

Women Work!



POLICY BRIEF

January 2003

In the Wedding Business

Marriage promotion and family formation programs have recently taken center stage in the welfare debate. Invoking images of coerced marriages and poor women trapped in abusive relationships, advocates for low-income women and children contend that it is not government's role to involve itself in the very private and personal decision of marriage. Despite this, investment of government funding to encourage and support marriage among welfare recipients is a hot topic on the national agenda. Many states are using the authority of the 1996 welfare reform legislation to initiate marriage promotion programs.

What does this mean for Women Work! and our member programs? To answer that question, this brief provides an overview of the current debate in Washington and around the country in regards to "healthy marriage" initiatives and highlights some activities states have undertaken. It also discusses policy alternatives that seek to build "healthy individuals" who are equipped to make healthy lives for themselves and their families.

Promoting Marriage

Most Americans would agree that marriage is an important institution. Along with emotional and social support, stable marriages generally increase economic sufficiency within families. Marriage promotion policies take off from this standpoint, promoting marriage as a way to reduce child poverty. Indeed, marital status and poverty are closely related. Research shows that among groups at risk for poverty, married couples are typically better off than couples who cohabit or do not live together.¹ Alternately, other research has shown that for couples who are married, economic hardship often leads to the dissolution of relationships.² Unemployment and limited job opportunities, poor education, and lack of child care and housing typically cause strife within marriages.³ These are stressors that many relationships don't survive.⁴ All this suggests that economic well-being is important to forming and sustaining marriages. However, the question remains, "Is marriage the best way to lift families out of poverty?"

The administration and Congress think so. President Bush has signed an executive order authorizing \$2.2 million

in grants focusing on family counseling and child support collection programs. This included funding for marriage promotion. Two religious groups and one state agency received approximately \$200,000 each to implement programs to encourage marriage (see box at right). Additionally, TANF reauthorization bills in both the Senate and House contain provisions directing between \$100 million and \$300 million for marriage promotion and family formation programs. Since the overall funding level for TANF is likely to remain the same in the final bill, funding for these initiatives will need to be taken from other areas under TANF.

What does this mean to programs serving displaced homemakers and single parents? At first glance, there appears to be little connection between DH/SP programs and the marriage initiatives. After all, DH/SP programs focus primarily on individuals whose marriages have ended through divorce or widowhood and on individuals who never married. DH/SP programs' emphasis is on assisting individuals to gain education and training necessary to enter the workforce and attain economic independence. However, programs need to be aware of this shift in policy. Is

The president's order directed \$2.2 million to 12 states and several organizations, including:

- **The Marriage Coalition**, OH, received \$199,994 to test a marriage curriculum for poor single parents;
- **Community Services for Children, Inc.**, PA, awarded \$177,373 to work with local church groups to provide marriage education to unwed couples; and
- **Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board** received \$200,000 to provide marital skills with programs to improve child support.

there a role for our programs? What could it be?

The Marriage Debate

In January 2001, Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families at the US Department of Health and Human Services, outlined the mission of the administration's marriage initiative within TANF as "support[ing]

activities to help couples who choose marriage for themselves get access to skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.”⁵ This benignly sounding statement set off a firestorm of debate over the proper role government should take in dealing with personal choices and the types of activities that should be promoted.

Proponents of marriage promotion, particularly conservative organizations, are highly in favor of these initiatives. Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation called the initiative, “the single most important thing that government can do to increase the well-being of American children.” Research used to support marriage policies indicates that children living in two-parent homes are five-times less likely to be poor than children living with single mothers.⁶ Furthermore, more than one-third of all children do not live with their biological fathers.⁷ Proponents point to these statistics, plus others that highlight out-of-wedlock birth rates and the effects of divorce on children, to substantiate their claim that marriage is the solution.

Among those who have been most vocal in their opposition to marriage policies are advocates for women and children. These groups argue that marriage policies are based on “romanticized and antiquated views of the institution.”⁸ They point out that marriage is not a panacea to poverty and that many children have thrived in single-parent homes. Likewise, women’s advocates note that the debate is less about statistics than it is about forcing ideological agendas on the poor. Advocates fear that the success of many single parents in raising children and providing economically for their families will be swept aside to return to more traditional gender and family roles. Such a trend would undermine decades of advancement among women to more fully participate in the workforce.

