

## VII. FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF MARRIED TWO-PARENT FAMILIES

One of the central purposes of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is to encourage the formation and maintenance of married two-parent families. On average, children raised by parents in healthy marriages are less likely than those of other family forms to fail at school, suffer an emotional or behavioral problem requiring psychiatric treatment, be victims of child abuse and neglect, become pregnant as teenagers, get into trouble with the law, use illicit drugs, smoke cigarettes, abuse alcohol, engage in early and promiscuous sexual activity, grow up in poverty, or attempt suicide. Children raised by parents in healthy marriages are also, on average, more likely to have a higher sense of self-esteem, form healthy marriages when they marry, attend college, and to be physically healthier (See Waite & Gallagher, 2000, for a review<sup>1</sup>).

Promoting healthy marriage is one part of the overall strategy to end the dependency of needy parents on government benefits. While employment is the main anti-poverty program, research has shown that stable marriages are associated with more stable employment and higher wages. For example, the 2003 U.S. Census Bureau report shows that married couple households are stronger economically than non-married households.<sup>2</sup> The median income of married households in 2003 was \$62,405, compared to \$43,318 for all households, \$41,959 for male-headed households with no spouse, and \$29,307 for female-headed households with no spouse. The median income for non-family households, which measures any person living alone, with a roommate, or with a cohabitating partner, is only \$25,741. The poverty statistics show a similar pattern. Only 5.4 percent of married households live below the poverty level, compared to 10.0 percent of all households, 13.5 percent of male-headed households with no spouse, and 28.0 percent of female-headed households with no spouse.

Healthy marriages are good for men, women, and children. Therefore, the purpose of healthy marriage programs is to increase the percentage of people in healthy marriages and, especially, the percentage of children being raised by parents in a healthy marriage. The objective is not for people to form any kind of marriage, but for those who choose marriage to form and sustain a healthy marriage. In keeping with the TANF goals, in particular the goal to “encourage the

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<sup>1</sup> Waite, L.J., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2003). *Table 4, Status of Families, by Type of Family, Presence of Related Children, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.

formation and maintenance of two-parent families,” the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) established a Healthy Marriage Initiative. The heart of the Healthy Marriage Initiative is to help people who want assistance gain access to relationship skills and knowledge that can help them form and sustain a healthy marriage.

This chapter provides an overview of how States are spending TANF dollars and shaping TANF policy to support the formation and maintenance of married two-parent families. Other State efforts and policy strategies are also briefly discussed. Lastly, the chapter also reviews how the Office of Family Assistance has provided ongoing support for the Healthy Marriage Initiative.

## **State TANF Spending**

State governments have explored various strategies for helping couples form and sustain healthy marriages as part of an effort to help families achieve self-sufficiency and improve child well-being. An April 2004 report by the Center for Law and Social Policy<sup>3</sup> details activities that involve some level of government as a sponsor, funder, or otherwise active partner. Table A is a reproduction of their findings. While many of the State efforts described are funded with TANF dollars, many others are funded by other Federal grants and State and local monies. The following paragraphs explain the nature of State efforts and provide some examples of TANF-funded activities in this area.

### *State Policy Initiatives, Commissions, and Campaigns*

These efforts include the enactment of laws to fund healthy marriage programs, establishing committees to develop and implement strategies supporting healthy marriages, and creating more public awareness about the value of healthy marriages and the relationship skills that increase the likelihood of achieving them. For example, in April 2000 the Arizona legislature passed a law authorizing \$1.15 million from Arizona’s TANF block grant to be designated for the Marriage and Communication Skills Program. A nine-member commission administers the funds for marriage education programs and the distribution of a marriage handbook.

### *Couples and Marriage Education for Adults*

These efforts include providing access to marriage education, providing material regarding healthy marriages, and the provision of healthy marriage services. Some States, such as Oklahoma, have adopted large-scale Statewide strategies to do so. Other States have adopted approaches with a more specific focus. For example, in 2002-2003, the Louisiana legislature authorized TANF funding to support the State Healthy Marriage and Strengthening Families Initiative. The State has taken a special interest in assisting low-income, never-married parents and their children. The State conducted research on 2,000 parents identified through the Food

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<sup>3</sup> Reproduced from Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet and Mary Parke (2004). *Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.

Stamp caseload that were interviewed 2-5 months after the birth of their child. African-Americans made up more than 80 percent of the sample. Based on the results of the study, a healthy marriage and relationship curriculum has been developed to meet the needs of those people.

