Virtual Services Tip Sheet

Because of the COVID-19 public health emergency, many Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grantees could not deliver their programming in person, and many transitioned to virtual services or hybrid approaches. In this tip sheet, we share strategies from grantees and experts for delivering virtual services. Be sure to check with your family assistance program specialist (FPS) before changing your service delivery approach to ensure your HMRF grant allows it. It's also best practice to coordinate with your organizational or institutional review board (IRB), if applicable, on any changes.

Improving delivery of virtual services

- Look to universities, community organizations, and curriculum developers as potential sources of information about virtual services. Some curriculum developers have posted tip sheets and virtual workshop toolkits for grantees on their websites.
- Consult with your FPS and HMRF technical assistance liaisons on specific considerations for HMRF services, and to connect to other grantees to share ideas and strategies.
- Involve clients, staff, and curriculum developers in designing virtual curricula.
- Coordinate with your data manager and continuous quality improvement (CQI) implementation team on how to identify challenges to delivering virtual services and strategies for improvement, including tools for collecting feedback from clients and staff to improve programming. This resource provides additional tips on using CQI in changing situations.
- Consider what investments in technology infrastructure are needed at the organizational level to continue successful virtual services operations.

Supporting facilitators and clients

- Train facilitators on delivering virtual services, including best practices for organizing courses in online platforms, using a variety of digital teaching tools, and fostering engagement and bonding between clients in virtual environments.
- Have a co-facilitator for workshops who can update shared documents, monitor chat box comments, organize breakout rooms, and troubleshoot technical issues. A co-facilitator can also text or call absent clients to remind them of the session and take over if the other facilitator gets disconnected.
- Provide a dedicated technology support person, if possible, for the initial workshop session to address issues and questions in real time.

Maximizing client engagement

- Administer a technology questionnaire to understand clients' technology needs. This can cover, for example, clients' access to Wi-Fi and devices and comfort with technology. Avoid making assumptions about technology use, access, and preferences when planning for virtual service delivery.
- Speak to your FPS and grant team first if you are considering using grant funds to fill technology gaps identified through the questionnaire.
- Establish expectations for clients during the first session around appropriate conduct in a virtual environment, such as keeping cameras on, dressing professionally, and joining from a quiet place.
- Foster a foundation of trust and bonding between clients by using activities that highlight client voices, such as facilitated discussions and Poll Everywhere surveys, rather than lectures or watching videos.
- Use interactive technology such as chat boxes in Zoom, virtual game platforms like Kahoot!, and communication applications such as Remind to support engagement.

Delivering services in specific settings

- Get creative when working with youth! Offer point or grade incentives, provide hands-on activity prompts with Play-Doh or other props, and include off-screen breaks.
- Have facilitators assign a peer leader for each session to lead an activity such as an ice breaker or a game or to take on specific responsibilities during the session. Using a peer leader can help maintain engagement and empower youth.
- Consider offering afternoon, rather than morning, sessions for youth. Their preferences might differ from adults, who tend to appreciate late evening sessions to schedule around their workdays.
- Understand the challenges of delivering virtual services in correctional facilities or other institutional settings. Gathering clients together in person, while a facilitator leads remotely, can allow for program delivery to continue in complex situations.

Delivering hybrid services

- Consider offering a mix of virtual or in-person formats, or a mix of synchronous and asynchronous program delivery. Asynchronous delivery refers to clients participating in the same programming but at different times from one another.
- Consider holding in-person kickoff and closing events, if permitted, to encourage bonding and build trust between clients for programs delivered virtually. Surveys could also be administered during these in-person sessions.
- Plan ahead to record virtual sessions. Facilitators can share recorded workshops with clients for asynchronous makeup sessions.

Ensuring privacy and safety

- Establish privacy ground rules early in a course or workshop, such as asking clients not to record sessions and to keep session discussions and participant names confidential.
- Have a co-facilitator watch for signs of distress or emotional vulnerability and reach out directly to clients to offer support.
- Work with clients and community organizations to find quiet spaces for clients to participate in sessions outside of the home if needed. Consider reserving library rooms or university classrooms and providing clients with headphones or earbuds.
- Review ACF's recommendations for protecting the privacy and personally identifiable information of HMRF clients in Appendix A of the nFORM Performance Measures and Data Collection Logistics Manual. The tip sheet on administering surveys during a public health emergency also includes information on how to protect client privacy and safety.