

More Than a Dating Service? State Activities Designed to Strengthen and Promote Marriage

By Mary Parke and Theodora Ooms

Introduction

Should state governments be in the business of promoting marriage? If so, what kinds of policies and programs should they enact? These questions have evoked considerable controversy in recent discussions about reauthorizing the federal welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). While this debate has been heating up in Washington, DC, a number of states and communities have already begun adopting policies and creating programs with the expressed goal of encouraging and strengthening marriage and reducing divorce.

The phrase “promoting marriage” can conjure up the alarming specter of government-administered dating services and marriage bureaus and other unappealing schemes. Indeed, a few of the most controversial new policies—such as covenant marriage laws and marriage “bonuses” paid to welfare recipients—have received widespread publicity. Little atten-

tion has been paid, however, to other strategies to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce that states and communities have already enacted, many of which have aroused less controversy.

Most of these activities date from the mid-1990s and were initiated by public officials or marriage advocates who were concerned about the effects of divorce and single parenthood on children. Some, however, were stimulated by the 1996 welfare reform law, in which three of the four purposes explicitly exhorted states to promote marriage, reduce out-of-wedlock births, and encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Many of the activities described here have involved very little expenditure of funds. However, five states (Arizona, Louisiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Utah) have allocated significant TANF funds to strengthen marriage and two-parent families.

This brief, the second in a new series from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) on Couples and Marriage Policy, groups the range of activities to promote marriage and two-parent families in states into seven broad categories:

- Reducing Policy Barriers for Two-Parent Families

SUMMARY

Even before policymakers in Washington began their current welfare-related debate on the role of government in promoting marriage, a number of states and communities had created policies and programs to reduce divorce and strengthen marriage. This brief, the second in a new series from CLASP on Couples and Marriage Policy, describes the surprisingly wide range of activities underway in states to promote marriage and two-parent families. No matter the outcome of the federal policy initiatives in this area, states and communities are likely to continue their efforts. As little is known yet about the effects of these new programs and policies, the authors suggest caution, creativity, and evaluation as policymakers move forward.

- Offering Policy Incentives for Marriage in TANF
- Setting Forth Public Goals to Reduce Divorce and Strengthen Marriage
- Creating Public Education Efforts to Promote Marriage
- Reforming Marriage and Divorce Law
- Strengthening Existing Programs That Affect Family Formation

About the Authors

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- Strengthening Couple Relationships and Cooperative Parenting Through Education

The aim of this brief is to offer an initial framework for thinking about the field of couples and marriage policy. It draws upon both CLASP research and a recent report compiled by the Lewin Group.¹ Little is

reasonable, others seem to us not very useful or may even be harmful. At the end of this brief, we suggest some general guidelines and questions to use to assess the potential merits or dangers of particular marriage promotion strategies.

Two important omissions in this menu of state marriage-related activities should be highlighted at the outset: namely, a lack of attention to improving basic state marriage and divorce statistics and a failure to conduct related research and evaluation. Collecting statistics on out-of-wedlock births, marriages, divorces, and remarriages—which conform to federally recommended standards—is essential to planning and assessing sound policy in this area. Yet the adequacy of marriage and divorce statistics varies widely among the states, and at least three states do not publish marriage and divorce data. In general, state marriage and divorce data are uneven in quality and reliability and are only getting worse.³ Moreover, with the exception of Oklahoma, states that have enacted new marriage policies or programs have not done research to try to understand the patterns of family formation and dissolution in their states.⁴

State Activities

Reducing Policy Barriers for Two-Parent Families

The 1996 welfare reform law allowed states the flexibility to change eligibility rules of the predecessor program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, that made it more difficult to give public assistance benefits to two-parent families (whether married or unmarried) than to one-parent fam-

ilies with the same income. States have used this flexibility and taken other steps to remove the special barriers two-parent families faced in accessing cash assistance and other benefits.⁵

- **Reducing financial barriers to two-parent families in TANF.**

Thirty-five states now determine TANF eligibility without imposing stricter work requirements on two-parent families than on single-parent families.

- **Forgiving child support arrears upon marriage.**

In low-income families, non-custodial parents often owe substantial back child support. Vermont and Tennessee forgive child support arrears that a non-custodial parent may owe to the state if the parents marry or, if formerly married, reunite—in order to avoid saddling the new union with the stress of paying off a large debt.

