

Executive Summary Background

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Understanding the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative

Robert E. Rector and Melissa G. Pardue

The erosion of marriage throughout the past four decades has had large-scale negative effects on both children and adults and lies at the heart of many social problems with which government currently grapples. The beneficial effects of marriage on individuals and society are beyond reasonable dispute, and there is a broad and growing consensus that government policy should promote rather than discourage healthy marriage.

Recognizing the widespread benefits of marriage to individuals and society, the federal welfare reform legislation enacted in 1996 set forth clear goals to increase the number of two-parent families and to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing. Regrettably, in the years since reform, most states have done very little to directly advance this objective. Out of more than \$100 billion in federal TANF funds disbursed over the past seven years, only about \$20 million (a minuscule 0.02 percent) has been spent on promoting marriage.

President Bush's Initiative to Promote Healthy Marriage. To deal with this shortcoming, President George W. Bush has sought to meet the original goals of welfare reform by proposing, as part of welfare reauthorization, a new model program to promote healthy marriage. The proposed program would seek to increase healthy marriage by providing individuals and couples with:

- Accurate information on the value of marriage in the lives of men, women, and children;

- Marriage-skills education that will enable couples to reduce conflict and increase the happiness and longevity of their relationship; and
- Experimental reductions in the financial penalties against marriage that are currently contained in all federal welfare programs.

All participation in the President's marriage program would be voluntary. The initiative would utilize existing marriage-skills education programs that have proven effective in decreasing conflict and increasing happiness and stability among couples; these programs have also been shown to be effective in reducing domestic violence. The pro-marriage initiative would not merely seek to increase marriage rates among target couples, but also would provide ongoing support to help at-risk couples maintain healthy marriages over time.

The plan would not create government bureaucracies to provide marriage training. Instead, the government would contract with private organizations that have track records of success in providing marriage-skills education.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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A Future-Oriented Policy. The President's healthy marriage initiative is a future-oriented, preventive policy.

It will foster better life-planning skills—encouraging couples to develop loving, committed marriages before bringing children into the world rather than having children before trust and commitment between parents has been established.

It will encourage couples to reexamine and improve their relationships and plan wisely for the future rather than stumbling blindly into a child-birth for which neither parent may be prepared.

The program would also provide marriage-skills education to married couples to improve their relationships and reduce the probability of divorce.

By providing young couples with the tools needed to build healthy, stable marriages, the marriage initiative would substantially reduce future rates of welfare dependence, child poverty, domestic violence, and other social ills.

Conclusion. There is now broad bipartisan recognition that healthy marriage is a natural protec-

tive institution that, in most cases, promotes the well-being of men, women, and children and that it is the foundation of a healthy society. Yet, for decades, government policy has remained indifferent or hostile to marriage. Government programs sought merely to pick up the pieces as marriages failed or, worse, actively undermined marriage.

President Bush seeks to change this policy of indifference and hostility. There is no group that will gain more from this change than low-income single women, most of whom hope for a happy, healthy marriage in their future. President Bush seeks to provide young couples with the knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish their dreams. The Senate would be wise to affirm their support for marriage by passing welfare reform reauthorization and enacting the President's healthy marriage initiative.

—Robert E. Rector is Senior Research Fellow in Domestic Policy Studies, and Melissa G. Pardue is a Policy Analyst in the Domestic Policy Studies Department, at The Heritage Foundation.

Background

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Understanding the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative

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The erosion of marriage during the past four decades has had large-scale negative effects on both children and adults: It lies at the heart of many of the social problems with which the government currently grapples. The beneficial effects of marriage on individuals and society are beyond reasonable dispute, and there is a broad and growing consensus that government policy should promote rather than discourage healthy marriage.

In response to these trends, President George W. Bush has proposed—as part of welfare reform reauthorization—the creation of a pilot program to promote healthy and stable marriage. Participation in the program would be strictly voluntary. Funding for the program would be small-scale: \$300 million per year. This sum represents *one penny* to promote healthy marriage for every *five dollars* government currently spends to subsidize single parenthood. Moreover, this small investment today could result in potentially great savings in the future by reducing dependence on welfare and other social services.

The Importance of Marriage

Today, nearly one-third of all American children are born outside marriage. That's one out-of-wedlock birth every 35 seconds. Of those born inside marriage, a great many children will experience their parents' divorce before they reach age 18. More than half of the children in the United States will spend all or part of their childhood in never-formed or broken families.