Imbedded in the debate is the question about what constitutes a family. The definition of family as a two-parent union plus kids has been seen as too narrow and insensitive to cultural norms in minority ethnic communities and other family structures where children do not share the same biological parents or are raised by other relatives. Advocates also stress that the quality of the marriage matters. Regardless of the economic stability a relationship may bring, if the marriage is abusive or filled with conflict, the family is not

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better off.⁹ Moreover, advocates are worried that the use of funds on untested programs may divert sorely needed money from programs serving all welfare recipients.¹⁰

The New Wedding Planners

Although the push for marriage may be alarming, the idea is certainly not new. The public has long been concerned about the state and redefinition of families in America. Since the mid-seventies, when divorce rates began to soar, concern about children’s welfare in single-parent families and the “deterioration” of the nuclear family have been regular topics on the national agenda. However, it was not until the reauthorization of TANF in 1996 that the federal government entered the wedding business.

The 1996 reauthorization encouraged states to implement programs that

promote marriage and family formation. In fact, three of the four goals of the welfare reform legislation direct states to create programs that:

- provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Since taking office, President Bush has placed marriage and family formation on his administration’s agenda. More recently (April, 2002), the president stated, “Welfare reform must also, wherever possible, encourage the commitments of family[,]” noting that marriages were “good for children.”¹¹

Congress has followed suit by proposing funding for marriage and family formation programs within TANF reauthorization bills, promoting responsible fatherhood and directing greater supports to two-parent families.

States’ Take on Marriage

States have attempted different programs and policies to meet the goals of TANF. Policies have ranged from removing barriers faced by two-parent families in receiving government aid to providing financial benefits to welfare recipients for getting married. A controversial West Virginia program, which has since been revoked, provided welfare recipients an extra \$100 in monthly cash benefits if they married. While controversial programs have received the most attention, states have been enacting a wide range of programs in an effort to reduce divorce and encourage married families. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) notes that many policies that have been enacted have involved little

expenditure of TANF monies, although five states – Arizona, Louisiana, Michigan, Oklahoma and Utah – have taken steps to direct significant TANF funding to their initiatives.¹² For example, in 2000, Oklahoma governor Frank Keating established the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, which set aside \$10 million in unspent TANF funds to establish programs for this purpose.

Typically, states have worked within existing program structures to reduce penalties or barriers to support for two-parent families and encourage marriage. Programs found across the nation include:

- couple and marriage education programs including relationship classes, fatherhood initiatives, and partnerships with faith-based community programs;

- conferences with health, business, and education officials;
- handbooks and public service announcements about the benefits of marriage;
- reinforcement of marriage and divorce laws; and
- expansion of existing programs related to family sufficiency, such as teen pregnancy, child support, paternity, and family support.

Do Programs Work?

In general, states have not collected data or conducted evaluations to determine if programs work. Data on marriage and divorce vary from state to state and at least three states do not publish any data on marriage or divorce.¹³ Additionally, in the 2000 Census, only a sampling of respondents

were asked to identify their marital status, which had been standard in previous surveys.¹⁴ Without complete information the government is unable to report on the effectiveness of their marriage initiatives. Further, only in Oklahoma have state officials sought to research and understand marriage and divorce patterns in their state before enacting new policies.¹⁵

With millions of dollars potentially being directed at untested programs, states are expected to increase and expand these initiatives and further experiment with programs to strengthen marriage and family formation.

Creating Healthy Individuals

Stable, self-sufficient families are headed by healthy, responsible adults with self-esteem, motivation and skills to succeed in the American economy.

States That Have Proposed or Enacted Policies to Promote Marriage
(Selected Examples)

Activity	Definition	States w/ Activities (Law or Bill)
Divorce Laws/Procedures		
Modifications to No-fault Laws	Laws that make divorce more difficult by requiring mutual consent.	AZ, CA, GA, ID, IN, KS, KY, MA, MI, MN, MT, NH, NJ, TX, VA, WA, WV
Covenant Marriage	Typically requires pre-marital counseling, an agreement to seek additional counseling if marital problems arise, and 2-year waiting period for divorce.	AL, AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, GA, IN, IA, KS, LA, MD, MI, MN, MS, MO, NE, NM, OH, OK, OR, SC, TN, TX, VA, WA, WV, WI
Mandatory Education	Education for couples with children on the effects of divorce on children.	AK, AZ, AR, CO, CT, FL, HI, IL, IA, KS, KY, MD, MI, MN, MO, MT, NE, NH, NM, PA, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WI
Marriage & Relationship Preparation & Education		
Incentives for Marriage Preparation	Activities, such as license fee reductions for education/counseling participants.	AK, AZ, CA, FL, IL, IA, MD, MI, MN, NM, OK, SD, TN
State Funding for Marriage Support	Use of TANF or other funds to encourage participation in marriage preparation.	AZ, MI, OK, TX, UT, WI
Adult Marriage Education	Suggested or required education, often within the context of license fee reductions, marriage waiting period reductions.	AK, AZ, CA, CT, FL, IL, IN, IA, KS, MD, MI, MN, MS, NM, OK, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WI