- **Increasing participation rates of two-parent families in Medicaid.**

Many states have made it easier for two-parent families to receive Medicaid through a variety of methods—for example, by abandoning the more stringent work-related requirements on two-parent families or by disregarding a portion of income and assets.

- **Offering Policy Incentives for Marriage in TANF**

Several states seek to provide specific marriage incentives to TANF recipients. For example, Alabama, Mississippi, and Oklahoma disregard the income of a new spouse for three to six months in calculating eligibility for benefits under TANF. West Virginia adds a \$100 marriage

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is the second in a series of **Couples and Marriage Policy Briefs**. The series is informed by a **“Marriage-Plus” perspective, which has two main goals centered on the well-being of children: (1) to help more children grow up in healthy, married families and (2) when this isn’t possible, to help parents—whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried—cooperate better in raising their children.**

Future briefs will cover the following topics, among others:

- **What is the effect of family structure on child well-being?**
- **How important is male “marriageability” to understanding the rise in single parenthood in low-income populations?**

known about how the changes in welfare policy and the other activities described here are actually being implemented or whether any of them are having the desired effects on behavior.² CLASP plans to release a more detailed state-by-state report of marriage initiatives this winter (see box on p. 3).

Inclusion in this brief does not imply endorsement by CLASP or the authors. In fact, while some of the activities appear promising and

“incentive” to the monthly cash TANF benefit of any family that includes a married couple. In Colorado, a bill passed the state House in 2001 that would have permitted county welfare agencies to give welfare recipients a cash “bonus or incentive” upon marriage (or, as some dubbed it, a “dowry”). The bill was defeated in the state Senate.

Setting Forth Public Goals to Reduce Divorce and Strengthen Marriage

Several states and increasing numbers of communities have declared reducing divorce and strengthening marriage as public goals, sometimes with specific numerical objectives and dedicated funding. The stated rationale is usually to improve the lives of children, but some jurisdictions also cite the benefits of healthy marriage for adults, communities, and the economy. Some states and communities have established commissions and other forums to study and plan what actions to take to strengthen marriage. Examples of states and communities that have set public goals include:

- **Oklahoma:** In 1999, Governor Frank Keating announced in his State of the State Address a goal to reduce the state divorce rate by one-third within 10 years and hosted a statewide conference to solicit ideas for how to accomplish the goal. This meeting was the first step in what is now known as the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. In 2000, the state set aside \$10 million of unspent TANF funds for activities designed to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce.

- **Utah:** In 1998, Governor Michael Leavitt established a Commission on Marriage and signed a proclamation stating that marriage is important to the public good. Two years later, the Commission was awarded \$600,000 in unspent TANF funds for four specific projects designed to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

- **Washington state:** In 2002, after several years of encouraging churches to implement Community Marriage Agreements, Families Northwest, a non-profit organization, has launched a 10-year campaign designed to mobilize major sectors in the state to collaborate in promoting activities and new legislation to strengthen marriage.⁶

- **Greater Grand Rapids, Michigan:** In 1996, the Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy, a multi-sector, public/private initiative, established three 10-year goals: reducing the divorce rate by 25 percent, reducing the out-of-wedlock birth rate by 25 percent, and making thorough premarital preparation the norm throughout communities in the state.

Creating Public Education Efforts to Promote Marriage

Several states and communities have implemented initiatives to inform the public about the benefits of marriage, the negative effects of divorce on adults and children, and ways to achieve stronger marriages:

- **Marriage handbooks** are given to couples applying for marriage licenses in Arizona and Florida. Such handbooks typically outline

spouses' legal rights and responsibilities and provide information about how to build strong marriages, about the effects of divorce, and about available community resources. In Utah, couples are given an educational videotape.

COMING SOON!

A State-by-State Report on Marriage Initiatives

This winter, CLASP will release a report documenting actions states and communities have taken since the mid-1990s to reduce the high rates of divorce and to encourage and strengthen marriage. This report will identify the full range of activities currently underway in this new area of public policy, both those funded by TANF and by other sources, organized in a state-by-state format.