### *Relationship and Marriage Education for High School Students*

Educational programs have been designed to give high school students a firsthand understanding of the challenges of marriage, the relationship skills needed to meet those challenges, and the benefits of forming and sustaining healthy marriages. The TANF-funded Oklahoma Marriage Initiative has worked with the publishers of a marriage education curriculum and a high school relationship education curriculum to develop one integrated course. This integrated curriculum is being offered in pilot programs with plans for ongoing development and distribution.

### *Fatherhood/Co-Parenting and Marriage*

Many States administer Fatherhood Programs. Healthy marriage components can be incorporated into these programs, and some States are already doing so. For example, Right Choices for Youth, Mentoring, and Fatherhood (RCYF), a TANF-funded program in Virginia, includes the promotion and enhancement of marriage and the marital relationship as part of their services, in addition to strengthening parent-child communications, promoting responsible and involved fatherhood, and developing parenting skills.

### *State Cooperative Extension Programs*

State Cooperative Extension Services provide educational programs that address a wide range of family life issues including parenting education, family resource management, nutrition education, and youth development. Marriage education is a topic that has been met with renewed interest. For example, in Utah the Governor's Commission on Marriage uses TANF funds for a wide range of activities including training Cooperative Extension agents in marriage education programs. The Utah State University Cooperative Extension Service is also involved in marriage education curriculum development and evaluation projects.

### *Multi-Sector Community Marriage Initiatives*

In some communities, marriage initiatives have grown from the grass roots efforts of broad-based coalitions that draw from diverse community sectors. For example, the Healthy Families – Nampa Coalition in Idaho has brought together religious, civic, education, minority, media and business leaders to support healthy marriages and responsible fatherhood. In May 2003, the city of Nampa, in partnership with the coalition, received a \$544,000 Federal Child Support Demonstration Grant to promote healthy marital and parental relationships. Idaho's TANF agency, the Department of Health and Welfare, is a coalition member.

## **State TANF Policy Changes**

With welfare reform and the creation of TANF, States have been given great flexibility in determining eligibility for cash-assistance. Previously under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), rules existed that made it easier for single-parent families than for two-parent families to be eligible for assistance resulting in a disincentive for marriage. For example, two-parent families working more than 100 hours per month were not eligible for AFDC regardless of income (unless the State had a waiver). Further, to be eligible, there was also a requirement that the principal earner in the two-parent family had worked 6 of the last 13 quarters. Most States have removed those disincentives in whole or in part.

While there is more flexibility under TANF, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 set forth a higher work participation rate for two-parent families than on single-parent families. Specifically, 50 percent of single-parent families must be engaged in work activities, but for two-parent families the requirement is 90 percent. Some States have found this burdensome and have created a separate assistance program for two-parent families that is funded exclusively by State dollars.

Some States also have crafted policy to create incentives for marriage. These efforts typically involve disregarding a spouse's income for a limited period of time when an individual who receives cash assistance marries.

## **Other Efforts within States**

The efforts discussed above and shown in Table A are also being conducted within the States through non-TANF funding, or in some cases with a mixture of TANF and non-TANF funding. The Administration for Children and Families has provided considerable funding via grants for healthy marriage programs, and these grants are being administered by numerous offices including the Children's Bureau, the Office of Community Services, the Office of Child Support Enforcement, the Administration for Native Americans, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. As of July 2004, a total of 67 sites across the country have received funding.

Another set of marriage education programs that are completely separate from TANF are those offered through the Armed Services. The Army, Air Force, Marines, and Navy each provide family support services, including marriage education programs. The services and programs available vary among base sites.

## **Other State Policies**

Some States have enacted changes to State marriage and divorce laws in an effort to promote healthy marriages. Specifically, several States encourage premarital education by reducing the marriage license fee for couples who take a marriage education course and by increasing the waiting period for a license for those that do not. A few other States have enacted covenant marriage laws that typically require marriage education or counseling prior to the marriage. If

couples are contemplating divorce, they are again required to participate in marriage education or counseling, and the divorce can only be obtained in cases of adultery, abuse, abandonment or a lengthy separation.

Some States have also reduced financial disincentives to marriage through changes to child support rules. Specifically, a few States suspend child support arrearage collections from non-custodial parents who marry the custodial parent of their children.

