

AAHMI MISSION

The mission of the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) is to promote and strengthen the institution of healthy marriage in the African American community.

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The Obama-Biden Transition Team talks about Strengthening Families at Home



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<http://www.flickr.com>

It is no secret that the next administration has a bevy of challenges to address—the economic state of the nation; the war in Iraq and foreign policy; homeland security; accessible health care; and energy and the environment to name a few. All of these issues affect our children and families, but the one issue that addresses the mission of ACF and the Healthy Marriage and Responsible

Fatherhood Initiatives in particular is that of strengthening families at home. This administration appears not only to recognize the value of family but also the *impact* of the family structure on the foundation of our country.

Although there has been no specific reference to healthy marriage in and of itself, the Obama -Biden transition team propose legislation and/or the expansion of programs that could lead to positive outcomes for many low-income American families - one of which references responsible fatherhood. Two proposals critical to our mission include:

- **Reintroduction of the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act.** According to *Change.gov*, this act would “remove some of the governmental penalties on married families, crack down on men avoiding child support payments, ensure that support payments go to families instead of state bureaucracies, fund support services for fathers and their families, and support domestic violence prevention efforts.”
- **Expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** When enacted, the number of working parents eligible for the credit will increase. Other benefits to increase include those available to non-custodial parents who provide support through child support payments as well as a reduction in the EITC marriage penalty.

For a complete listing of the Transition Team agenda, visit: <http://change.gov/agenda>.

“Going to the Chapel” By: Debora Taylor Social Development Commission Head Start Healthy Marriage Program—Milwaukee, WI

Michelle Jones-Harrison, Head Start employee with the Council for the Spanish Speaking: Guadalupe Head Start Center of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, attended the African American Healthy Marriage Research Conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Michelle states, “Chapel Hill changed my life. I was inspired by the information regarding healthy marriages. The health benefits of being married, 10 Great Dates, the Basic Model of Communication and Building Fire and Resilience in Marriage are examples of things that have stuck with me. One of the speakers said he has been married to the same woman seven times.” She was inspired by the number of African -American men and women that had Masters and PhDs. This has motivated this seventeen- year Head Start employee to return to college for a Masters in Community Counseling in January 2009, after vowing to never return to school again.



Michelle and Tony Harrison

Michelle had been pondering over a twenty two year relationship with her children’s father. She states, “After returning from North Carolina, we began to do some of the activities from my “Within My Reach” © workbook. I was pleasantly surprised at his answers... I decided that I would give him a chance to make me happy. We had our issues throughout the years. He asked me to marry him at least three times. I said, “Yes” on the third time. I became engaged to Tony Harrison after my Chapel Hill experience on a warm summer day in July.”

After secretly becoming engaged, Michelle attended a Within Our Reach© facilitators training with her grantee, the Community –Relations Social Development Commission Head Start. Michelle shares with the Debora Taylor (the grantee Healthy Marriage Program Manager), “after that training it was a done deal.” Tony and Michelle Harrison eloped with their three young adult children on Saturday, September 6, 2008. I could hear
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Did you know...

Studies show that while 35% of Americans between 24 and 34 have never been married, that percentage increases to 54% for African Americans in the same age group. Additionally, married couples head 76% of our American families, while African American married couples head only 47% of American families.

While the overall rate for single parent households in America has increased for all children, it is especially alarming among African Americans. Between 1960 and 1995, the number of African American children living with two married parents dropped from 75% to 33%. At the moment, 69% of African American births are to single mothers, compared to 33% nationally.

African American Healthy Marriage Initiative Brochure

Father Involvement and Children's Brain Development**By: Josie Hauer**

"A child's brain is built over time, shaped by the interaction between genetics and experiences throughout life," remarked Dr. Tomas Reyes, Specialist in the Head Start Quality Initiative in ACF Region I. The role of father involvement in children's brain development was explored in a monthly forum sponsored by the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund in Boston. Attendees from the fields of human service, child welfare and fathering identified strategies and exchanged ideas to build their capacity to support positive "brain-based" fathering practices.

Reyes reported that at birth, the brain is largely undeveloped. Most babies are born with more than 100 billion brain cells whose functions are not yet defined and some of which will not be used and will die off. As the brain develops it organizes in a sequential fashion, starting from the most "regulatory" regions of the brain, up through the parts of the brain responsible for complex functions such as the regulation of feelings and abstract thinking. Healthy development of one brain region or function depends on the previous healthy development of lower brain regions.

Brain development also depends upon the pattern, frequency and timing of experiences during childhood. The brain likes repeated occurrences so that the more repetitions of activities (e.g. music, reading, conversation), the more the brain regions responsible for these tasks will respond to this stimulation and develop. When Dads read the same story or sing the same song over and over to their children's delight, they are literally helping to "train their brains" to respond to this type of stimuli.

