiting and child welfare programs through research on the services offered and families' experiences, including evaluation through the [Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute \(TEI\)](#) and a pilot study on [developmental screening in tribal communities](#).

Supporting Positive Youth Development and Transitions to Adulthood

- Released several products that provide new evidence to support the [Personal Responsibility Education Program \(PREP\)](#), including curricula and toolkits for sexual health education, and conceptual models that support adulthood preparation in PREP-funded programs.
- Launched a [new project to enhance data systems and](#) performance measurement of PREP-funded programs, which will include a new Data Dashboard to monitor performance and offer customizable data reports that can assist grantees and federal program staff in program management and continuous quality improvement.
- Published multiple reports on findings related to the [Transitional Living Program \(TLP\)](#), including a final report on youth outcomes from the Program, a process evaluation of grantees' implementation of an LGBTQ youth demonstration project, and completion of the first randomized control trial among TLP grantees.

The following pages describe major OPRE/DFS projects related to family strengthening in Fiscal Year 2022.

SUPPORTING FATHERHOOD

In recent decades, efforts to support and promote fatherhood have been spurred by research that shows a link between supportive fathering and positive child outcomes.

Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs aim to promote father involvement and improve family and child well-being by providing resources and support to fathers around healthy marriage and relationships, parenting, and economic stability. Much of the past research in the area of fatherhood had focused on fathers with middle incomes or divorced fathers. The field of research on fatherhood with men with low incomes or never married men is growing. Though the field can draw from some of the past research, the unique circumstances of men with low incomes, particularly non-resident fathers with low incomes, necessitate a distinct line of inquiry.

Past ACF research includes the completion of two large-scale, randomized controlled trials (the [Parents and Children Together](#) and [Building Bridges and Bonds](#) studies). DFS oversees an ongoing research and evaluation agenda to provide needed information about the implementation and effectiveness of fatherhood services. The agenda includes a focus on learning the views and experiences of program participants as well as other key research questions

In addition to the projects highlighted below, some projects described in the Strengthening Relationships section of this report also include work on fathers, specifically:

- Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING)
- Race Equity for Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Programs to Empower Black Families (REFRAME)

OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA).

Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads

The Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) Study is a federal evaluation effort designed to: better understand how Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs currently support healthy marriages/relationships and coparenting; examine how their approaches align with the needs of the fathers in their target populations; and inform the RF field about potential future directions in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) and coparenting programming. Using a largely qualitative approach, the CHaRMED team collected data from nine fatherhood programs on the nature of fathers' relationships, the services that RF programs provide to support healthy marriages/relationships and coparenting, and fathers' opinions about those services. The study concluded in 2022 and produced a [final report](#); a compilation of resources for supporting healthy relationships in fatherhood programs; and briefs focused on considerations for fatherhood program practitioners, strategies to support healthy relationships for American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) fathers, fathers' experiences with stigma and discrimination, and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for supporting fathers' relationships in fatherhood programs. The contract was awarded to Child Trends.

Fathers and Continuous Learning

Evidence suggests that positive father involvement can improve a range of well-being outcomes for children. For families involved in the child welfare system, father involvement is associated with other important outcomes as well, including reduced likelihood of entry into foster care, shorter periods of time in foster care, and increased rates of reunification. Despite the potential for positive impacts of father involvement, engaging fathers and paternal relatives has been a longstanding challenge for child welfare agencies. This project is using the Breakthrough Series Collaborative, a collaborative continuous learning approach, to work with child welfare agencies and their system partners to implement strategies and interventions that can be used to improve father and paternal relative engagement.

Partnering with the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Children's Bureau (CB), the project includes the following key tasks: 1) synthesize existing information about engaging

fathers and paternal relatives in the child welfare system and continuous learning approaches; 2) map “touch points” within a child welfare case where fathers and/or paternal relatives could be more fully engaged; 3) identify potential strategies and interventions that could be used at the touch points to increase their engagement; 4) implement a collaborative continuous learning approach with a small number of sites to test these father and paternal relative engagement strategies and interventions; and 5) examine the feasibility and implementation of the approach and the engagement strategies and interventions. The contract was awarded to Mathematica, with a subcontract to the University of Denver.

Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Responsible Fatherhood (RF) service-delivery organizations face challenges related to program implementation, particularly regarding recruitment, retention, and engagement of fathers in services. These challenges in turn make it difficult for programs to deliver services effectively and are a barrier to research that aims to develop rigorous data on program effectiveness and participant outcomes. Rapid cycle learning methodologies (see next page) offer an approach to data-driven improvement over a relatively short time frame, which can both strengthen programs and improve their capacity to participate in rigorous large-scale evaluations.

The Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) project uses rapid cycle learning methods to help RF programs address challenges related to recruitment, retention, and engagement of fathers in services. The project team identified common obstacles to program implementation and innovative ways to overcome them. The project tested promising solutions to common implementation challenges with 10 fatherhood programs and measured their effects using rapid cycle learning methodologies. The project generated insights that program operators and staff can apply to improve the implementation of their programs and also helped sites be better prepared to participate in future rigorous, multi-site program evaluations by building staff data and evaluation capacity. The contract was awarded to MDRC with Insight Policy Research and MEF Associates as subcontractors.

Testing Identified Elements for Success in Fatherhood Programs

The Testing Identified Elements for Success in Fatherhood Programs (Fatherhood TIES) project aims to answer the question: What elements of fatherhood programs lead to better outcomes for the fathers who take part in them?

The Fatherhood TIES project will identify and test core components of fatherhood programs. Core components are the essential functions, principles, elements, and components that evidence suggests are necessary to produce positive outcomes. The project aims to determine which core components or set of components are most effective at improving the lives of fathers who participate in fatherhood programs and their children.

The Fatherhood TIES team will accomplish the project’s goals through the following key activities: 1) obtain input on each phase of the work through a robust active engagement approach; 2) define and prioritize core components to test using multi-faceted methodology including both quantitative and qualitative analyses; 3) collaborate with four fatherhood programs to implement and test the selected core components; 4) share findings and lessons by publishing a variety of products such as reports, briefs, and practice tools; 5) conduct an implementation study that will describe who participated in fatherhood program services, how services operated, what fathers thought about the services, and the challenges staff members faced implementing them. The contract was awarded to MDRC with subcontracts to Abt Associates and MEF Associates.



RAPID LEARNING METHODS

Social service programs need timely evidence to implement positive program modifications and improve service. Rapid learning methods are data-driven approaches designed to quickly and/or iteratively evaluate program implementation, impact, and improvement efforts. Numerous methods exist to help support rapid learning. All rely on data, some employ methods to determine causality, and some incorporate advanced statistical methods to make predictions. In 2022, several DFS efforts were underway to share best practices; support and evaluate the implementation of learning methods by local programs; and utilize rapid methods as part of ongoing research. In particular, two rapid learning methods—Continuous Quality Improvement and Rapid Cycle Evaluation, were utilized across several DFS projects.

Continuous Quality Improvement and Learning Collaboratives

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a systematic, formal approach to the analysis of practice performance and efforts to improve performance and better serve program participants.

Some OPRE projects, including the Building Usage, Improvement, and Learning with Data in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) programs (BUILD) and the Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute (TEI) contracts provide technical assistance on CQI. This technical assistance includes in-depth training on CQI methods, resources and tools, and individual support to HMRF and Tribal Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (Tribal MIECHV) grant recipients to support their CQI work.

DFS projects also supported methodologies for CQI modeled after the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) from the Institute for Health Improvement. BSC aims to promote the uptake, sustainability, and spread of evidence-based practices at all levels of an organization. The Fathers and Continuous Learning (FCL) project implemented and is evaluating the use of a BSC aimed at strengthening father and paternal relative engagement in the child welfare system. TEI supported the Tribal Home Visiting Program in implementing and evaluating an adapted version of the BSC where grantees completed rapid cycle tests of changes to improve language and literacy, and family engagement among families served by Tribal Home Visiting.