Source: *State Policies to Promote Marriage, Final Report*. (Sept, 2002) HHS. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/hspparent.htm>

Stable, self-sufficient families help women and children move out of poverty. Welfare policies need to support the development of healthy individuals who can enter into and sustain healthy relationships in all areas of their lives, not just the development of healthy marriages. A legal union between a low-income unmarried mother and her child's father will not in and of itself raise the family out of poverty, nor will it assure the development of self-esteem, motivation, and skill capacity to effectively lead a family into a condition of health and sustainability. When parents lack skills, jobs, adequate housing and may be struggling with depression, substance abuse, or domestic violence, the risk of marital breakdown increases.¹⁶ There is a lack of evidence upon which to conclude that marriage promotion is effective in reducing the divorce rate or raising families out of poverty.

Marriage promotion policies and family formation initiatives need to take broader approaches and apply more flexible strategies than are currently in place. Such a policy, called *Marriage-Plus*, is currently being promoted by CLASP. *Marriage-Plus* contains provisions that are in line with Women Work!'s mission to promote the well-being of children by helping parents become financially responsible. Main objectives of *Marriage-Plus* are to:

- reduce economic stress by reducing poverty;
- provide better-paying jobs and job assistance for the poor;
- institute workplace policies to reduce work/family conflict and stress on couples;
- reduce tax penalties and other disincentives to marriage; and
- provide education to those who want to marry and stay married

about how to have healthy relationships and good marriages.

Additionally, rigorous data collection and evaluation of programs is necessary. The influx of funding for these programs needs to be justified. Public skepticism about the government's involvement in promoting marriage warrants this vital information.

No policy should detract from the support or needs of single parents. Stability within the home is critical in every home. Any policy intended to reduce poverty by strengthening families must address the needs and interests of all families, not just those headed by traditionally married couples. All TANF recipients need to be provided with opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency, including opportunities to improve their education and training. Women Work! will continue to advocate that all TANF recipients gain access to the skills for becoming economically and emotionally better individuals, parents and partners, now and in the future.

End Notes

- 1 Ooms, T. (2002, August). *Marriage and Government: Strange Bedfellows?* CLASP Policy Brief, Couples and Marriage Series, 1.
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Horn W. (2002, January) "Interview with Dr. Wade Horn." *Making Welfare Work: Welfare Reauthorization*. CLASP 2002 Audio Conference Series.
- 6 Federal Interagency Forum on Children and Family Statistics, *America's Children: Key Indicators of Well-Being*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001.
- 7 Anderson Moore, A., Jekielek, S., and Emig, E. (2002, June) *Marriage from a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do about It?* Child Trends Research Brief.
- 8 Albertson Finman, M. (2002) In New York Times Editorial: *On Target and Off 2002: The Year's Most Overrated and Underrated Ideas*. December 28, 2002.

9 See Anderson Moors, A. et al. (2002, June)

10 See Ooms, T. (2002, August)

11 Bush, G.W. (2002, April) *Speech given before the Commonwealth Club and Churchill Club*. San Jose, CA. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020430-5.html>

12 Parke, M. and Ooms, T. (2002, October). *More Than a Dating Services? State Activities Designed to Strengthen and Promote Marriage*. CLASP Policy Brief, Couples and Marriage Series, 2.

13 Gardiner, K., Fishman, M., Nikolov, P., Glosser, A. and Laud. S. (2002, September) *State Policies to Promote Marriage, Final Report*. Lewin Group. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/hspparent.htm>

14 US Census Bureau (1999) *Major Differences in Subject-matter Content Between the 1990 and 2000 Census Questionnaires*. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/90vs00.html>.

15 See Parke, M. (2002, October)

16 See Ooms, T. (2002, August)

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Advocating for the economic security
of women and families through
policies, programs and partnerships.