Talking Points

- Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of marriage to families and society, by the very nature of its means-tested programs, the welfare system has penalized and discouraged marriage for more than four decades.
- The President's Healthy Marriage Initiative would spend just one penny to promote strong marriages for every five dollars the government currently spends to subsidize single parenthood.
- The initiative would provide individuals and couples marriage-skills and relationship-skills training and would include experimental reductions in the financial penalties against marriage that are currently contained in all federal welfare programs.
- All participation in the President's marriage program would be voluntary.

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The collapse of marriage is the principal cause of child poverty in the United States. Children raised by never-married mothers are seven times more likely to live in poverty than children raised by their biological parents in intact marriages. Overall, approximately 80 percent of long-term child poverty in the United States occurs among children from broken or never-formed families.

It is often argued that strengthening marriage would have little impact on child poverty because absent fathers earn too little. This is not true: The typical non-married father earns \$17,500 per year at the time his child is born. Some 70 percent of poor single mothers would be lifted out of poverty if they were married to their children's father. This is illustrated in Chart 1, which uses data from the Princeton Fragile Families and Child Well-being Survey—a well-known survey of couples who are unmarried at the time of a child's birth. If the mothers remain single and do not marry the fathers of their children, some 55 percent will be poor. However, if the mothers married the fathers, the poverty rate would drop to 17 percent. (This analysis is based on the fathers' actual earnings in the year before the child's birth.)¹

The growth of single-parent families has had an enormous impact on government. The welfare system for children is overwhelmingly a subsidy system for single-parent families. Some three-quarters of the aid to children—given through programs such as food stamps, Medicaid, public housing, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and the Earned Income Tax Credit—goes to single-parent families. (See Chart 2.) Each year, government spends over \$150 billion in means-tested welfare aid for single parents.²

Growing up without a father in the home has harmful long-term effects on children. Compared with similar children from intact families, children raised in single-parent homes are more likely to become involved in crime, to have emotional and behavioral problems, to fail in school, to abuse drugs, and to end up on welfare as adults.³

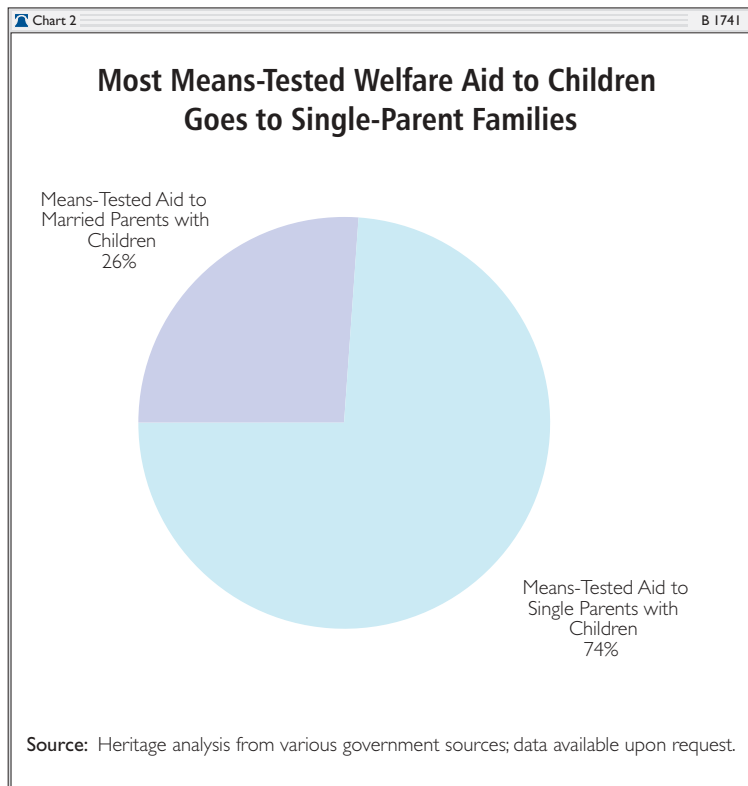
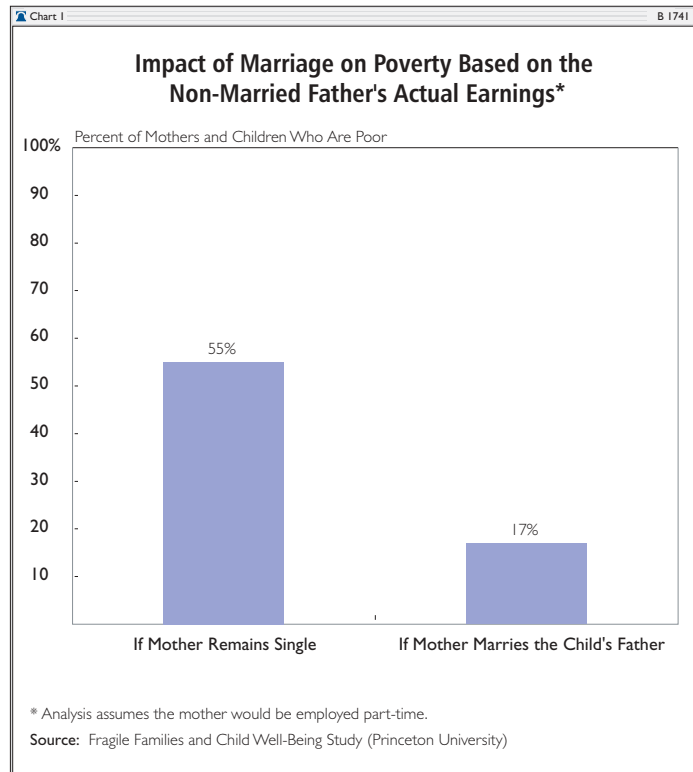
Finally, marriage also brings benefits to adults. Extensive research shows that married adults are happier, are more productive on the job, earn more, have better physical and mental health, and live longer than their unmarried counterparts. Marriage also brings safety to women: Mothers who have married are half as likely to suffer from domestic violence as are never-married mothers.⁴