Rapid Cycle Evaluation

Rapid cycle evaluation refers both to an approach to assessing the effectiveness of interventions rapidly and to a philosophy of providing ongoing feedback to participating programs to support continuous quality improvement.

The Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity to Implement Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SAHRM) Project developed and then utilized formative rapid cycle evaluation methods to fine tune co-regulation training approaches and resources for staff with an eye toward broad application among curriculum developers, programs, and providers in the future. The Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) and Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) projects both used rapid cycle evaluation to quickly and iteratively test strategies to strengthen programming and address common implementation challenges that HMRF programs commonly face, related to program recruitment, retention, and engagement. These projects worked with HMRF programs to pilot strategies to address challenges, collect feedback from staff and program participants on how these strategies are working, and gather data to demonstrate whether the strategies are supporting improvement.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

A large body of research has shown that family characteristics and relationships affect outcomes for children on a range of measures related to psychological and physical health, social interactions, cognitive skills, and economic circumstances. Across family structures, such measures of well-being are associated with the quality of parental relationships, family belonging, parenting, and parent involvement, and economic status. Research has also identified dimensions of couples' relationship functioning (e.g., positive communication, effective conflict management, problem-solving, etc.) that could be modified or enhanced through relationship-focused educational programming. Some evaluations have found that such services can produce improvement in multiple dimensions of relationship quality and reductions in break-up/divorce.

While past research has focused primarily on white couples with middle incomes who were engaged or married, ACF has supported research on Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) for more diverse populations. Past ACF research includes the completion of five large-scale randomized controlled trials—the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS), Building Bridges and Bonds (B3), Parents and Children Together (PACT), Supporting Healthy Marriages, and Building Strong Families evaluations—and one quasi-experimental trial of healthy marriage community initiatives (the Community Healthy Marriages Initiatives evaluation).

DFS oversees an ongoing research and evaluation agenda to provide needed information about the implementation and effectiveness of HMRE services. The agenda includes a focus on learning the views and experiences of participants as well as other key research questions. Below are descriptions of some of the ongoing studies in this portfolio.

In addition to the projects highlighted below, the Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) project in the Supporting Fatherhood section of this report also relates to strengthening relationships.

OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA).

Building Usage, Improvement, and Learning with Data in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs

The purpose of the Building Usage, Improvement, and Learning with Data in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs (BUILD) project is to foster high quality data collection, support continuous quality improvement efforts, and develop the capacity for performance monitoring and reporting for the fourth cohort (2020-2025) of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grant recipients funded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance. The BUILD project includes a new iteration of the nFORM management information system for HMRF grantees, known as nFORM 2.0, which is cloud based and enhanced in response to feedback from grantees from the 2015 cohort and other interested parties. Data leveraged from nFORM 2.0 will be used to produce cross-grantee analyses, annual reports, and other products that will help further ACF's and the research and practice communities' understanding of HMRF programs. The contract was awarded to Mathematica.

Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research

The Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project supports activities relevant to a learning agenda for the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) program, which is administered by ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA). This project examines research and evaluation related to HMRF programming. Through expert consultation, selected white papers, and quick summaries of recent impact studies, this project explores completed HMRF research with the intention to identify gaps and potentially inform future research relevant to HMRF programs. In 2022, the FRAMING Research project released white papers and briefs on measuring child well-being and engaging community members in evaluations of HMRF programs, and on the effects of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education programs for youth. The contract was awarded to Mathematica with a subcontract to Public Strategies.

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST R&D) is a five-year cooperative agreement awarded to Child Trends, in partnership with the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University, designed to form a nexus between basic and applied research and evaluation on marriage and romantic relationships in the United States and programs designed to strengthen these relationships. The Center: 1) contributes to the research and evaluation base relevant to marriage and relationships (with a focus on adults and youth) and Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs and practices; 2) builds and supports the capacity of students and early career professionals to expand and strengthen the field of researchers studying relationships and families; and 3) translates and disseminates emerging research and evaluation resources. The Center aims to actively engage a diverse range of groups and individuals, including, but not limited to researchers, evaluators, and practitioners throughout the course of the project. The Center published several informative briefs in 2022, which can be found on the [MAST Center website](#).

Race Equity for Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Programs to Empower Black Families

The Race Equity for Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Programs to Empower Black Families (REFRAME) project explores how Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grantees can work to address the barriers and circumstances created by racial inequity through HMRF programs. This includes making HMRF programming more equitable for Black fathers, families, couples, and youth, and providing a compassionate, solutions-based space that appropriately reflects on the strengths and resilience of Black families. The project is engaging with experts and communities; synthesizing evidence on how racism and historic disparities affect Black fathers, families, couples, and youth, as well as their strengths and positive contributions to their families and communities; identifying future research priorities to support ongoing work in this area; and developing resources on how HMRF programs can ensure their services are equitable and reflective of the needs of Black families. This contract was awarded to MEF Associates with a subcontract to Insight Policy Research.

Secondary Analyses of Strengthening Families Datasets Grants

OPRE awarded four cooperative agreements to fund research to conduct secondary data analysis of archived ACF data, specifically the Building Strong Families (BSF) and Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) datasets. The grantees focused on topics such as the antecedents and outcomes of change in relationships, parenting behaviors, and childhood outcomes, child and family resilience, and the relationship between strong couple relationships and risks associated with childhood maltreatment. Grantees worked collaboratively with each other to move the field of research focused on strengthening families forward through the design of complementary analyses and joint dissemination efforts. These grants were awarded to Child Trends, The Ohio State University, RAND Cooperation, and Illinois State University.

Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth

The goal of the Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM) study was to intentionally enhance Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) program staff's capacity to promote the self-regulation development of adolescents in relationship education programs. This project built upon prior research about the important role of self-regulation and explores whether a self-regulation framework can be leveraged to improve HMRE programs for youth ages 14-24. Project activities include identification, development, and formative rapid cycle evaluation of co-regulation-focused training resources for staff who implement HMRE programs. SARHM included: 1) a review of literature summarizing a) the current knowledge base around adolescent and young adult self-regulation skill development, b) co-regulation training, and c) best practices for measurement and assessment of coregulation and adolescent self-regulation; 2) an exploration of current youth HMRE programs and curricula through the lens of self- and co-regulation; and 3) the identification, development, and testing of co-regulation training approaches and resources for staff with an eye toward broad application among curriculum developers, programs, and providers in the future. The [final report](#) was published in 2020; in 2021 [a practitioner guide](#), [strategies for co-](#)

[regulation in practice](#), and a [draft tool to measure co-regulation](#) were released; in 2022, a [5-minute animated video](#) was developed to provide a brief introduction to co-regulation support. The contract was awarded to Public Strategies, in partnership with Mathematica and Dr. Desiree Murray.

Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services

To identify and evaluate strategies for improving the delivery and effectiveness of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs, ACF initiated the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) project. STREAMS is a large multi-site random assignment impact evaluation of HMRE programs serving adults and youth that is designed to answer multiple practice- and policy-relevant questions. STREAMS features process and impact studies of 5 programs funded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA) that serve adult couples, adult individuals, and youth in high schools. Research questions focus on understanding the effect of HMRE programs for specific populations, the effect of implementation strategies on key outcomes, and program engagement, and include:

- What are the effects of offering a full version and shortened version of relationship skills education

programming as part of a regular high school curriculum?

- What is the effect of offering integrated relationship skills education and economic stability services to couples with low income who are raising children?
- What is the effect of offering relationship skills education and other support services to pregnant women and new mothers with low income?
- What is the effect of offering young adults workshops that integrate economic stability services and relationship skills education?
- Can text messages informed by behavioral insight theory improve session attendance and workshop completion for couples?

