



As financial counseling and the [Financial Empowerment Center \(FEC\)](#) model emerges as an important public service in local governments across the country, ensuring that clients can expect high-quality services from appropriately trained, professional counselors is critical. The FECs' emphasis on professionalism, expressed through the model's attention to data-driven management as well as professional training, has made a strong impression on clients, partner organizations, and municipal leaders.

As the FEC initiative expands to dozens of cities in the next few years through the [FEC Public](#) platform, the CFE Fund aims to provide greater options and flexibility for counselors to meet the Financial Empowerment Center Counselor Training Standards. The Standards are based on findings from our [Financial Empowerment Center evaluation](#), field best practices on training and professionalization, and insights gleaned from our partners over the past ten years. They articulate the knowledge and skills FEC counselors need to demonstrate before they can begin direct service, and detail the continuing education counselors will need for ongoing professional development.

The Standards delineate the breadth and depth of the financial content areas, counseling and coaching skills, practice and experiential learning, and socio-economic and cultural context setting necessary to serve the diverse needs and backgrounds of FEC clients. The Standards also include a [Code of Ethics](#),

that promotes responsible, professional and ethical financial counseling, furthering the profession of one-on-one financial counseling.

The Standards are broken down into six sections:

A) *Context of Poverty, Cultural and Socio-Economic Factors:* An introduction to the socio-economic factors that cause and perpetuate poverty; demographic, linguistic, and cultural information about target populations and how financial empowerment can build resident financial stability.

B) *Financial Content:* As part of their initial training, counselors are expected to have a strong understanding and mastery of the following financial content areas:

- I. Money Management and Budgeting
- II. Basic Banking and Financial Transactions
- III. Credit Reports
- IV. Using Credit Wisely
- V. Consumer Rights – Debt Collection
- VI. Student Loans
- VII. Bankruptcy
- VIII. Planning for Retirement
- IX. Future Planning and Investments
- X. Home Ownership and Mortgages
- XI. Insurance and Public Benefits

C) *Counseling and Coaching Skills* includes two parts:

- I. **Counseling and Coaching Techniques:** Outlines the skills needed to work with clients as a counselor/coach, including: cultural competency; avoiding judgment; privacy, confidentiality, and ethical behavior; the role of the supervisor; and understanding the boundaries of financial counseling/coaching.
- II. **Negotiations:** Counselors should be equipped with effective negotiation strategies, and understand the components of a successful negotiation, including: preparation; negotiating from a position of strength; leveraging consumer protection laws and

regulations; communicating with the opposition; assessing and evaluating an offer of settlement; and summarizing and memorializing an agreement.

D) *Practice and Experiential Learning:* In addition to practical exercises incorporated throughout the content training, FEC counselors should engage in participatory experiential learning opportunities prior to working with their own clients to apply financial content knowledge and counseling and coaching skills. This can consist of additional role-playing, shadowing or co-counseling during counseling sessions, and peer and expert observation and mentorship. At minimum, counselors are required to complete 20-30 hours of practice and observation.

E) *Continuing Education:* Continuing education and professional development are critical components of FEC counselor training, and essential for maintaining the quality and professionalism of the counseling services. To maintain their status as an FEC counselor, counselors must complete at least 30 hours of continuing education and professional development, including at least 1 hour related to ethics, each year and submit an annual log to their supervisor for verification and documentation.

F) *Additional Trainings, including the Code of Ethics:* The CFE Fund and its partners will provide in-person and remote training prior to the FEC launch. The CFE Fund team will visit each City/County to provide training on the FEC model, the counseling process, data collection and reporting specific to the FEC database system. Following this training, managers and counselors will also be required to complete the online Code of Ethics and Operations training delivered by Neighborhood Trust Financial Partners.

Additionally, local FEC management should organize trainings on relevant issues specific to the locality and state, and equip counselors with a strong understanding of their community and integration partner services, resources, and referrals. These types of trainings should also be ongoing as part of the continuing education requirement. Local FEC management should also organize trainings for the community and local government partners on FEC services and how to make referrals to the FEC.

FEC Training and Certification Process

Each FEC Planning Partner is required to submit a training plan that details how they will train their financial counselors, in accordance with the requirements and competencies detailed in the Training

Standards. To facilitate the delivery of these trainings, CFE Fund has worked with national and regional training providers to pre-approve their training courses that align with the Standards, and continues to encourage local training providers (partner organizations, training consultants, community colleges, or universities) to submit their trainings for CFE Fund evaluation.

The list of approved training providers and the sections of the Standards they satisfy is shared with Planning Partners, and updated with each new training provider that has completed the evaluation process and been approved.

Once counselors complete their training, in accordance with their approved training plan, they must pass a CFE Fund-administered exam. This exam will ensure that regardless of the local approach to training, all FEC counselors meet the same bar nationally.

Want to learn more, or get your financial counselor training approved for Financial Empowerment Center eligibility? Contact Fernanda Villaseñor, Senior Associate, at fvillasenor@cfefund.org.