The Growing Consensus on Promoting Healthy Marriage

The overwhelming evidence of the positive benefits of marriage for children, women, and men has led to a large and growing consensus that government policy should strengthen marriage—not undermine it. William Galston, former Domestic Policy Adviser in the Clinton White House, has stated: “Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike Whether American Society succeeds or fails in building a healthy marriage culture is clearly a matter of legitimate public concern.”⁵

Former Vice President Al Gore has proclaimed, “We need to be a society that lifts up the institution of marriage.”⁶ Mr. Gore and his wife have concurred with the Statement of Principles of the Marriage Movement, which declares:⁷

1. For more information on this point, see Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Patrick F. Fagan, and Lauren R. Noyes, “Increasing Marriage Will Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty,” Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. CDA03-06, May 20, 2003.
2. Robert Rector, “The Size and Scope of Means-Tested Welfare Spending,” testimony before the Committee on the Budget, U.S. House of Representatives, August 1, 2001.
3. Patrick Fagan, Robert Rector, Kirk Johnson, and America Peterson, *The Positive Effects of Marriage: A Book of Charts* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, April 2002), at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Features/Marriage/index.cfm>.
4. Robert E. Rector, Patrick F. Fagan, and Kirk A. Johnson, “Marriage: Still the Safest Place for Women and Children,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1732, March 9, 2004.
5. *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-one Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, Institute for American Values, New York, 2000, p. 6.
6. Scott Shepard, “Gore Outlines Reforms to Make Absent Fathers More Responsible,” Cox News, June 3, 2000, at http://www.cox-news.com/2000/news/cox/060300_gore.html (December 9, 2002).



We believe that America must strengthen marriages and families. . . . Strong marriages are a vital component to building strong families and raising healthy, happy, well-educated children. Fighting together against the forces that undermine family values, and creating a national culture that nurtures and encourages marriage and good family life, must be at the heart of this great nation's public policy.⁸

Will Marshall, of the Progressive Policy Institute, and Isabel Sawhill, widely respected welfare and family expert at the Brookings Institution, recently issued a paper entitled "Progressive Family Policy for the 21st Century." Marshall and Sawhill repudiate "the relativist myth that 'alternative family forms' were the equal of two-parent families," citing a growing body of evidence showing that—in aggregate—children do best in married, two-parent families. They argue that "a progressive family policy should encourage and reinforce married, two-parent families because they are best for children."⁹

Policy Background

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of marriage to families and society, the sad fact is that, for more than four decades, the welfare system has penalized and discouraged marriage. The U.S. welfare system is currently composed of more than 70 means-tested aid programs providing cash, food, housing, medical care, and social services to low-income persons. Each year, over \$200 billion flows through this system to families with children. While it is widely accepted that the welfare system is biased against marriage, relatively few understand how this bias operates. Many erroneously believe that welfare programs have eligibility criteria that directly exclude married couples. This is not true.