Previously published process study reports describe the implementation of each of the five programs. In 2021, final reports summarizing findings from impact studies of three programs were published: [Relationship Smarts PLUS](#), [Empowering Families](#), and [MotherWise](#). In 2022, study reports on the one-year impacts of the [Career STREAMS](#) program and a text message intervention tested with the [ELEVATE program](#) were published. In addition, two reports describing the longer-term impacts of the [Relationship Smarts PLUS](#) and [Motherwise](#) programs were published in 2022, along with numerous research to practice briefs and additional research reports. The contract was awarded to Mathematica with a subcontract to Public Strategies.



Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs

The Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) project aims to identify and test promising practices for addressing implementation challenges faced by Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs that serve a range of populations using rapid learning methods. While the knowledge base about the effectiveness of HMRE programs is growing rapidly, less is understood about the effectiveness of specific program or implementation approaches. Additionally, implementation findings suggest HMRE programs face challenges that make developing rigorous data on program effectiveness more difficult.

To address these gaps, SIMR worked in partnership with a set of HMRE grant programs funded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA) that serve adult couples, adult individuals, and high school-aged youth to: 1) identify critical implementation challenges and promising practices to address them; 2) develop or refine and test promising practices for addressing implementation challenges through rapid cycle evaluations; 3) produce and disseminate briefs and reports summarizing the findings of rapid cycle tests; and 4) develop recommendations for summative evaluation sites. Goals of this work include both strengthening HMRE program implementation early in the grant cycle and preparing grantees for future large-scale studies of their programs. The project is also producing actionable lessons for the HMRE field more broadly. The contract was awarded to Mathematica with a subcontract to Public Strategies.

Preventing Family Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant problem for women and men in the United States, with almost half (47.3 percent) of women and 44.2 percent of men experiencing contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking, by an intimate partner during their lifetime (based on data from 2016-2017). Furthermore, the prevalence of IPV is higher among populations with low income and populations of color (specifically African American, American Indian, Alaska Native and multiracial persons). The Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) is the primary federal funding stream dedicated to the support of emergency shelter and related assistance for victims of domestic violence and their children. ACF's Division of Family Violence Prevention and Services within the Family and Youth Services Bureau oversees FVPSA-funded programming, and DFS conducts IPV research in close collaboration with this division.

DFS's research and evaluation related to preventing and addressing IPV has primarily focused on two main areas of inquiry: 1) examining services provided by the National Domestic Violence Hotline (and other, population-specific hotlines) and, 2) understanding IPV prevalence, intervention (including screening), and outcomes in the context of other ACF programs (e.g., Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education).

For example, the Accomplishments of the Domestic Violence Hotline, Online Connections, and Text (ADVHOCaT) project, addressed research questions about the services that the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) and love is respect (the hotline for young people) provide and whether those services align with the needs of and are helpful to those who contact The Hotline and love is respect. The study also examined short-term outcomes for those who contacted the Hotline and love is respect.

In another example of DFS's IPV-related research, the Preventing and Addressing Intimate Partner Violence when Engaging Dads (PAIVED) project sought to examine how fatherhood programs contribute to IPV prevention and education. The project provided information about the strengths and gaps in existing IPV services and referrals within fatherhood programs, provided a summary of promising practices that may improve the provision of fatherhood services to prevent and address IPV, and informed the larger fatherhood and domestic violence fields about directions for policy based on the identified successes, challenges, and barriers to providing IPV-related services in fatherhood programs.

In the future, DFS is interested in how IPV is being or can be addressed in the context of a wider range of ACF's programs, and how employment and anti-poverty programs can affect domestic and intimate partner violence-related outcomes. DFS is particularly interested in applying participatory approaches and using active engagement to answer these research questions.

NURTURING CHILDREN THROUGH FAMILIES

DFS projects in this area are designed to build, describe, and strengthen the evidence for interventions that support parents and families in their role as caregivers. They include projects that focus on home visiting interventions and on interventions that support parents and families engaged in the child welfare system.

Home visiting is a service delivery strategy that aims to support the healthy development and well-being of children and families by providing individually tailored support, resources, and information. In the work described here, home visiting is used to provide services to pregnant people and families with children up to age five. Decades of research on early childhood home visiting programs have found that they positively affect a range of outcomes including maternal health, child health and development, child maltreatment prevention, and family economic well-being. The federal investment in home visiting – and related research and evaluation – has greatly expanded since the establishment of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program in 2010. DFS projects contribute to the [MIECHV Learning Agenda](#), which aims to better understand and improve MIECHV-funded services for children and families through a diverse array of activities, including implementation, descriptive, and impact research, systematic reviews of evidence, active engagement of groups and individuals, performance measurement, continuous quality improvement, and technical assistance and capacity building.

Child welfare practice and policy is guided by goals to promote children’s safety, permanence, and well-being. DFS projects in this area focus on interventions to support parents and families engaged in the child welfare system to support these goals.

DFS conducts work on home visiting in collaboration with the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and with ACF’s Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. DFS’s work on child welfare services is conducted in collaboration with ACF’s Children’s Bureau (CB) and the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD) in OPRE.

OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness

The Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE) review was launched in 2009 to conduct a thorough and transparent review of early childhood home visiting models. The review provides an assessment of the evidence of effectiveness for early childhood home visiting models that serve families with pregnant women and children from birth to kindergarten entry (through age 5). HomVEE reviews and summarizes eligible, well-designed research and identifies which reviewed models are evidence based according to criteria established by HHS. This designation is a key requirement of eligibility for models implemented with funding from the MIECHV Program. As of the 2022 annual review, 24 of 53 models reviewed have been found to meet the criteria. In addition, HomVEE reviews the evidence for home visiting programs in tribal communities, with the latest update to the tribal review published in November 2022. In 2021, HomVEE also released a handbook update related to procedures and standards for single-case design research. The latest Version 2.1 Handbook of Procedures and Evidence Standards is available on the HomVEE website. Users can access HomVEE’s findings and learn more at: <https://homvee.acf.hhs.gov>. The contract was awarded to Mathematica.

Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation

The Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE) is the legislatively mandated evaluation of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program. MIHOPE was launched in 2011 and has four main components: 1) an analysis of the needs assessments that the states and territories provided in their initial MIECHV applications; 2) an impact analysis; 3) an implementation analysis; and 4) a cost analysis. The evaluation includes 12 states, 88 local sites, and approximately 4,200 families. Families were randomly assigned to a group offered home visiting services or to a group provided with information on other services available in the community. Sites in the evaluation operate one of four models: Early Head Start – Home-based option (EHS), Healthy Families America (HFA), Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), and Parents as Teachers (PAT). [A Report to Congress](#) that included the needs assessment analysis and baseline characteristics about families and programs was submitted in 2015. A [report](#)

[on findings from the implementation research](#) was released in November 2018, a [report on impact findings](#) when children were 15 months old was released in January 2019, and a [report](#) on the cost of providing MIECHV-funded, evidence-based home visiting to families was released in June 2022. In 2021, MIHOPE data was made available for secondary analysis through a Restricted Access File at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICSPR) at the University of Michigan. In July 2022, cost data was added to this Restricted Access File. The contracts were awarded to MDRC with subcontracts to James Bell Associates, Johns Hopkins University, Mathematica, University of Georgia, and several academic consultants.

MIHOPE Long-Term Follow-up

The purpose of the MIHOPE Long-Term Follow-Up project (MIHOPE-LT) was to design and conduct a follow-up study or studies to examine the long-term effects of MIECHV-funded evidence-based home visiting programs on child and family outcomes. A brief summarizing prior research findings on the long-term effects of home visiting programs was released in October 2017, and a report detailing the follow-up studies' designs was released in May 2021. Currently, MIHOPE-LT is conducting the follow-up study of the MIHOPE families when the participating children are in kindergarten. Data collection with participants for the kindergarten follow-up began in January 2019 and was completed in the 2021- 2022 school year. Similar to the data collection that resulted in the impact findings report when the children were 15 months old, MIHOPE-LT has collected information on a diverse array of child and family outcomes via parent surveys; in-home assessments of parents, children, and parent-child interactions; and administrative data, including Medicaid, state child welfare records, school records, and employment and earnings data. In addition, information on children's academic experiences has been collected through surveys with teachers. MIHOPE-LT was midway through the kindergarten follow-up data collection with families in March 2020 when the COVID-19 public health emergency began. MIHOPE-LT conducted an additional, virtual data collection in Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 to capture information about MIHOPE participants' experiences during the pandemic. This information will be used to provide context to the study's findings. A final report detailing findings from MIHOPE-LT is anticipated to be released in 2025. The contracts were awarded to MDRC with subcontracts to Mathematica and University of Georgia.