- **Marriage summits or conferences** involving stakeholders in government, health, business, education, and other fields have been held in Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Carolina, among other states.
- **Public service announcements (PSAs)** focusing on the benefits of marriage and the skills required to make marriages work have appeared on radio, TV, and billboards and in newspapers in Washington state, Greater Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Louisiana is planning to produce PSAs in 2003.
- **Relationships skills and marriage education for youth.** The Florida Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act of 1998

requires that marriage skills education be offered to all high school students. In at least four other states, schools offer courses or classes in relationships skills and/or marriage education to high school students on a voluntary basis.⁷

Reforming Marriage and Divorce Law

State law governs the conditions and terms under which couples can marry and divorce and defines the rights and responsibilities of married, separating, and divorced couples. Since the mid-1990s, several states have amended laws and regulations to encourage premarital education, discourage divorce, and encourage better co-parenting by divorcing couples. Examples of these efforts include:

- **Reduction of marriage license fees** for couples who attend a four-hour premarital education course is one of the components of the 1998 Florida Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act. Couples who do not attend such courses also have to wait longer before they can marry. Maryland and Minnesota have enacted similar marriage license fee reduction laws, with Minnesota requiring couples to take a 12-hour course, including conflict resolution and communication skills.
- **Covenant marriage laws** have been enacted in Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Generally, these laws offer couples who apply for marriage licenses the option of a covenant marriage contract, which requires them to take premarital counseling by a counselor or clergy, seek counseling before applying for

divorce, and submit to longer waiting periods before a divorce is granted. Some form of covenant marriage legislation has been introduced in an additional 24 states.

- **Requiring divorcing parents to attend cooperative parenting classes.** Eight states require divorcing parents to attend classes or counseling sessions on the effects of divorce on children. These classes generally emphasize the importance of good communication and cooperation between divorced parents in raising their children. Another 11 states have laws allowing courts to order parents to attend these classes.⁸

Strengthening Existing Programs That Affect Family Formation

Efforts to strengthen marriage need not be restricted to launching new programs. Promising although limited research finds that some income support and other programs can make a difference in reducing teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock birth rates and enhancing marital and family stability—even when they do not focus on marriage explicitly. This should not be surprising since poverty and many other sources of stress can both inhibit and break up marriages and couple relationships.⁹ Such programs include:

- **Expanding programs and activities to reduce teen pregnancy.** Arizona, Michigan, and North Carolina, among other states, have made major investments in teen pregnancy prevention in recent years.¹⁰

- **Tightening paternity establishment and child support enforcement** to give a clear message to men and women alike that non-custodial parents will be held financially accountable for their children. Some research finds that states with the highest paternity establishment rates and toughest child support programs have been found to have lower out-of-wedlock birth rates and reduced marital breakup.¹¹

- **Providing increased income to low-income working families.** In the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), a demonstration welfare-to-work waiver project, enhancing the earnings disregard was found to significantly reduce divorce rates and increase marriage rates among single-parent long-term recipients. The program also significantly reduced domestic violence.¹²

- **Supporting in-home visitation programs** for high-risk families. Twenty-one states have created TANF-funded home visiting programs. Studies of demonstration nurse home visiting programs have found reduced births among unmarried mothers, increased self-sufficiency, and a greater likelihood that the mothers were living with their child's father or another partner.¹³

- **Offering employment services to low-income fathers** (married or unmarried). Many low-income fathers have the same lack of education, skills, and work experience as their children's mothers. Community-based responsible fatherhood programs have been offering such services to fathers.

Some recommend that this would be a useful policy strategy to expand in order to increase fathers' capacity to pay child support, to make them more attractive as marriage partners, or, if they are already married, to stabilize their marriages.¹⁴

Strengthening Couple Relationships and Cooperative Parenting Through Education

A growing number of states and communities are planning or have already set up programs to strengthen marriage through couples and marriage education.¹⁵ This new field grew out of research on what makes marriages and relationships succeed or fail. The programs vary considerably in length, content, format, and the setting in which they are offered. However, with only one exception (PREP relationship education), none of these programs have been evaluated to determine their long-term effects. Although growing in popularity, they are not yet widely available, especially in low-income communities. In general, the curricula aim to change attitudes, dispel myths, and teach relationships skills to individuals and couples at various life stages—high school students, dating adults, engaged couples, the newly married, marriages in crisis, remarried couples, and so forth. The following are some examples:

- **Offering couples and marriage education programs.** Oklahoma is using TANF dollars to train state employees, community professionals, and pastors to offer Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) relationship classes¹⁶ in every county in the state, especially to low-income couples.