Nevertheless, welfare programs do penalize marriage and reward single parenthood because of the inherent design of all means-tested programs. In a means-tested program, benefits are reduced as non-welfare income rises. Thus, under any means-tested system, a mother will receive greater benefits if she remains single than she would if she were married to a working husband. Welfare not only serves as a substitute for a husband, but it actually penalizes marriage because a low-income couple will experience a significant drop in combined income if they marry.

For example: A typical single mother on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families receives a combined welfare package of various means-tested aid benefits worth about \$14,000 per year. Suppose the father of her children has a low-wage job paying \$16,000 per year. If the mother and father remain unmarried, they will have a combined income of \$30,000 (\$14,000 from welfare and \$16,000 from earnings). However, if the couple marries, the father's earnings will be counted against the mother's welfare eligibility. Welfare benefits will be eliminated (or cut dramatically), and the couple's combined income will fall substantially. Thus, means-tested welfare programs do not penalize marriage *per se* but, instead, implicitly penalize marriage to an employed man with earnings. The practical effect is to significantly discourage marriage among low-income couples.

This anti-marriage discrimination is inherent in all means-tested aid programs, including TANF, food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food program. The only way to eliminate the anti-marriage bias from welfare entirely would be to make all mothers eligible for these programs regardless of whether they are married and regardless of their husbands' earnings. Structured in this way, the welfare system would be

7. The Marriage Movement consists of a coalition of organizations that have joined together to encourage and strengthen marriage. The Statement of Principles details the current "marriage crisis," refutes arguments against marriage, defines marriage, explains the importance of marriage and the costs of divorce, describes several ongoing pro-marriage movements, and outlines a call to action for government entities, married couples, and others. See <http://www.marriagemovement.org/html/report.html> (December 16, 2002).
8. Former Vice President Al Gore and Tipper Gore, signed letter to "Supporters of The Marriage Movement, c/o Institute for American Values," from the Gore Campaign 2000, July 1, 2000.
9. Will Marshall and Isabel Sawhill, "Progressive Family Policy in the 21st Century," presented at the Maxwell Conference on Public Policy and the Family, Syracuse University, October 24–25, 2002.

marriage-neutral: It would neither reward nor penalize marriage.

Such across-the-board change, however, would cost tens of billions of dollars. A more feasible strategy would be to experiment by selectively reducing welfare's anti-marriage incentives to determine which penalties have the biggest behavioral impact. This approach is incorporated in the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative.

President Bush's Initiative to Promote Healthy Marriage

In recognition of the widespread benefits of marriage to individuals and society, the federal welfare reform legislation enacted in 1996 set forth clear goals: to increase the number of two-parent families and to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing. Regrettably, in the years since this reform, most states have done very little to advance these objectives directly. Out of more than \$100 billion in federal TANF funds disbursed over the past seven years, only about \$20 million—a miniscule 0.02 percent—has been spent on promoting marriage.

Recognizing this shortcoming, President Bush has sought to meet the original goals of welfare reform by proposing a new model program to promote healthy marriage as a part of welfare reauthorization. The proposed program would seek to increase healthy marriage by providing individuals and couples with:

- Accurate information on the value of marriage in the lives of men, women, and children;
- Marriage-skills education that will enable couples to reduce conflict and increase the happiness and longevity of their relationship; and
- Experimental reductions in the financial penalties against marriage that are currently contained in all federal welfare programs.

All participation in the President's marriage program would be voluntary. The initiative would utilize existing marriage-skills education programs that have proven effective in decreasing conflict and increasing happiness and stability among couples. These programs have also been shown to be effective

in reducing domestic violence.¹⁰ The pro-marriage initiative would not merely seek to increase marriage rates among target couples, but also would provide ongoing support to help at-risk couples maintain healthy marriages over time.

The plan would not create government bureaucracies to provide marriage training. Instead, the government would contract with private organizations that have successful track records in providing marriage-skills education.

The President's Healthy Marriage Initiative is often characterized as seeking to increase marriage among welfare (TANF) recipients. This is somewhat inaccurate. Most welfare mothers have poor relationships with their children's father: In many cases, the relationship disintegrated long ago. Attempting to promote healthy marriage in these situations is a bit like trying to glue Humpty-Dumpty together after he has fallen off the wall. By contrast, a well-designed marriage initiative would target women and men earlier in their lives when attitudes and relationships were initially being formed. It would also seek to strengthen existing marriages to reduce divorce.