MIHOPE Elementary School Follow-up

The MIHOPE3G project was initiated in 2022 to examine the benefit-cost of MIECHV-funded home visiting and the long-term effects of MIECHV-funded home visiting on families and children when participating children are in elementary school. MIHOPE3G will use data from multiple administrative data sources to examine effects on academic, employment and earnings, crime, health, and child welfare outcomes. The MIHOPE3G contract was awarded to MDRC.

Supporting and Strengthening the Home Visiting Workforce

The purpose of the Supporting and Strengthening the Home Visiting Workforce (SAS-HV) project is to advance the understanding of how to support and strengthen the early childhood home visiting workforce, including programs funded through MIECHV and Tribal MIECHV programs. In 2022, the project concluded a groundwork phase of developing conceptual models and reviewing current research, measures, and practice in two focus areas: 1) professional well-being and 2) reflective supervision. These findings contributed to [two final reports](#) and a tool for practitioners related to each topic: [professional well-being](#) and [reflective supervision](#). The next phase of the project focuses on developing a measure of reflective supervision that can be useful for research and informative to practice. The contract was awarded to James Bell Associates with subcontracts to Johns Hopkins University, MDRC, and University of Colorado Denver.

Understanding and Expanding the Reach of Home Visiting

Maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting is a service delivery strategy that can support child and maternal health, child development and school readiness, and family economic self-sufficiency, and help reduce child abuse and neglect. According to the National Home Visiting Research Center, home visiting programs, including those funded through the Health Resources and Services Administration and the Administration for Children and Families' Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Tribal MIECHV programs, reached nearly 335,000 families in 2019. Although many families participate in home visiting services, many more could benefit. States, territories, Tribes, and local programs face a variety of challenges in identifying, recruiting, retaining, and engaging families in home visiting.

In conducting the Understanding and Expanding the Reach of Home Visiting (HV-REACH) project, ACF aims to deepen the field's understanding of how home visiting can better reach families, including: 1) families who are not recruited in the first place; 2) families who are recruited for home visiting but do not enroll; 3) families who enroll, but never engage to receive services; and 4) families who are recruited and engage initially, but end their participation early. The project will build knowledge about factors at the participant-, provider-, program-, neighborhood-, and systems-levels that influence identification, recruitment, retention, and engagement of families, for better or worse. HV-REACH is intended to directly benefit home visiting programs by identifying, developing, studying, and disseminating evidence-informed resources and strategies they can implement to ensure more equitable access to and participation of families in home visiting and, ultimately, more positive outcomes for children and families. The contract was awarded to Mathematica in partnership with the Brazelton Touchpoints Center, Social Grove, and the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs.

Supporting Family Economic Well-Being through Home Visiting (HomeEc)

The purpose of this project is to advance understanding of how home visiting programs funded by the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Tribal MIECHV Programs can and do support family economic well-being.

Family economic well-being is key to families' long-term stability and is linked to positive outcomes in other areas targeted by home visiting programs, such as parenting. A number of home visiting models target family economic well-being and have demonstrated effects on outcomes such as parent income. Given what is known about the interdependent relationship between economic stability and parenting and the complex impact of economic strain on caregiver well-being, it is important to understand how a stronger focus on family economic well-being in home visiting could support overall family functioning.

Family economic well-being is especially important to examine given the increased rates of unemployment and other economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the needs of families and the resources available in communities (e.g., increased rates of food insecurity, fewer available job openings due to closed businesses). Furthermore, the pandemic amplified and

exacerbated the existing systemic health, social, and economic inequities that disproportionately impact Black, Latinx, American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN), Asian-American, and Pacific Islander communities and populations. When exploring how to advance family economic well-being outcomes, it is vital to also consider systemic context, including a history of racial segregation and the clustering of social disadvantage and systemic disinvestment, and how this context may differentially affect communities. The project addresses this overall purpose with an initial knowledge development phase, which includes a literature review, a document review, and interviews and focus groups with home visiting practitioners and with families who have participated or are participating in home visiting. This knowledge development phase will produce a conceptual model, and identify strategies currently being used or that could be used by home visiting programs to support family economic well-being. If elected, the project may evaluate the efficacy of strategies to support family economic well-being; explore measurement of family economic well-being in a home visiting context; and/or conduct additional research on related topics. A special topics sub-study is exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic affected family economic well-being and how home visiting programs responded to the pandemic, as well as lessons learned for the future. The project was awarded to Mathematica with subcontracts to James Bell Associates, Start Early, and Decision Information Resources, Inc.



Virtual Home Visiting

Home visiting services are inherently in-person, built on the concept that visiting families in their homes provides unique opportunities to support caregivers and children. However, some eligible families may not receive the benefits of evidence-based home visiting programs due to a variety of barriers, including scheduling, geographic distance, and family disengagement. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some home visiting models and programs were using virtual methods to help connect and work with families. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of home visiting programs needed to make an abrupt shift to delivering services virtually, rather than in person.

There appears to be general agreement amongst those involved in home visiting that virtual service delivery will continue to be a component of home visiting programs moving forward from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is important to better understand the benefits, drawbacks, and challenges of virtual home visiting service delivery to ensure that what has been learned during the COVID-19 pandemic can be used to help improve home visiting going forward.

To determine national, state, territory, and tribal views regarding the implications of virtual service delivery for home visiting, DFS staff, working with federal colleagues at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and ACF, and with contractors at ICF, led efforts to organize a series of three virtual roundtable listening sessions. Held in March 2022, the listening sessions engaged individuals involved with home visiting — including families, home visitors, program administrators, tribal leaders, model developers, researchers, technical assistance providers, advocates, and foundation staff — in conversations about the benefits and drawbacks of virtual home visiting, lessons learned to date, innovative approaches to virtual service delivery, and opportunities to inform federal strategies for strengthening the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. A [report](#) summarizing the discussions was recently released.

OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with the Office of Early Childhood Development (ECD)'s Tribal MIECHV Program.

Center for Indigenous Research Collaborations and Learning for Home Visiting (CIRCLE-HV)

The Center for Indigenous Research Collaborations and Learning for Home Visiting (CIRCLE-HV) supports two types of research-practice collaborations to build evidence and understanding about home visiting and well-being in Indigenous communities. The project aims to:

- Provide awards for research-practice partnerships to research entities that will pursue innovative research and evaluation of mutual interest with home visiting programs that serve Indigenous children and families
- Partner closely with home visiting programs that serve Indigenous children and families to pursue cross-site research and evaluation on shared priority topics

CIRCLE-HV informs the [Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting \(MIECHV\) Learning Agenda](#) and expands on

several federally-funded efforts with Indigenous home visiting programs. These include evaluation technical assistance provided by the Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute (TEI), co-creation of knowledge through the measurement development communities of learning of Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC), and the Multi-Site Implementation Evaluation of Tribal Home Visiting (MUSE).

CIRCLE-HV includes active engagement with an array of Indigenous communities and programs funded through MIECHV and other sources, including federally recognized tribal nations, American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities, Native Hawaiians, U.S. Pacific territories, members of state-recognized tribes, urban Indian organizations, and tribal consortia. In addition to collaboration with these indigenous communities, CIRCLE-HV convenes and gathers input from a community expert group. CIRCLE-HV's planning phase includes knowledge development, active engagement, and planning and infrastructure development for the future Research-Practice Partnerships and Cross-Site Study.