In addition, the program is being adapted to reach special populations, such as Head Start families, new parents in home visiting programs, parents in youth services programs, and prison inmates and their partners.

- **Establishing demonstration programs for “fragile families.”** These programs offer a variety of educational services and economic and social supports to “fragile,” low-income, unwed families—especially first-time parents around the birth of their child. Michigan has funded five pilot demonstration programs using TANF monies designed to improve relationships between new, unmarried mothers, their infants, and, when possible, the fathers.

- **Adopting Community Marriage Policies[®].**¹⁷ In about 150 communities nationwide, churches have signed community marriage policies, pledging to require serious premarital education for any couple they marry and committing to increasing their capacity to help prepare and support these couples, primarily by training couples in their congregations to serve as marriage mentors.

- **Establishing fatherhood initiatives** that focus, in part, on improving non-custodial or unmarried fathers' relationships with their children and their children's mothers. Five state-wide programs include an educational piece on marriage as a route toward responsible fatherhood, as well as a focus on improving parenting skills and relationships generally.

- **Promoting marriage- and family-friendly employment policies.** For many years, branches of the armed services have provided special housing benefits for married couples and offered education and support programs to relieve the stress of military life on couples and reduce the high incidence of family violence. In 2001, the Army launched a new, six-site demonstration program, Building Strong and Ready Families (BSRF), which provides an enriched PREP program to married soldiers, particularly those who are experiencing difficulty or in crisis.¹⁸ The Greater Grand Rapids Community Initiative is urging area businesses to institute more family- and marriage-friendly policies, including marriage education as an employee assistance benefit.

What Next?

Guidelines for Considering Marriage Promotion Activities

Whatever the outcome of the federal debate about marriage promotion in TANF reauthorization, it is likely that states and communities will continue to experiment with programs to strengthen marriage and reduce out-of-wedlock child-bearing and divorce. What criteria should they consider in selecting and designing programs and policy? First of all, it is important to reiterate that little is known about the efficacy of most of the activities described here. Moreover, many people express legitimate concerns about the propriety of government efforts to promote marriage. For example, some are worried that focusing new resources on marriage may discriminate against different

types of family structure, such as single individuals, children living with single parents, or families led by cohabiting or gay parents. Others fear that policies that reward marriage financially may encourage too early or hasty marriages. Still others are concerned that the eagerness to promote marriage and require counseling or co-parenting classes for divorcing parents ignores the realities of domestic violence.¹⁹

Below is a set of guidelines and questions to help assess the potential merits or disadvantages of activities in this area. They are based on the principles of a “Marriage-Plus” perspective (see box on p. 2).²⁰

- **Maintain child well-being as the central goal of all proposals related to family formation.** What are the desired results of this new policy or program? How are these related to the well-being of children in this generation and the next? What is being done to help children for whom their parents’ marriage is not feasible or desirable?
- **Focus efforts on promoting healthy marriage and co-parenting relationships, not marriage *per se*.** Does the proposal focus on making marriage better to be in, rather than harder to get out of? Does it recognize that sometimes helping individuals decide *not* to marry or decide to leave an abusive or high-conflict marriage is a desirable outcome?
- **Be alert to potential negative effects of the policy or program.** What could be the inadvertent negative effects of the proposal and how can the program be modified to guard against them? For example, are

the services being offered on a voluntary basis?

- **Create broad public support for the program/policy** by seeking input in its design and implementation from representatives of diverse perspectives. For example, have leaders from the domestic violence community been closely involved? Have other potential critics of the program been included?
- **Collaborate with other sectors whenever possible—promoting marriage is not just the government’s business.** What is being done to encourage the involvement of other sectors to assist with the new initiative or program (such as businesses, faith-based organizations, health care professionals, educators, the media, and nonprofits)? What is being done to assure that couples receiving preventive/educational services will be referred for more specialized services if they are needed (e.g., substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health services)?

In addition, policymakers should select or design any new marriage-related activities based on the best theory and research evidence available and should invest in monitoring and evaluating their effects—both intended and unintended.

Conclusion

States and communities are leading the way in developing new policies and programs to promote marriage—using a surprisingly wide range of approaches. Yet, couples and marriage policy remains a new field, and very little is known about the effectiveness of these activities—or the unintended consequences

that may result. This would argue for caution in expanding marriage promotion policies and programs. Creativity, common sense, experimentation, and evaluation should be the watchwords as states and communities move forward.

