

FED TALK

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Advancing Equity in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) Programs

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As we transition into 2024, the Branch Chiefs for the Grants Support and Innovation Branches, Taffy Compain and Kailiah Thomas, want to wish everyone a Happy New Year! Reflecting on your steadfast work that made 2023 successful, we want to thank all recipients for your outstanding efforts to strengthen families in your communities through high-quality HMRF services. Lives are being changed and families are stronger as a result of all of the hardworking program staff and partners. In addition, we would like to thank you all for a smooth transition into

two grant-focused branches this past year as well as your participation in our four Roundtables and, for many of you, the Economic Stability Summit. These events were energetic and productive, and the HMRF team is in the process of announcing webinars on a number of topics you have expressed interest in further exploring.

As we reflect on the year past and the year ahead, we would like to update you on exciting equity-related efforts within our program. HMRF has had a long-standing interest in supporting diversity, equity,

inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts for the populations served by our programs.

At the forefront of our priorities includes understanding equity and our role as a federal government entity in applying what it means to advance equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely impacted by persistent poverty and inequality. These priorities were strengthened in 2021 when on his first day in office, President Biden issued [Executive Order 13985](#) on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, followed by [Executive Order 14035](#) on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce. These executive orders have guided federal offices to review and enhance our equity-supporting practices including areas such as grants monitoring, technical assistance, and research.

EQUITY means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

—Executive Order 13985, President Joseph R. Biden, January 20, 2020



Specifically, ACF has been working to coordinate strategies to orient, educate, and promote policies around advancing equity. This includes supporting programs and practices that treat everyone with fairness and provide everyone with the opportunity to reach their full potential. August 2023 marked one year since ACF coordinated with each office to release equity action statements. Examples of ACF equity initiatives taking place agency-wide can be found on [ACF's Equity page](#).

For HMRF, it remains our priority to ensure that all grant recipients receive the support they need to accomplish the goals they set out to achieve in pursuit of strengthening families. To that end, we recognize that HMRF programs are working tirelessly to meet the needs of participants, who can at times face challenges worsened by systemic and structural barriers.

HMRF is proud to have both existing and new strategies in place to better understand and support communities who have been historically marginalized, and we are committed to continuing to invest in improving

our services for the families we serve. For example, we are collecting ideas on how to increase accessibility and strengthen the quality of program services in the next set of Notices of Funding Opportunity (NOFOs). Here are some of the other HMRF efforts underway to better support DEIA and, specifically, equity for communities who are underserved:

Listening to communities served. We actively seek opportunities to listen to the populations served, especially those who may be overlooked. For example, through the Fatherhood Alliance, we are seeking to understand the lived experience of program participants.

Learning how to increase DEIA in HMRF programming. In collaboration with the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), HMRF continues to support the following DEIA-related projects, all of which focus on how to increase equity in our work together:

- **REFRAME: Race Equity for Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Programs to Empower Black Families, 2021–2025.** This project aims to deepen understanding of the needs and experiences of Black families served by HMRF programs and identify research priorities and program strategies to ensure program services can effectively support their needs. It includes an explicit goal of documenting and leveraging strengths and assets of Black families through HMRF program services.
- **CAMPE: Advancing Contextual Analysis and Methods of Participant Engagement, 2021–2024.** HMRF and OPRE staff engaged in monthly consultations to explore equity issues and practices in HMRF program and research contexts.



- **National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families, 2013–2018 and 2018–2023.** HMRF and OPRE staff conducted research and translation in poverty reduction and self-sufficiency, marriage/relationships and fatherhood, and early care and education.
- **Building Knowledge to Advance Equity for Hispanics/Latinos in HMRF Programs, 2023–2027** (Hispanic/Latino Equity Research for Opportunities to Empower and Succeed in HMRF Programs (HEROES)). This project uses a strength-based and equity perspective to generate an understanding of the needs and assets of the Hispanic/Latino communities that HMRF programs seek to serve. Using findings from a literature review, qualitative data collection, and information from those with lived experience, the project will generate an equity framework and practice resources.
- **Advancing Best Practices and Cultural Relevance of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs for Indigenous Communities, 2023–2026.** This project will explore best practices for how federal staff, TA providers, and federally funded HMRF programs can serve Indigenous populations. The primary goal of this study will be to analyze existing literature, as well as new information from a descriptive study, to draw connections among ideas to identify common themes on how to serve Indigenous populations.

Increasing the equity and cultural responsiveness of the HMRF client surveys. The Building Usage, Improvement, and Learning with Data in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs (BUILD) team is planning to assess the equity and cultural relevance of the nFORM client surveys. This work includes gathering feedback from HMRF program staff and clients, consultations with other experts in HMRF and related fields, in-depth analyses of the survey measures to understand how well they capture the intended concepts across different groups, and a focused literature review with a particular emphasis on understanding experiences and processes among different racial and ethnic groups as they relate to the key goals of HMRF programs. Collectively, this work will inform potential changes to the client surveys so that questions are reflective of and relevant to clients of different races and ethnicities served by the HMRF programs.

Documenting our DEIA through updated Qualitative Progress Reports. We are also implementing efforts to better document the excellent ways that recipients are already increasing DEIA in their programs. We are pleased to announce that the Responsible Fatherhood and



Healthy Marriage QPR and PPR Progress Narrative templates have been updated to include ACF's new question about equity-related activities during the reporting period. The new question can be found in Section A-02 of the QPR and Section B-02 of the PPR on Major Activities and Accomplishments. The addition of this field not only helps us better understand and support equity work being implemented across recipient sites, but it also provides us with a more systematic process for routinely gathering insights to inform ongoing equity advancement strategies for HMRF programs.

Recipients should use the updated templates, available on the HMRF Grant Resources site and nFORM, to complete the Year 4 Q1 narrative due on January 30, 2024, and for all future QPR and PPR submissions. Further information on completing QPR and PPR Progress Narratives can be found [here](#).

Our Continued Commitment to Equity

We are committed to continuously examining how to advance equity in the administration of HMRF grants in ways that are sustainable and that lead to opportunities for families served to reach their full potential. Our goal is to understand how current and future participants are affected by inequitable systems and how that in turn affects their experience and access to services. In alignment with ACF's mission, we strive to make equity a central part of how we operate and deliver on our mission.

Thank you for all the remarkable accomplishments of 2023! The HMRF federal team is excited to move into the new year with the ability to better learn about and memorialize your equity-supporting work. We look forward to your continued partnership in service to our nation's families in most need of additional support.