Potential future activities include the development of a request for proposals for Research-Practice Partnerships and the co-creation of a cross-site study with interested home visiting programs. Other possible activities include selection, support, and oversight of research-practice partnerships and collection, analysis, and reporting of cross-site study data. At

the conclusion of the project, the CIRCLE-HV team will report on its experience of initiating and sustaining research-practice collaborations (i.e., Research-Practice Partnerships and Cross-Site Study) to build evidence and understanding about home visiting in Indigenous communities. The contract was awarded to James Bell Associates, in partnership with the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health at the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Center.

Multi-Site Implementation Evaluation of Tribal Home Visiting

The Multi-Site Implementation Evaluation of Tribal Home Visiting (MUSE) is the first multi-site, multi-model study that will systematically explore how home visiting programs are operating across diverse tribal community contexts and identify factors that lead to successful program implementation. MUSE is engaging tribal grantees, tribal and organizational leadership, and evaluation consultants to create an innovative yet feasible multi-site implementation evaluation of Tribal MIECHV. The MUSE Team has integrated multiple theoretical and practice-based approaches to increase study relevance and rigor, capitalize on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative designs, and conduct a study that is responsive to relevant groups and individuals.

The MUSE conceptual model and priority evaluation questions (which build on the MIHOPE Implementation Research project and have been refined in partnership with relevant groups and individuals) highlight unique cultural and contextual inputs, outputs, and outcomes and communicate that context is critical rather than peripheral. MUSE collected information about Tribal MIECHV programs' planning processes, services implemented, characteristics of staff and families, and staff and families' experiences of home visiting services. Data collection was completed in December 2021 and mixed methods analysis is underway, including a specialized analysis of the implementation of Tribal MIEHV during the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2022, the MUSE Dissemination Review and Data Approval Committee was convened. Each grantee has a representative on this committee to review MUSE dissemination products and approve the use of their grantee's data in those products. MUSE plans to publish two papers in 2023: one describing how MUSE engages Indigenous communities in research to inform practice and another describing findings of the analysis of grantee implementations plans. The contract was awarded to James Bell Associates, Inc. (JBA) and Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health (CAIANH) at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.



Tribal Early Childhood Research Center

The Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC) seeks to address gaps in early childhood research with American Indian and Alaska Natives (AIAN) through partnerships with Tribal Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and home visiting programs. The goals of the research are: 1) to identify needs and/or develop effective practices for early childhood initiatives in tribal communities; 2) to identify, validate, and/or develop culturally meaningful measures of program practices and outcomes for AIAN families; and 3) to establish peer-learning communities and provide training and professional development to facilitate interest and competencies in research relevant to early childhood initiatives in tribal communities. The TRC is engaged in pilot research with AIAN communities and secondary analyses of existing data on AIAN children and families.

In 2022, the TRC published findings from one of their communities of learning the Pilot Exploration of Developmental Screening in Tribal Communities (Tribal PEDS) Study. The Tribal PEDS study aimed to: 1) explore developmental screening systems and processes in AIAN communities, and 2) pilot methods for collecting developmental screening data from a large sample of young AIAN children (6 months to 5 years of age) in order to inform a larger study to assess how trustworthy current screening tools are for these children. Findings included a [full report](#), peer-reviewed journal articles on [community perspectives on developmental screening](#), and [the feasibility of validating early developmental screening tools](#), [resources for families](#), and [early childhood professionals](#) on developmental screening. Links to other TRC activities and resources can be found at www.tribalearlychildhood.org. The grant award for the TRC is to the University of Colorado Denver.

Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute

The Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute (TEI) provides technical assistance that promotes rigorous and relevant performance measurement, data management, continuous quality improvement (CQI), and evaluation activities in the Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (Tribal MIECHV). The project contributes to knowledge building around home visiting as a service delivery strategy in tribal communities through reliable, responsive products that build data and evaluation capacity. TEI supports multiple cohorts of Tribal MIECHV grantees at different

stages of implementation. Specific technical assistance activities include: 1) Supporting grantees to conduct performance measurement planning and reporting; 2) Guiding grantees to develop or improve their data systems; 3) Building the capacity and interest of tribal grantees to use data to inform decision making and sustainability efforts; 4) Providing CQI training and support for grantees conducting local projects and to those participating in the Tribal MIECHV CQI Collaboratives; and 5) Assisting grantees in planning and conducting rigorous evaluation studies. The contract was awarded to James Bell Associates, with subcontracts to the Michigan Public Health Institute, Tellenger, and Face-to-Face Integrated Technologies to conduct the project. To access all TEI technical assistance resources, see: www.tribaleval.org

Family Strengthening Research for American Indians and Alaskan Natives

The evaluation and research that OPRE does in collaboration with American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities is grounded in ACF's evaluation policy and guided by the [Roadmap for Collaborative and Effective Evaluation in Tribal Communities \(Roadmap\)](#). The Roadmap offers approaches for building a new narrative on research and evaluation in Native communities through bi-directional partnerships between programmatic experts and evaluators. Currently, the Division of Family Strengthening has several ongoing research and capacity building efforts specifically focused on American Indians and Alaska Natives.



OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with the Children’s Bureau (CB).

Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data

The Child Welfare Study to Enhance Equity with Data (CW-SEED) project aims to understand how and to what extent data are used to explore equity in service delivery and child and family outcomes, to identify barriers or problematic data practices, and to explore efforts by child welfare agencies and their partners to use data to reduce barriers across the continuum of child welfare services. The project will examine practices across the data life cycle related to data planning, collection, access, and analysis; use of statistical tools and algorithms; and data reporting and dissemination. The project team completed an environmental scan of current and emerging data practices. The study team will complete five or more case studies of how child welfare agencies and their partners use data to promote equity. The project will develop a research agenda and propose design options that will provide a platform for building capacity among child welfare agencies and their partners. The contract was awarded to Mathematica Policy Research and its partners the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of North Carolina School of Social Work.

Expanding Evidence on Replicable Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families

The Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) for Patients and Communities Act (Public Law 115-271) authorizes \$15 million in funding for HHS to replicate an intervention for families engaged in the child welfare system due to parental substance use disorders that demonstrates favorable parental recovery outcomes and shortens time to reunification. The legislation calls for a three-part evaluation including: 1) a pilot study, 2) an impact study that includes random assignment and multiple follow-ups of participating families over a 5-year period, and 3) an implementation study conducted concurrently with the impact study.

The Children’s Bureau (CB) and OPRE conducted a preliminary phase, the Expanding Evidence on Replicable Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families (R3) project, as a feasibility study that laid the foundation for ACF to conduct the three-part evaluation. The R3 project had two goals. The first goal was to compile and disseminate a [synthesis](#) on the existing body of evidence of recovery and reunification

interventions that utilize coaching models to the field. The second goal was to determine the feasibility of conducting a rigorous impact evaluation of one or more potentially replicable and scalable interventions. The contract was awarded to Abt Associates and its subcontractors, Faces and Voices of Recovery and Joseph Ryan (University of Michigan School of Social Work).

Replication of Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families-Impact Study

In September 2022, the Children’s Bureau (CB) and OPRE concluded the Expanding Evidence on Replicable Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families (R3) project. The Replication of Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families—Impact Study (R3-Impact) will advance the former R3 project by replicating two recovery coaching interventions (the Parent Mentor Program and Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams) and conducting the Congressionally mandated three-part evaluation, i.e., pilot, impact, and implementation studies. This contract was awarded to Abt Associates and its subcontractors, Joseph Ryan (University of Michigan School of Social Work), Carrie Furrer (Portland State University), Child Trends, Morrison Child and Family Services, Children and Family Futures, Faces and Voices of Recovery, and The Adjacent Possible.



SUPPORTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Many ACF programs serve youth. Some directly focus on youth, such as the Personal Responsibility Education Program (which provides abstinence and contraceptive education to young people), the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Program (which provides education for youth to voluntarily refrain from sexual activity and other risky behaviors), the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, and the John H. Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. DFS leads several research and evaluation projects with a large focus on youth.