Typically, marriage promotion programs would provide information about the long-term value of marriage to at-risk high school students. They would teach relationship skills to unmarried couples before the woman became pregnant with a focus on preventing pregnancy before a couple has made a commitment to healthy marriage. Marriage programs would also provide marriage and relationship education to unmarried couples at the "magic moment" of a child's birth and offer marriage-skills training to low-income married couples to improve marriage quality and reduce the likelihood of divorce.

The primary focus of marriage programs would be preventative—not reparative. The programs would seek to prevent the isolation and poverty of welfare mothers by intervening at an early point before a pattern of broken relationships and welfare dependence had emerged. By fostering better life decisions and stronger relationship skills, marriage programs can increase child well-being and adult

10. Patrick F. Fagan, Robert W. Patterson, and Robert E. Rector, "Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence That Marriage Education Works," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1606, October 25, 2002.

happiness, and reduce child poverty and welfare dependence.

Program Specifics

The President's Healthy Marriage Initiative has been included in the two major TANF reauthorization bills. One of these is the Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Promotion Act of 2003 (H.R. 4) that was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in May 2002 and again in February 2003. The Healthy Marriage Initiative has also been included in the Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone (PRIDE) bill introduced by Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) in the U.S. Senate.

The proposal would create two separate funds to promote marriage. In the first, \$100 million per year would be provided in grants to state governments for programs to promote healthy marriage. Participation in this funding program would be voluntary and competitive. States would neither be required to participate nor guaranteed funds: Instead, they would compete for funding by submitting program proposals to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The states with the best proposals would be selected to receive funds. States receiving funding would be required to match federal grants with state funds. In the second fund, another \$100 million per year would be allocated in competitive grants to states, local governments, and non-government organizations.

Both funding pools could be used for a specified set of activities consistent with the overarching strategy of promoting healthy marriage. These activities would include:

- Public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and the skills needed to increase marital stability and health;
- Education in high schools about the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting;
- Marriage education, marriage-skills instruction, and relationship-skills programs—which may include parenting skills, financial management,

conflict resolution, and job and career advancement for non-married pregnant women and non-married expectant fathers;

- Pre-marital education and marriage-skills training for engaged couples and for couples or individuals interested in marriage;
- Marriage-enhancement and marriage-skills training for married couples;
- Divorce-reduction programs that teach relationship skills;
- Marriage mentoring programs that use married couples as role models and mentors in at-risk communities; and
- Programs to reduce the disincentives to marriage in means-tested aid programs, if offered in conjunction with any of the above activities.

Much of the debate about marriage-strengthening will center on this list of allowable uses of the marriage funds. Opponents of the President's initiative will seek to broaden the list to include activities that have little or no link to marriage. The effort to broaden the program to include standard government services such as job training, day care, and contraceptive promotion (all of which are already amply funded through other programs) would dissipate the limited funds available and render the program meaningless.¹¹

Criticisms of the President's Plan

The President's Healthy Marriage Initiative has been criticized on a number of grounds. Each of these criticisms is inaccurate.

- **Individuals will be forced to participate in the program.** Critics charge that welfare mothers would be forced to participate in marriage education. In fact, all participation would be voluntary. Services would be provided only to individuals or couples interested in receiving them.¹²
- **The program will increase domestic violence.** Critics charge that the program would increase

11. Robert E. Rector, Melissa G. Pardue, and Lauren R. Noyes, "Marriage Plus': Sabotaging the President's Efforts to Promote Healthy Marriage," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1677, August 22, 2003.

12. The Bush Administration has always been clear that individuals' participation in the program would be completely voluntary. The Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone (PRIDE) Act, introduced by Senator Grassley, contains specific language clarifying that point. See Section 103, p. 154 of the PRIDE legislation.

domestic violence by coercing or encouraging women to remain in dangerous relationships. In fact, marriage and relationship-skills training has been shown to reduce, not increase, domestic violence.¹³ Such programs help women steer clear of dangerous and counterproductive relationships.¹⁴ Moreover, domestic violence is less widespread among low-income couples than is generally assumed. For example, three-quarters of non-married mothers are romantically involved with the child's father at the time of the non-marital birth: Only 2 percent of these women have experienced domestic violence in their relationship with the father.¹⁵ In general, domestic violence is more common in cohabiting relationships than in marriage: Never-married mothers, for example, are twice as likely to experience domestic violence than are mothers who have married.