Endnotes

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2 There is a paucity of evidence on how TANF has influenced family formation thus far. According to a recent brief from Abt Associates: “Researchers evaluating the effects of welfare reforms have focused almost entirely on economic outcomes and have paid limited attention to demographic outcomes.” Fein, D.J., Lindberg, L.D., London, R.A., & Mauldon, J. (2002, June). *Welfare Reform and Family Formation: Assessing the Effects*. A research brief from the Welfare Reform and Family Formation project. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates, Inc.

3 See Gardiner, K., et al. (2002, March).

4 As part of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, Oklahoma State University conducted a baseline state-wide survey on marriage and divorce, with a special focus on low-income individuals. See Johnson, C.A., Stanley, S.M., Glenn, N.D., Amato, P.R., Nock, S.L., Markman, H.J., & Dion, M.R. (2001). *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce*. Oklahoma City: Bureau for Social Research, Oklahoma State University.

5 For more details, see Gardiner, K., et al. (2002, March) and Bouchet, S., Ooms, T., & Parke, M. (in press). *State-by-State Profiles of Policy and Program Activities to Strengthen Marriage*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

6 Krasky, K.J. (2002). *Northwest Marriage and Family Movement: Strategy Blueprints for Families Northwest's Ten-Year Cultural Campaign*. Bellevue, WA: Families Northwest. Available at: www.familiesnorthwest.org

7 See www.smartmarriages.com for a description of the seven best-known curricula for high school students and where they are being used.

8 See Gardiner, K., et al. (2002, March).

9 Ooms, T. (2002, August). Marriage and Government: Strange Bedfellows? *CLASP Policy Brief, Couples and Marriage Series, 1*, 1-8.

10 Karen Troccoli, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (personal communication, September 18, 2002). Since 80

percent of teen births are non-marital, reducing teen pregnancy rates is seen as a key strategy for reducing the number of out-of-wedlock births.

11 Plotnick, R.D., Garfinkel, I., Gaylin, D.S., McLanhan, S.S., & Ku, L. (1998). *Better Child Support Enforcement: Can It Reduce Teenage Premarital Childbearing?* Paper presented at the Population Association of America Conference in Chicago; Nixon, L.A. (1997). The effect of child support enforcement on marital dissolution, *Journal of Human Resources, 32*(1), 159-181.

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14 Horn, W.F., & Sawhill, I.V. (2001). Fathers, marriage, and welfare reform. In R. Blank & R. Haskins (Eds.), *The New World of Welfare* (pp. 421-441). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; Reichert, D. (1991, July). *Broke But Not Deadbeat: Reconnecting Low-Income Fathers and Children*. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, see p. viii.

15 See www.smartmarriages.com for description of curricula, a program directory, and related articles and reports.

16 PREP is a curriculum developed by Scott Stanley and Howard Markman at the Center for Marriage and Family Studies,

University of Denver. Several evaluations of PREP have found promising results five years later, including improving couple communication and reducing divorce. For a description of the curriculum and articles on the evaluations of the program, see www.prepinc.com.

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17 Community Marriage Policy is a registered trademark of Marriage Savers. For more information, see www.marriagesavers.org.

18 Bloomstrom, G.L. (2002, March). Army Building Strong and Ready Families Program. *NCFR Report, 47*(1), F11-F15.

19 Separated women experience intimate partner violence at significantly higher rates than married, divorced, or never-married women. See Rennison, C.M., & Welchans, S. (2001, October). *Intimate Partner Violence and Age of Victim*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Figure 4, p. 5.

20 See Ooms, T. (2002). Marriage-plus. *American Prospect, 13*(7), 24-29; Ooms, T. (2002, August). Marriage and Government: Strange Bedfellows? *CLASP Policy Brief, Couples and Marriage Series, 1*, 1-8.

Couples and Marriage Series

October 2002
Brief No. 2

ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series will focus on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

This series of briefs is made possible, in part, by funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It was inspired by a meeting held at the Wingspread Conference Center in December 2000, which was co-sponsored by the Johnson, Casey, Ford, Gund, and Rockefeller Foundations.

CLASP POLICY BRIEF

Couples and Marriage Series, No. 2

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