### **Support for the Healthy Marriage Initiative from the Office of Family Assistance**

#### *The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center*

The Office of Family Assistance has supported the Healthy Marriage Initiative by launching the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) in September 2004. The NHMRC serves as a national repository and distribution center of information about healthy marriage programs and policy. The NHMRC serves a wide range of purposes including:

- To provide current information and resources for the public about what it takes to have a healthy marriage.
- To provide resources for practitioners and organizations wanting to implement healthy marriage programs and activities.
- To provide resources for organizational leaders interested in building community healthy marriage initiatives.
- To provide resources for individuals working to strengthen marriages through public policy.
- To provide research findings and reviews for individuals, couples, practitioners, organizational leaders, and researchers.

The majority of information will be available through the NHMRC website.

#### *Creating Awareness among States*

The Office of Family Assistance and the Regional Offices have promoted the Healthy Marriage Initiative by conducting several conferences. Generally, the conferences provide opportunities for States to learn about emerging models and best practices for implementing healthy marriage programs and policies. Conferences held over the past several years include:

- Working Together to Strengthen Families Conference, August 2002

This conference was hosted by the ACF Region X Office (Seattle). Held in Seattle, Washington, this two-day conference drew more than 435 community, State, Tribal, and

national leaders to hear and discuss ways to implement ACF's new family initiatives (Responsible Fatherhood, Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and Marriage and Family Stabilization). The conference featured more than 30 speakers and 20 workshop sessions. The audience included child and family advocates, academics, Head Start grantees, health care workers, social workers, religious leaders, Tribal representatives, and public policy administrators.

- Colorado Strengthening Families Conference, September 2002

Led by a steering committee of 30 agencies and organizations, this conference brought State leaders together to address the partnerships and best practices necessary to strengthen families, how strong families improve the economy, and how government should promote healthy marriages. Approximately 350 people attended the two-day meeting.

- National Healthy Marriage Academy, January 2003

This two-day conference brought representatives from 15 States together to learn more about ACF's Healthy Marriage Initiative. The Academy afforded States an opportunity to hear presentations from nationally recognized speakers, researchers, Federal policy makers, as well as from other States with successful Healthy Marriage Initiatives.

- Region VI Midwinter Leadership Conference, January 2003

The ACF Region VI Office (Dallas) hosted this three-day conference. The conference theme was "Leading the Way: Positive Educational, Social and Healthy Outcomes for Children." Healthy Marriage programs were featured in addition to Fatherhood, Youth Development and others. The pre-conference meetings, mega sessions, and workshop sessions provided the most up-to-date information enabling States, Tribal, and local agencies to develop programs and enhance existing programs. The sessions also made it possible for participants to collaborate across multiple programs.

- Region V African American Healthy Marriage Forum, May 2004

This forum, conducted in conjunction with the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, focused on the role of faith-based and community organizations in supporting healthy marriages. Conference participants were informed about the current research, best practices, and funding opportunities that exist for those interested in developing a community Healthy Marriage Initiative or incorporating healthy marriage activities into existing services.

- Strengthening Families Leadership Forum, September 2004

This conference was sponsored by the ACF Region IV Office (Atlanta). Held in Montgomery, Alabama, this event addressed Healthy Marriage programs among other ACF key priorities. Participants gathering to focus on child care, youth development, child support, and fiscal management were also exposed to the opportunities and practices associated with the Healthy Marriage Initiative.

The Office of Family Assistance has made additional information available to States by contracts with the Welfare Information Network (WIN) and the National Governors Association (NGA). WIN published a Topic Resource Report on Marriage and Family Strengthening for the Office of Family Assistance in June 2004. The publication serves as a compendium of resources for Federal, State, and local staff charged with administering the TANF block grants and healthy marriage programs. WIN has also created a webpage that has other articles that they have published related to this topic, and it also provides additional information, and links to other websites.

NGA has conducted two of three webcasts to educate Governors and their staff about public efforts to strengthen marriage. The theme of the first webcast was “Research on Family Structure and Child Well-Being: What Should Policymakers Know” and it reached 200 web-based viewers on July 22, 2004. The second webcast on August 31, 2004 was themed “Supporting Healthy Marriages and Strong Families through Marriage Education” and featured presentations on the efforts to reach low-income couples in Louisiana and Alabama. The third webcast, titled “Starting Early: Talking About Healthy Relationships with Teenagers,” will address youth programs. NGA is also drafting a series of brief fact sheets about healthy marriage programs to serve as a resource for State policy makers and high State-level program administrators.