- **Marriage-skills programs are ineffective or unproven.** Critics charge that marriage-skills programs are ineffective. The facts show exactly the opposite: Over 100 separate evaluations of marriage training programs demonstrate that these programs can reduce strife, improve communications skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.¹⁶
- **The program will bribe couples to marry.** Critics charge that the marriage program will bribe low-income women to marry unwisely. This is not true. As noted, all means-tested welfare programs such as TANF, food stamps, and public housing contain significant financial penalties against marriage. The marriage program would experiment with selectively reducing these penalties against marriage.
- **The program is too expensive.** The President proposed spending \$300 million per year on his model marriage program (\$200 million in federal funds and \$100 million in state funds). This sum represents *one penny* spent to promote healthy marriage for every *five dollars* spent to subsidize single parenthood.¹⁷ This small investment would also help to avert future dependence on welfare.
- **The public opposes marriage promotion.** Critics claim that the public opposes programs to strengthen marriage. In fact, the state of Oklahoma has operated a marriage program similar to the President's proposal for several years. Most Oklahomans are familiar with this program; 85 percent of the state's residents support the program, and only 15 percent oppose it.¹⁸
- **The shortage of "marriageable men" makes marriage unlikely for most low-income women.** Critics argue that marriage is impractical in low-income communities because men earn too little to be attractive spouses. This is not true. As noted, nearly three-quarters of non-married mothers are cohabiting with, or are romantically involved with, the child's father at the time of the baby's birth. The median income of these non-married fathers is \$17,500 per year. Some 70 percent of poor single mothers would be lifted out of poverty if they married the father of their children.¹⁹
- **Low-income women are not interested in marriage.** Critics charge that low-income women are not interested in marriage and marriage-skills training. However, at the time of

13. Fagan *et al.*, "Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works."

14. Some critics seem to assume that marriage programs would encourage women to marry abusive boyfriends or would try to use marriage to improve an abusive relationship. No marriage program would do this, because all of them rest on the premise that marriage is inappropriate when significant physical abuse exists.

15. Rector *et al.*, "Increasing Marriage Will Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty."

16. Fagan *et al.*, "Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works," p. 7.

17. Rector, "The Size and Scope of Means-tested Welfare Spending."

18. Christine A. Johnson *et al.*, *Marriage in Oklahoma*, Oklahoma State University, Bureau for Social Research, June 2002, p. 31.

19. Rector *et al.*, "Increasing Marriage Will Dramatically Reduce Child Poverty." Data are taken from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study at Princeton University, at <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>. See also Wendy Sigle-Rushton, "For Richer or Poorer," Center for Research on Child Well-being, Princeton University, *Working Paper* 301-17FF, 2001.

their child's birth, more than 75 percent of non-married mothers say they are interested in marrying their child's father. In Oklahoma, 72 percent of women who have received welfare say that they are interested in receiving marriage-skills training.²⁰

- **Increasing male wages through job training is the key to increasing marriage.** Some argue that the key to getting low-income parents to marry is to raise the father's wages. This notion is inaccurate for several reasons.

First, unmarried fathers already earn, on average, \$17,500 per year at the time of their child's birth.

Second, data from the Fragile Families Survey show that male wage rates have very little to do with whether or not an unmarried father marries the mother of his child. Instead, the most important factors in determining whether or not couples marry after a child's birth are the couples' attitudes about marriage and their relationship skills.²¹ These are the precise attitudes and behaviors that would be targeted for change in the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative.

Third, the federal government already operates seven separate job-training programs and spends over \$6.2 billion per year on job training.²² Since the beginning of the War on Poverty, overall spending on job training has exceeded \$257 billion.²³ This spending has had no apparent effect on increasing marriage in the past: There is no reason to believe it would do so in the future.

Fourth, most government training programs are ineffective in raising wage rates. For example, a large-scale evaluation of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) showed that the program

raised the hourly wage rates of female trainees by only 3.4 percent and those of male trainees by zero.²⁴

Finally, under H.R. 4, and the PRIDE bill, job training may be provided, if needed, to individuals participating in marriage-skills and marriage-enhancement programs. However, any job training must be linked to marriage-skills training. To add job training as a stand-alone spending category within a "marriage" funding stream would cripple any future marriage program by diverting substantial funds into traditional job-training activities that have little to do with marriage.