"Brain architecture" -- the interaction and functioning of different regions of the brain -- develops most in early childhood; therefore, life experiences during this phase have the most powerful and enduring effects. Reyes noted that, "when protective relationships are not provided, elevated levels of stress hormones (cortisol) disrupt brain architecture by impairing cell growth and interfere with the formation of healthy neural circuits." Emotional neglect and exposure to negative living environments lead to "toxic stress" which inhibits a child's future ability to deal with challenging situations and a broad range of life-long problems may ensue.

Reyes led participants to form small groups to identify fathering practices that support healthy brain development. Being consistently involved via homework help, sports or play activity and keeping regular routines was seen as very important. Activities that support consistent emotional bonding and language enrichment were also identified to be especially important. Participants reminded themselves to practice

self-control and avoid explosive anger in order to maintain a "heart to heart" connection even when there are problems. Reyes emphasized that children thrive when they feel emotionally and physically safe. Since Dads bring distinctive gifts to the parent-child relationship, it is important to let them know their contribution to their children's brain development is vital and unique. Research has confirmed that when compared to Moms, Dads tend to promote more physically active play and encourage children's sense of independence and competence. Reyes believes that as fathers increase understanding of their role and its impact on children's physical and emotional growth, they will become more consistent and informed in their parenting practices. He encouraged all to share the information with the Dads they reach.

Continued from Page 1, "Going to the Chapel" them singing "Going to the Chapel and we're going to get Married," says Mrs. Taylor. Who knew the Chapel of Love would be influenced by the Chapel Hill African American Healthy Marriage Research Conference?



The Harris Family at the Nuptials of Michelle and Tony Harrison

•Visit the AAHMI Website at:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/aa_hmi/AAHMI.html

•Visit the Healthy Marriage Initiative Website at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage>

•Visit the Healthy Marriage Resource Center at: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org>

The Administration for Children & Families is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Spotlight On the Region: Region V

The Play That Moved! By: Lake County, MI Young Ambassadors



The banner encouraged hundreds daily all the month of November to "Jump the Broom." It hung over M-37, a major highway and the main street in the Village of Baldwin, Lake County, in northwest Michigan.

The play "Jump the Broom," by writer/director Thomas Meloncon,



Cast of "Jump the Broom"

a professor in the Fine Arts Department of Texas Southern University, Houston, TX, and longtime Playwright of Educational Drama, is about choices, self-respect, real love, relationships and marriage. A one-act play composed of vignettes came to the stage at Baldwin Community Schools at the urging of students who saw it this summer at

the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative: Building Strong and Healthy Families Research Conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

"I wish my sister and friends were here to see this," stated one youth. "Yes, but there are a lot of girls and boys that need to see this," stated another. This was followed by, "Please, Ms. Trucks. Do you think we could get the play to come to our school?"

Their request was taken to the Lake County Enterprise Community Board by Mary L. Trucks, the Executive Director of FiveCAP, Inc. who knew too well the statistics of teen pregnancy and single parenthood in their low-income community. The EC Board, in cooperation with Baldwin Community Schools, sponsored the play and finally the big day arrived November 21, 2008.

Two hundred and fifty students and faculty attended the Student Assembly and were treated to snip-

pets of the play and discussion of various topics with the actors. Students were inspired by the educational and professional achievements of the performers as well.

The audience for the evening performance included students, parents, community leaders and supporters. Two standing ovations and moving reviews by youth and adults said the goal was accomplished. Both the good messages of the play and the extraordinary talent of the performers moved many to tears, laughter and dance.

In advance of the play, the school's Teen Health Program and the Lake County Young Ambassadors & Art of Leadership (YAAOL) students discussed relationships, making life goals and abstinence. Faith Thomas-Jones, Principal-Baldwin Community Schools, excitedly discussed with parents and others plans the school has for activities to follow up on the messages contained in "Jump the Broom."

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Spotlight On Health: Depression By: Barbara Andrews

A popular holiday song begins with the lyric, "It's the most wonderful time of the year!" Unfortunately, holiday time is not happy for everyone, and poor personal relationships can contribute to unhappiness. For some people, the holiday season is a time of loneliness, sadness, anxiety and hopelessness. When these feelings do not pass, when they become persistent and interfere with normal functioning, this could indicate a more serious condition—"major" depression, "clinical" depression or "depressive disorder."

People experience depression in many different ways. Signs of severe depression include feelings of

worthlessness; irritability and fatigue; inability to take care of one's daily needs; loss of interest in activities that were once pleasurable; changes in sleep patterns; persistent aches and pains and difficulty concentrating.

Depression is a common, but serious illness that can affect people of all ages, races and gender across all socioeconomic groups. For many reasons, people do not always get help. If you or someone you know needs help, talk with a counselor, mental health professional, social worker, employee assistance program, clergy or friend. Do it now!