In addition to the ones listed below, some home visiting evaluation projects that are described in the *Nurturing Children through Families* section of this report (e.g., MIHOPE) include a significant proportion of young mothers in their study samples. Some projects described in the Strengthening Relationships section of this report also include a focus on programs that serve youth.

Other OPRE divisions conduct youth-focused research as well. The Division of Economic Independence (DEI) has projects focused on youth employment and training. The Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD) undertakes projects involving youth affected by human trafficking and youth with child welfare involvement. Across OPRE rigorous research and evaluation is used to describe, evaluate, and translate a range of existing, innovative, and effective ways to serve youth.

OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB).

Personal Responsibility Education Program: Promising Youth Programs

The Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) is one of multiple efforts at the federal level to reduce teen pregnancy through evidence-based programs. For the second generation of PREP programming (funded 2016-2020), the Promising Youth Programs (PYP) project supported grantees' evaluations by providing evaluation-related training and technical assistance. The PYP project also adapted two curricula: 1) [Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care: An Online Training for Parents and Caregivers of Youth in Foster Care](#) to help parents and caregivers of youth in foster care learn about topics related to adolescent sexual health and strengthen their communication skills; and 2) the [Digital Citizenship: Adapted lessons for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities \(IDD\)](#) to support the sexual health and well-being of youth. The project also created a supplementary [Sexual Health Resource Toolkit for Parents and Caregivers of Youth with IDD](#). The contract was awarded to Mathematica.

Personal Responsibility Education Program: Studies of Performance Measures and Adulthood Preparation Subjects

The Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) Studies of Performance Measures and Adulthood Preparation Subjects (PMAPS) served multiple purposes – to revise measures to monitor and report grantee performance and analysis of performance data; to collect, analyze, and report performance data; and to develop adulthood preparation subjects (APS) conceptual models. PMAPS was comprised of two key components, one on performance measures and one on adulthood preparation subjects.

The PREP Performance Measures Study supported PREP-funded programs to develop, collect, and report on meaningful performance measures that communicate the PREP programs' mission and priorities; analyzed data from those measures to determine if grantees and the PREP program overall are meeting performance benchmarks; and provided information to grantees about their performance. The PREP Adulthood Preparation Subjects (APS) Conceptual Models Study conducted a review of PREP grantees' APS programming and developed conceptual models that demonstrate how inclusion of APS can enhance or expand on



the outcomes for youth participating in PREP programs. The [final report](#) on the conceptual models aimed to help PREP grantees understand and select APS topics, develop related content, and target specific outcomes in their programs. A factsheet published in 2022 summarized findings based on performance measures for the 2019-2020 reporting period. The contract was awarded to Mathematica.

Personal Responsibility Education Program: Local Evaluation Support and Dissemination

The purpose of the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) Local Evaluation Support and Dissemination (PLESD) project is to build and expand the adolescent pregnancy prevention knowledge base by supporting grantees in conducting rigorous program evaluations to improve programming, and ultimately youth outcomes. The project includes a range of activities that strengthen and support the local evaluations of recipients and subrecipients implementing the PREP grants: PREP Innovative Strategies (PREIS), Tribal PREP, State PREP, and Competitive PREP. This project will also develop innovative communication products to disseminate information about the effective and promising practices that PREP grantees identify. The contract was awarded to Abt Associates, with subcontracts to Child Trends and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center.

Personal Responsibility Education Program: Performance Leads to Understanding Success

The purpose of the Personal Responsibility Education Program: Performance Leads to Understanding Success (PREP PLUS) project is to support high quality performance measurement for PREP-funded programs. The project has several goals – to revise existing measures used to monitor and report grantee performance; to collect, analyze, report, and disseminate performance data; to develop a Performance Measures Data Portal and Performance Measures Dashboard that will incorporate individual-level data; and to support PREP grantees in continuous quality improvement related to biannual performance measures reporting. PREP PLUS aims to enhance the current data system used to monitor grantee performance. Through the Data Dashboard, performance measures data and customizable data reports will be available to grantees and federal program staff for use in program monitoring, program management, and continuous quality improvement. The contract was awarded to Mathematica.

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation

The Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation (SRAENE) is designed to address congressionally mandated Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) research and evaluation objectives. It is comprised of three distinct projects. First, the National Descriptive Study provides a nationwide description of how grantees and provider organizations implement SRAE programs, the outcomes for youth in these programs, and associations between program implementation and outcomes. The National Descriptive Study comprises two sub-studies: the [Early Implementation Study](#), which describes the program plans for SRAE grant recipients operational in 2020, and the Nationwide Study, which focuses on program implementation and youth outcomes to identify promising programming approaches. Second, the Program Components Impacts Study utilizes innovative evaluation designs to assess the effectiveness of SRAE program components. Third, SRAENE provides data and evaluation support to build grantee data capacity through a variety of activities, like [group-based learning opportunities](#) and [technical assistance resources](#), and to bolster grantee-led evaluations. The contract was awarded to Mathematica with a subcontract to Public Strategies.



Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Performance Analysis Study

The Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Program Performance Analysis Study (SRAE PAS) seeks to collect performance measures data from SRAE program participants and providers to allow both the program office and grantees to monitor and report on progress in implementing SRAE programs. Primary activities include support to grantees to collect and submit performance measures, the development of an SRAE Performance Measures Portal (SPMP) for performance measures submission, and the development of a Performance Dashboard for use by grantees and the program office for continuous quality improvement. These data provide ACF with up-to-date information on youth participant characteristics, service receipt, perceived influences of the programs; program infrastructure, reach, scope, and content; and technical assistance needs. The initial contract was awarded to Public Strategies with a subcontract to Mathematica. A subsequent contract for SRAE PAS 2.0 was awarded to Mathematica with a subcontract to Public Strategies.

Transitional Living Program Evaluation Studies

The 2003 Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act called for a study of long-term outcomes for youth who are served through the Transitional Living Program (TLP). The Transitional Living Program Evaluation Studies are research efforts to better understand the effects the TLP may have on the lives of runaway and homeless youth.

[The Youth Outcomes Study](#) was conducted to better

understand key youth outcomes in housing, employment, earnings, and education before, during, and after program participation. In addition to reporting on these outcomes, the [final report](#) also explores how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected TLP services and TLP participants' experiences regarding outcomes of interest. Youth outcomes will also be tracked through administrative data at 12- and 24-months post program entry.

OPRE and FYSB sponsored a process evaluation of the 2016 Transitional Living Program Special Population Demonstration Project. This FYSB grant program targets LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness who are between the ages of 16 to 21, as well as young adults who have left foster care after the age of 18 up to age 21, but who may still need housing and services. The process evaluation assesses grantees' implementation of the demonstration project, which seeks to support promising strategies for helping homeless youth transition to self-sufficient adults. Grantees may serve either or both of the project's target populations based on an assessment of their community's needs. The process evaluation [final report](#) was published in 2021.

OPRE and FYSB also sponsored the Transitional Living Program (TLP) Pilot Study of a Randomized Controlled Trial: November 2016-August 2017. This study was conducted to assess the feasibility of using an experimental design with random assignment among TLP grantees and the vulnerable youth they serve. The [final report](#) details the lessons learned during the design, site selection and recruitment, study enrollment, and data collection phases of the study, which provide valuable information for the human services field, researchers, program administrators, and policymakers. The contract for the TLP Evaluation Studies was awarded to Abt Associates.



OPRE leads the following projects in collaboration with the Children's Bureau (CB).