- **Encouraging marriage at an early age is counterproductive.** The age at which women give birth out of wedlock is often underestimated. The issues of out-of-wedlock childbearing and teen pregnancy are generally confused: They are not the same. Most women who give birth outside marriage are in their early twenties. Only 10 percent of out-of-wedlock births occur to girls under age 18; 75 percent occur to women who are age 20 and older.

The focus of the Healthy Marriage Initiative would be on encouraging couples to form stable, committed relationships and to marry before pregnancy and childbirth occur. In many cases, this would involve delaying childbearing until couples were older and more mature. Thus, the goals of promoting healthy marriage and of postponing childbearing to a mature age are harmonious and mutually supportive. However, simply encouraging a delay in childbearing without increasing the incidence of healthy marriage would have only marginal benefits and would not be wise policy.

20. Johnson, *Marriage in Oklahoma*, p. 35.

21. Based on forthcoming analysis by The Heritage Foundation using data from the Princeton Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey.

22. Vee Burke, *Cash and Noncash Benefits for Persons with Limited Income: Eligibility Rules, Recipients and Expenditure Data, FY 1998–FY 2000*, November, 19, 2001, p. 221.

23. This figure represents federal job training expenditures from 1965 to 2000 in constant 2000 dollars.

24. Howard Bloom et al., *National JTPA Study Overview: Title II-A Impacts on Earnings and Employment at 18 Months*, Abt Associates Inc., January 1993.

- **Government should fund more pregnancy-prevention and contraceptive programs rather than marriage promotion.** Some urge that marriage promotion funds should be diverted to contraceptive programs on the grounds that, once women have had children out of wedlock, they are less likely to marry in the future. But the government already spends over \$1.7 billion per year on pregnancy prevention and contraceptive promotion through programs such as Medicaid, TANF, Adolescent Sexual Health, and Title X.²⁵ Overall, current funding for contraception/pregnancy-prevention dwarfs the proposed funding for marriage promotion. Diverting limited marriage funds to even more contraceptive programs would clearly cripple any marriage initiative.

However, as noted, the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative would promote the goal of preventing non-marital pregnancy in another broad sense. Marriage programs would encourage women to enter healthy marriages before becoming pregnant. In many cases, this would involve encouraging women to avoid pregnancy until they become more mature and more capable of sustaining a viable, healthy relationship. However, this approach would differ greatly from simply handing out contraceptives.

- **Promoting marriage is none of the government's business.** There are some who argue that, while marriage is a fine institution, the decision to marry or not to marry is a private decision in which the government should not be involved.²⁶ This argument is based on a misunderstanding of the government's current involvement in the issue of single-parenthood, as well a misunderstanding of the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative.

First, the government is already massively involved when marriages either fail to form or break apart. Each year, the government spends

over \$150 billion in subsidies to single parents. Much of this expenditure would have been avoided if the mothers were married to the fathers of their children. This cost represents government efforts to pick up the pieces and contain the damage when marriage fails. To insist that the government has an obligation to support single parents—and to control the damage that results from the erosion of marriage—but should do nothing to strengthen marriage itself is myopic. It is like arguing that the government should pay to sustain polio victims in iron lung machines but should not pay for the vaccine to prevent polio in the first place.

Second, the government is already heavily (and counterproductively) involved in individual marriage decisions, given that government welfare policies discourage marriage, by penalizing low-income couples who do marry and by rewarding those who do not. The President's Healthy Marriage Initiative would take the first steps to reduce these anti-marriage penalties.

Third, under the President's initiative, the government would not "intrude" into private matters concerning marriage, since all participation in the marriage promotion program would be voluntary. Nearly all Americans believe in the institution of marriage and hope for happy and long-lasting marriages for themselves and their children. Very few wish for a life marked by a series of acrimonious and broken relationships. The President's program would offer services to couples seeking to improve the quality of their relationships. It would provide couples seeking healthy and enduring marriages with skills and training to help them to achieve that goal. To refuse services and training to low-income couples who are actively seeking to improve their relationships because "marriage is none of the

25. See Melissa G. Pardue, Robert E. Rector, and Shannan Martin, "Government Spends \$12 on Safe Sex and Contraceptives for Every \$1 Spent on Abstinence," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1718, January 14, 2004.