For more information, visit:

National Institute of Mental Health
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>;

Mental Health Association
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency
<http://www.samhsa.gov>.

If you or someone you know is in crisis now, seek help immediately! To reach the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, call 1-800-273-TALK.**

Regional Roundup

NFI Workshop, Father Daughter Summit, and Strengthening the Family Summit in Region X By: Janice Holt

On November 7, 2008, Ron Clark, Director of the Community-Based Programming for the National Fatherhood Initiative provided a comprehensive workshop that allowed staff to reflect on their experience and approach to engaging men/fathers in the work they do and the services they provide families. Topics that were covered included: how to impact services to families by engaging fathers; recognizing the important roles of fathers in the lives of their children and families; incorporating the role of the father into the family assessment; integrating fathers into the overall approach to service provision; and practices that increase male/father participation.

Region 10 is also partnering with local fatherhood programs to promote the upcoming Father Daughter Summit set for January 10, 2009. For further information please go to: <http://www.seattlefatherdaughtersummit2009.com>.

Community partners are working on the 2009 AAHMI Strengthening the Family Summit which will take place in Seattle, WA, in March. This summit will bring together national and local speakers who will give context and practical tools for working with fragile families and addressing healthy marriage, responsible fatherhood, and youth empowerment.

Michigan Fatherhood Policy Forum Fathers in Transition: Building Pathways to Healthy Relationships By: Vander Green

Collaboration is the key when it comes to providing comprehensive services for fathers in Region V. After several phone conference meetings and many decisions and logistical arrangements were made, the Michigan Fatherhood Policy Forum was held September 18th and 19th at the beautiful Shanty Creeks Resorts in Bellaire, Michigan. The forum was well attended and proved to be a groundbreaking event. Many came from far and near to be a part of this landmark occasion.

Participants included state legislators, human services personnel, practitioners, attorneys, judges, community service providers, ACF staff and most importantly, fathers. The event began with a reception on Thursday evening at which time Senator Bill Hardiman, 29th Senate District, set the agenda for the forum. On Friday, Dr. Oliver Williams challenged the participants with a phenomenal keynote address entitled, "What is Responsible Fatherhood?"

The forum was conducted using a panel discussion format. There were three panels that included practitioners, service providers, legal personnel, judicial personnel and fathers. The following outlines the discussion topics that the panel presented: 1) Issues that affect fathers in the child welfare system, 2) Issues that affect fathers in the child support system and 3) Issues that affect fathers in the area of child custody and parenting time. The key objective was to provide fathers with tools and resources to improve their relationships with their children and others. It is our desire that policies will be enhanced and implemented to continue the work that began on this wonderful fall day in Michigan.

Many thanks to Joyce Thomas (ACF), Stanley Stewart and his team (Michigan Department of Human Services), Senators Bill Hardiman and Mark Jansen (Michigan Senate), and ACF Region V Staff for their commitment and dedication to fathers in the state. Carlis Williams (ACF) also attended this event and we were grateful for her support.

ACF Happenings

Congo Square Rhythms Festival... A Celebration with a Purpose! By: Elma Z. Goodwin



Participants enjoy the music at the Congo Square Rhythms Festival

ACF co-sponsored the 2nd Annual Congo Square Rhythms Festival in New Orleans, LA, October 4-5, 2008 and was represented by the staff of Region VI. The event, sponsored by the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and Foundation, was originally scheduled to take place in Louis Armstrong Park but was

relocated to the banks of Bayou St. John due to construction. The festival celebrates the historic role of Congo Square as the birthplace of American music. It was there that African slaves gathered on Sunday afternoons to practice their ancestral traditions - influencing all of the styles that would emerge from New Orleans' cultural melting pot.

This year's festival brought forth this tradition in a purposeful and powerful way. Over 6,000 people were in attendance representing a melting pot of cultures with a visible family and children presence. They came for entertainment (the state's native son and superstar, Cupid, introduced his new shuffle), the wellness pavilion, information and services from social-services organizations, the children's pavilion, arts and crafts and, as one would expect, the *great* food. Region VI hosted an exhibit booth shared by a local grantee, Total Community Action Agency, and distributed information on healthy marriage, responsible fatherhood and other agency programs.

ACF was proud to co-sponsor this event due to its cultural significance, importance to the families and children of the city, and impact on the reviving economy. Special recognition goes to Karen Chatman of Karen Chatman Edutainment for her efforts in making this opportunity possible. More information on the festival and the Jazz & Heritage Foundation can be found at <http://www.jazzandheritage.org/congosquare>.

**SAVE THE DATE!!!
AAHMI National Leadership
Summit Pre-Conference
February 24, 2009
National Harbor, MD**

**4th Annual AAHMI Research Conference
June 16-18, 2009
Chapel Hill, NC**

Please send comments or questions to Darlene Tart at Darlene.Tart@acf.hhs.gov

