



Healthy Marriage Matters to ACF

Background

Research suggests that all things being equal, children who grow up in healthy married, two-parent families do better on a host of outcomes than those who do not. Further, many social problems affecting children, families, and communities could be prevented if more children grew up in healthy, married families. Examples of social science findings include:

- Married couples seem to build more wealth, on average, than singles or cohabiting couples, thus decreasing the likelihood that their children will grow up in poverty.
- Children who live in a two-parent, married household enjoy better physical health, on average, than children in non-married households.
- Healthy marriages reduce the risk of adults and children either perpetrating, or being victimized by, violent crime.

Congress acknowledged the importance of married-couple families when it reformed the welfare system in 1996. The 1996 legislation stipulated that three out of the four purposes of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program either directly or indirectly promote healthy marriages. President Bush echoed this sentiment when he indicated that healthy marriages would be a focus of his administration. In proclaiming National Family Week in November 2001, he noted:

“My Administration is committed to strengthening the American family. Many one-parent families are also a source of comfort and reassurance, yet a family with a mom and dad who are committed to marriage and devote themselves to their children helps provide children a sound foundation for success. Government can support families by promoting policies that help strengthen the institution of marriage and help parents rear their children in positive and healthy environments.”

ACF Healthy Marriage Initiative

The Healthy Marriage Initiative is about *helping couples, who have already chosen marriage for themselves, gain greater access to marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage.* In practical terms, it involves:

- *Implementing demonstration projects.* In consultation with states and local communities, ACF is working to implement healthy marriage demonstration projects. These are broad-based efforts to work with key community sectors (e.g., local governments, businesses, civic organizations, non-profits) to strengthen marriages.
- *Emphasizing marriage in Federal programs.* ACF’s program offices are promoting healthy marriages in every appropriate program. For example, marriage education and enrichment services are being provided, alongside existing services, to low-income couples who utilize Refugee Resettlement, Children’s Bureau, Community Services, or TANF services.
- *Conducting research.* This initiative is using existing funds to explore the types of marriage strengthening services that exist and their effectiveness, so that future resources can be targeted more wisely.
- *Training.* The initiative is providing training about healthy marriage issues to interested Federal ACF staff.

This initiative is **not** about:

- Trapping anyone in an abusive or violent relationship.
- Forcing anyone to get or stay married.
- Running a federal dating service.
- Withdrawing supports from or diminishing in any way, either directly or indirectly, the important work of single parents.

Sources of Funding for Healthy Marriage Initiatives:

The pending House welfare reauthorization bill (HR 4) includes funding for healthy marriage education and research. To review the complete bill, go to <http://www.thomas.loc.gov> (search bill number HR 4).

Education. Section 103 of HR 4 indicates:

- *Amount of funds:* \$100 million, annually, for fiscal years 2003 to 2008.
- *Who can apply for funds:* States, Tribes and Territories; however, these three eligible applicants can allow private partners to help them implement the activities funded under the grant.
- *Required matching funds:* Grantees must provide a dollar for dollar match. Federal funds received for TANF can be used as match, and the match can be in-kind.
- *Allowable activities:* Funds provided shall be used to support any of the following eight programs or activities:
 - ♦ Public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and the skills needed to increase marital stability and health.
 - ♦ Education in high schools on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting.
 - ♦ Marriage education, marriage skills, and relationship skills programs, that 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 programs for married couples.
 - ♦ Divorce reduction programs that teach relationship skills.
 - ♦ Marriage mentoring programs which use married couples as role models and mentors in at-risk communities.
 - ♦ Programs to reduce the disincentives to marriage in means-tested aid programs, if offered in conjunction with any activity described in this subparagraph.

Research, Demonstrations and Technical Assistance. Section 115 of HR 4 provides for additional funding:

- *Amount of funds:* \$102 million annually from fiscal year 2003 through 2008.
- *Who may apply for funds:* Public or private entities.
- *Required matching funds:* None.
- *Allowable activities:* Research, technical assistance, and demonstration projects to be spent primarily on activities described above.

A comparable Senate bill is pending.

Additional Information: For more information, or to request technical assistance, visit the ACF website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/key.html>. Or contact Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education, at bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov or (202)260-1550.