26. For example, Senator Max Baucus has stated that he would oppose even modest funds to promote healthy marriage because "marriage is not something the government should interfere with." Senator Max Baucus, "Remarks on Welfare Reform Reauthorization," National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support, March 5, 2002.

government's business" is both cruel and short-sighted.

Finally, the government has a long-established interest in improving the well-being of children. For instance, the government funds Head Start because the program will ostensibly increase the ability of disadvantaged children to grow up to become happy and productive members of society. It is clear that healthy marriage has substantial, long-term, positive effects on children's development: Conversely, the absence of a father or the presence of strife within a home both have harmful effects on children. If government has a legitimate role in seeking to improve child well-being through programs such as Head Start, it has a far more significant role in assisting children by fostering healthy marriage within society.

Conclusion

More than 40 years ago, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan—at that time, a member of President Lyndon Johnson's White House staff—wrote poignantly of the social ills stemming from the decline of marriage in the black community. Since that time, the dramatic erosion of marriage has afflicted the white community as well. Today, the social and economic ills fostered by marital collapse have exceeded Senator Moynihan's worst expectations.

Tragically, when Senator Moynihan's prescient report on marriage and the family was released in the early 1960s, it was met with a firestorm of abuse. So vitriolic was the attack against Moynihan that a virtual wall of silence came to surround the issues he raised. For 30 years, nearly all public discussion about the importance of marriage, and the role that government policy played in either supporting or undermining it, was muffled. Meanwhile, marriage declined and out-of-wedlock childbearing soared. When Moynihan wrote his report in the early 1960s, 7 percent of all American children were born out of wedlock: Today, the number is 33 percent. To any objective observer, the link between the erosion of

marriage and high levels of child poverty and welfare dependence was obvious, but for decades, this topic was scrupulously avoided in public discussion.

In the early 1990s, the wall of silence surrounding the marriage issue began to crumble. In his 1993 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton spoke forcefully of the harm wrought by the decline of marriage in America.²⁷ His remarks echoed those of Moynihan 30 years earlier. By the late 1990s, most responsible individuals, on both the left and the right, had acknowledged the importance of marriage to the well-being of children, adults, and society. Most affirmed the need for government policies to strengthen marriage.

In response, President Bush has developed the Healthy Marriage Initiative: the first positive step toward strengthening the institution of marriage since the Moynihan report four decades ago. The proposal represents a strategy to increase healthy marriage—carefully crafted on the basis of all existing research on the topic of promoting and strengthening marriage.

The President's Healthy Marriage Initiative is a future-oriented, preventive policy. It will foster better life-planning skills—encouraging couples to develop loving, committed marriages before bringing children into the world, as opposed to having children before trust and commitment between the parents has been established. The marriage program will encourage couples to reexamine and improve their relationships and plan wisely for the future, rather than stumbling blindly into a childbirth for which neither parent may be prepared. The program will also provide marriage-skills education to married couples to improve their relationships and to reduce the probability of divorce.

Ideally, pro-marriage interventions for non-married couples would occur well before the conception of a child. A second—less desirable, but still fruitful—point of intervention would be at the time of a child's birth: a time when the majority of unmarried couples express an active interest in marriage. By providing young couples with the tools needed to

27. In his January 1994 State of the Union address, President Clinton forcefully lamented the decline of marriage, warning, "The American people have got to want to change from within if we're going to bring back work and family and community. We cannot renew our country when within a decade more than half of the children will be born into families where there has been no marriage."

build healthy, stable marriages, the Marriage Initiative would substantially reduce future rates of welfare dependence, child poverty, domestic violence, and other social ills.

There is now broad bipartisan recognition that healthy marriage is a natural protective institution that, in most cases, promotes the well-being of men, women, and children: It is the foundation of a healthy society. Yet, for decades, government policy has remained indifferent or hostile to marriage. Government programs sought merely to pick up the pieces as marriages failed or—worse—actively undermined marriage.

President Bush seeks to change this policy of indifference and hostility. There is no group that will gain more from this change than low-income single women, most of whom hope for a happy, healthy marriage in their future. President Bush seeks to provide young couples with the knowledge and skills to accomplish their dreams. The Senate would be wise to affirm their support for marriage by passing welfare reform reauthorization and enacting the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative.

—Robert E. Rector is Senior Research Fellow in Domestic Policy Studies, and Melissa G. Pardue is a Policy Analyst in the Domestic Policy Studies Department, at The Heritage Foundation.