Building Capacity to Evaluate Interventions for Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness: Phase III

This project supports ACF's efforts to build evidence on how to end youth homelessness by continuing work with organizations who conducted foundational work as part of Phases I and II of the Building Capacity to Evaluate Interventions for Youth/Young Adults with Child Welfare Involvement At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) project. Phase I of YARH (YARH-1) provided evaluation-related technical assistance (TA) to organizations awarded planning grants to develop interventions for youth with child welfare involvement who are most likely to experience homelessness. Phase II of YARH (YARH-2) provided evaluation-related support for organizations awarded implementation grants for further developing and testing of interventions developed under Phase I. Phase III of YARH (YARH-3) will continue to provide important information to the field by supporting organizations from Phase II in evidence-building activities, including providing evaluation-related TA; assessing sites' readiness for summative evaluation; designing and conducting a federally led evaluation of at least one comprehensive service model, including an implementation study and an impact study; and disseminating knowledge gained through project activities. The evaluation team will work closely with ACF, a broad range of relevant groups and individuals, and selected experts so that the TA activities and evaluation will yield timely findings that inform policy and practice. In FY22 OPRE released several briefs, including [one on implementation facilitators and challenges](#). The contract was awarded to Mathematica.

Chafee Strengthening Outcomes for Transition to Adulthood

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program) provides funding to states, territories, and tribes to help support youth currently and formerly in foster care. States use Chafee funding for a variety of activities, including employment and college success programs, services for pregnant and parenting youth, supportive housing programs, and the extension of Chafee services to age 23 in eligible states with extended federal foster care. Prior evaluation work explored the range of programs serving transition age youth and observed that many programs are difficult to rigorously

evaluate due to issues such as program size, lack of appropriate comparison groups, or implementation challenges. Therefore, despite the Chafee program's over twenty-year history, there is still much to learn about the effectiveness of specific program components or implementation approaches for serving youth in or transitioning out of foster care. The Chafee SOTA project uses innovative learning techniques to identify and test promising practices in programs serving transition age youth. Ultimately, the project aims to strengthen the evidence base and improve the feasibility and rigor of evaluations that test the effectiveness of program services or components. Another focus of this project is the exploration of how youth/young adults, who are preparing to exit or have exited foster care, access information about extended services that assist them in utilizing resources and making informed decisions about education, employment, and their lives. A key aspect of the project is the authentic engagement of young people with lived experience in the child welfare system as core members of the research team. The contract was awarded to Westat with partners the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, Dr. Katie Richards-Schuster (University of Michigan School of Social Work), CLH Strategies, and First Place for Youth.

Planning a Next Generation Evaluation Agenda for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: Phase II

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program; formerly the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program) was created following the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 (Public Law 106-169).

The program allows states and eligible Tribes to provide services to assist youth currently and formerly in foster care achieve self-sufficiency. Activities and programs allowable under the Chafee program include help with education, employment financial management, housing, emotional support, and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care. In addition, the FCIA required that funding be set aside for evaluations of promising independent living programs. In response to this statutory requirement, ACF conducted the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, a rigorous, random assignment evaluation of four programs funded under the Chafee program. To build on the findings of the Multi-Site evaluation, this contract is conducting formative evaluations of programs of potential national significance in preparation for possible

future summative evaluations. Programmatic areas of interest for this work include employment and college success programs; services for pregnant and parenting youth; supportive housing programs; and the extension of Chafee services to age 23 in eligible states with extended federal foster care. Findings from a formative evaluation of two employment programs were released in 2021, as well as findings from a national scan of supportive housing programs for young people formerly in foster care. In 2022, the project released [a report](#) on the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program with state-specific fact sheets about ETV use, [a report](#) on the Family Unification Program (FUP) for youth, and [a brief](#) on employment programs for youth with histories of foster care. The contract was awarded to Urban Institute.

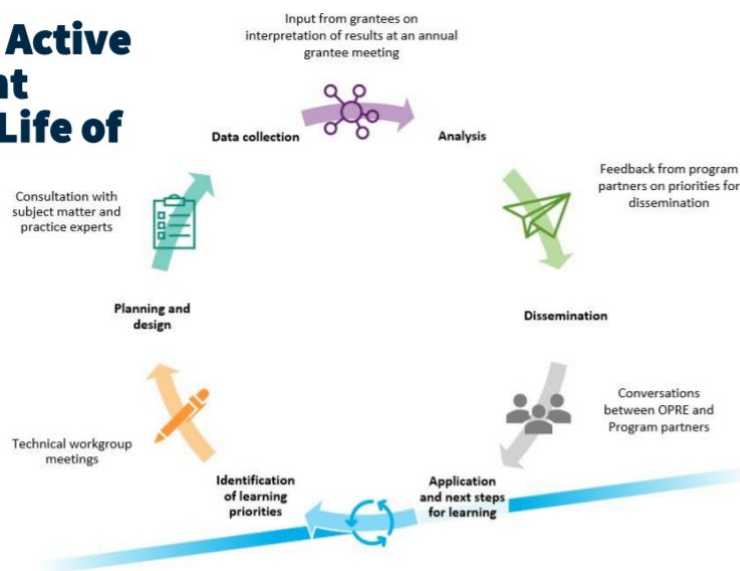
MAKING EVALUATIONS RIGOROUS AND RELEVANT THROUGH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Active engagement is the intentional involvement of groups and individuals who are invested in the outcomes of evaluation in all phases of the inquiry process. When this type of engagement occurs, it can improve the rigor of research and evaluation, facilitate the uptake of findings, and increase DFS's capacity to promote equity. DFS engages particular groups and individuals to 1) develop learning agendas that guide work in topic areas and 2) develop and carry out individual projects that inform those learning agendas. The goal is to produce information that helps inform and improve policy and practice for all children, youth, families, individuals and communities in the United States.¹

Developing learning agendas. Building on the Foundations for [Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018](#) and the [ACF Research and Evaluation Policy](#), DFS engages in an ongoing learning process with its program office partners to strategically build the knowledge base for ACF and other federal human services programs. DFS and program offices work together to develop learning agendas tailored to the focus, mission, and goals of the program office. Feedback and input from groups and individuals who are invested in the outcomes of human services programs are critical to helping DFS and program offices decide what learning agenda priorities should be. Groups or individuals we plan to engage meaningfully for DFS projects have diverse areas of expertise and include service providers; developers of interventions, innovations, or practices; program participants; subject matter experts; federal, grantee, or other program staff; federal, state, or local leadership; groups and individuals in communities where programs occur; individuals with lived expertise²; and those in broader fields of study related to human services research and evaluation.

Active engagement in individual projects. When we intentionally and meaningfully involve groups and individuals with an interest in the outcomes of our studies in the evaluation process, it can increase the rigor of evaluation activities and improve the understanding, acceptance, and use of findings. In addition, engaging program participants and communities involved in human services throughout the evaluation lifecycle can promote equity. Through effective active engagement, communities can share their priorities and needs in ways that shape how evaluation is conducted and how programs are improved. Towards these aims, DFS expects contractors and grantees to develop plans and implement strategies to maximize opportunities for active engagement in DFS projects that are appropriate to the goals of each phase of a project's life cycle.

Example of Active Engagement During the Life of a Project



¹ In the past, DFS has referred to these activities as 'stakeholder engagement' in our contracts and grants. Based on concerns related to using terms like 'stakeholder' in evaluation (see ["As an evaluator, do I use words \(e.g., stakeholder\) that can be harmful to others?"](#) by Goldie MacDonald and Anita McLees), DFS is thinking carefully about the words used to describe this important process. Here, it is referred to as "active engagement."

² "Individuals with lived expertise" refers to those who have personal expertise gained through their direct, first-hand involvement in programs being studied and/or belonging to communities where those programs occur.

CROSS-CUTTING PROJECTS

In addition to research that falls clearly within the substantive areas of family strengthening, DFS leads or is involved in OPRE projects whose focus spans the issues facing children and families with low incomes in a cross-cutting way. These cross-cutting projects may look at the populations served by multiple ACF programs, may include family strengthening as one among multiple foci, or may focus on research methodology to support high-quality evaluations across OPRE work and in the human services field more generally.