### *Responding to State and Local Requests for Assistance*

Many of the efforts of the Office of Family Assistance to support the Healthy Marriage Initiative stem from requests for assistance from States and counties. The Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network (Welfare Peer TA) provides peer-to-peer technical assistance to public agencies and private organizations operating the TANF program. Since September, 2002, Welfare Peer TA has hosted numerous events.

- Developing a Marriage Initiative for Your State, September 2002

The first Welfare Peer TA event on healthy marriages was a two-day conference held in Oklahoma City. Because of Oklahoma’s leading role in implementing State efforts to promote, enhance, and maintain the development of healthy marriages, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative was featured as a model for representatives from eight other States. Topics covered during the workshop included using survey data to develop a Statewide marriage initiative, components of a marriage curriculum, developing interagency partnerships, handling resistance and skepticism to marriage programs, and working with community partners to implement a marriage initiative.

- Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Workshop, July 2003

Another event was hosted in Oklahoma City and attended by representatives from six other States. Like the September event, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative served as a model, but the agenda was also developed with State input to ensure that their needs were met. Topics included service delivery system design and implementation, building community

partnerships, and linking to supports and services beyond marriage programs (e.g., substance abuse and domestic violence).

- Strengthening Families, October 2003

To assist the Alabama Department of Human Resources in exploring ways to promote the Healthy Marriage Initiative, Welfare Peer TA made arrangements for a representative to visit the site of a healthy marriage program in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Information was gathered for a wide range of issues such as curriculum design, coalition building, reaching diverse participants, and funding.

- Healthy Marriage Forums

Welfare Peer TA has conducted three roundtables designed to highlight best practices and model programs that encourage the developing and sustaining of healthy marriages. These events were held in California (January 2004), Louisiana (March 2004), and West Virginia (June 2004). Program administrators, State and local governmental officials, and service providers were among those that convened to learn and begin strategic planning.



**Table A**  
**Summary of State Efforts to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families**

State	State Policy Initiatives, Commissions, and Campaigns		Changes in State Marriage and Divorce Laws			Programs, Activities, and Services					TANF & Child Support Policy Changes			
	State	Initiatives, Commissions, and Campaigns	Marriage License	Covenant Marriage	Education for Adults	Relationships and Marriage Education in High Schools	Fatherhood/Co-Parenting & Marriage	Military Marriage-Related Programs	State Cooperative Extension Programs	Multi-Sector Community Initiatives	Treat 2-Parent and Single-Parent Families the Same	Have Separate 2-Parent State Program	Marriage Incentive	Child Support Areas Forfeiture
Alabama					X				X		X			
Alaska								X						
Arizona	X			X			X							
Arkansas	X		X											
California				X							X		X	
Colorado	X			X										
Connecticut				X							X			
Delaware									X		X			
Dist of Columbia										No Action	X			
Florida						X			X		X			
Georgia	X		X								X			
Hawaii							X				X			
Idaho					X									
Illinois				X										
Indiana				X							X			
Iowa				X							X			
Iowa														
Kansas	X						X							
Kentucky							X							
Louisiana					X									
Louisiana														
Maine				X										
Maine	X						X				X			
Maryland														1
Massachusetts			X				X							
Michigan					X		X							
Minnesota				X					X					
Mississippi			X				X						X	
Missouri					X									
Montana				X										
Montana				X			X							
Nebraska				X										
Nebraska				X										
Nevada														
New Hampshire				X										
New Jersey				X										
New Mexico				X										
New York				X										
New York				X										
North Carolina														
North Carolina														
North Dakota														
Ohio				X			X		X				X	
Oklahoma				X			X		X					
Oregon			X											
Pennsylvania	X													
Rhode Island														
Rhode Island							X							
South Carolina				X										
South Carolina				X										
South Dakota	X													
Tennessee				X			X		X				X	
Tennessee			X											
Texas				X			X							
Utah				X										
Vermont				X										
Virginia	X													
Washington				X										
Washington				X										
West Virginia									X					
West Virginia														
Wisconsin														
Wisconsin														
Wyoming														

\*Compared to other states, these states have adopted partial changes or taken a different approach to address this policy issue. Source: Ooms, T., Bouchet, S., & Parke, M. (2004). Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