Develop Teaching Materials Based on OPRE's Research and Evaluation

OPRE supports high-quality research on programs and policies that promote the well-being of children and families. However, gaps between federal and academic research can make it hard to ensure students and professionals in relevant fields are aware of OPRE's work. To address these gaps, this project aims to create and disseminate teaching materials for post-secondary and professional development settings. The first stage of the project solicited feedback to determine the feasibility and best methods for creating teaching materials based on OPRE's research and evaluation. This included consultation with key groups, individuals, and experts as well as a survey of instructors across a range of disciplines relevant for OPRE's work and different educational contexts. Findings from the survey will inform the format, content, target disciplines, and educational level of teaching materials.

In its second phase, the project is developing teaching materials based on work conducted across OPRE's divisions and developing user-friendly web pages on the OPRE website to make the teaching materials publicly available. A subsequent component of the project may include creating professional development modules and/or university courses. The contract was awarded to MEF Associates and their partners Mathematica and Prof2Prof.

Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts

While significant research has come forward to improve our collective understanding of human services programs and their contribution to the economic and social well-being of individuals and families, notable knowledge gaps continue to persist regarding how these programs can best serve the needs and interests of rural communities. This project

engaged subject matter experts, reviewed over 50 articles, conducted over 100 interviews with human services providers and community partners across 12 rural communities, and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to meet the following goals: 1) Provide a rich description of human services programs in rural contexts; 2) Determine the remaining need for human services in rural communities; and 3) Identify opportunities for strengthening the capacity of human services programs to promote the economic and social well-being of individuals, families, and communities in rural contexts. The study focused on four human services programs: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); MIECHV; HMRP; and Health Professionals Opportunity Grants. The contract was awarded to 2M Research and its partner Urban Institute.

Publications from this contract include a [Comprehensive Report](#), [special topic briefs](#) on housing, broadband internet, and racial equity; and briefs focused on TANF, MIECHV, HMRP, and HPOG.

OPRE Methods Inquires

The Methods Inquiries project helps ensure that OPRE research uses the most scientifically advanced and appropriately applied methodology possible. To accomplish this goal, OPRE regularly convenes meetings of scientists and research experts to advance its understanding of critical topics in social science research methods. In addition to OPRE staff, these meetings bring together experts from varying disciplines and policy fields and from academia, government, and the private sector to explore innovations in research design, analytic techniques, and data measurement. Additionally, the Methods Inquiries project includes an ongoing seminar series for OPRE and other federal staff; publications with further information on topics addressed in the meetings; and ad hoc responses to emerging methodological issues.

To date, OPRE has sponsored 13 meetings on innovative methods. The most recent meeting, held in October 2022, was titled "Applying Mixed Methods and Qualitative Approaches to Social Policy Questions." Prior meetings explored community engagement, core components, open science; effect sizes; sub-group analysis; innovative directions in estimating impacts; methods for unpacking the "black box" of programs and policies; use of administrative data in social policy research; Bayesian methods; and rapid learning methods. Materials from all of OPRE's past methods meetings, including agendas, presentations, and publications, are available at <https://opremethodsmeeting.org/>

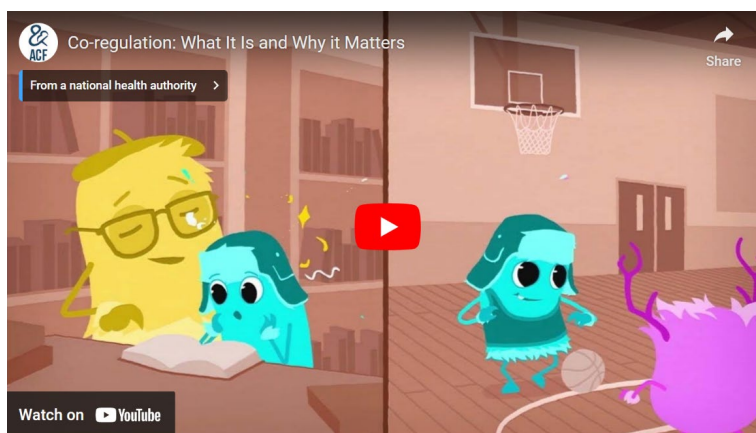
Tribal TANF-Child Welfare Coordination Guidance and Support

The Tribal TANF-Child Welfare Coordination Guidance and Support contract provides technical assistance and support to [Tribal TANF Child Welfare Coordination Grantees](#) that promotes excellence in performance measurement, continuous quality improvement, and grantee-led collaborations between child welfare and TANF agencies in their tribal communities. The project is intended to: 1) provide technical assistance to grantees in revising project logic models to align project activities with intended outcomes; 2) provide support for grantees' identification and collection of performance measures to track project activities and outcomes; 3) provide support to grantees in using data for quality assurance and continuous quality improvement; 4) provide programmatic guidance on ways to strengthen Tribal TANF and Child Welfare coordination in order to strengthen outcomes specified by grantees in their applications; and 5) document these activities and lessons learned. This project provides universal guidance and peer learning opportunities, as well as grantee specific guidance on a variety of topics including identification of measurable goals and objectives, data systems and data privacy, data analysis and interpretation, continuous quality improvement, and dissemination of program successes. The contract was awarded to James Bell Associates.

Applying a Co-Regulation Framework to ACF Programs that Serve Youth and Young Adults

In 2013, OPRE commissioned four interrelated reports focused on self-regulation and toxic stress from a team at the Center for Child and Social Policy at Duke University. That team and other experts have created multiple practice-oriented resources grounded in the initial reports. Together, these reports and resources comprise the "[Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series](#)." The goal of this series is to communicate the potential of a self-regulation framework for strengthening prevention programs and human services.

In 2018, the Division of Family Strengthening began addressing some of the future directions for applying a co-regulation framework that were identified in the [summary of gaps in research and practice](#) from this series. For example, The [Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth \(SARHM\)](#) project utilized formative rapid cycle evaluation to identify strategies to build the co-regulation capacity of facilitators who teach healthy relationship education programs for youth. Recently released, this [5-minute video](#) from SARHM aims to motivate adults who lead adolescent-serving programs to provide co-regulation support and informs them on evidence-informed ways to do so.



In 2021, the [Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience](#) project provided a theoretical foundation for applying co-regulation to older youth in or transitioning out of foster care, conducted a scoping review of co-regulation literature, completed a targeted program scan, and integrated the results to generate key findings, identify a future research agenda, and make recommendations for practice. The project team also created [practice guides](#) on how four groups of adults who regularly interact with youth in foster care could incorporate co-regulation in everyday experiences with youth.

These types of application of a co-regulation framework hold promise for strengthening other youth-serving programs as well. For example, [an OPRE blog from 2022](#) considers application of the co-regulation framework to adolescent pregnancy prevention programs in ways that could strengthen youth self-regulation and support healthy decision-making in the contexts where adolescents make choices about sexual activity.

What is self-regulation? Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions. This means, for instance, finding ways to cope with strong feelings so they don't become overwhelming; learning to focus and shift attention; and successfully controlling behaviors required to get along with others and work towards goals. Self-regulation has a foundational role in promoting physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being and educational, professional, and personal achievement. Self-regulation is developed throughout a lifespan and can be strengthened and taught.

What is Co-regulation? Co-regulation is the interactive process by which individuals can foster self-regulation development in others by 1) providing warm, supportive, and responsive relationships, 2) promoting self-regulation through coaching, modeling, practice, and feedback, and 3) structuring supportive environments. For example, parents provide co-regulation support to their toddlers when they help them get organized to head out the door for preschool in the morning; program staff provide co-regulation support to program participants when they foster positive group norms that encourage inclusive engagement; supervisors provide co-regulation support for staff when they provide opportunities for self-care during times of high stress; and participants provide co-regulation support to their peers when they listen and help each other find solutions for reaching each other's goals.

Co-regulation resources and research can be found on OPRE's new [Co-Regulation in Human Services](#) page!