



**Human Services Policy Center
Evans School of Public Affairs
&
The Center for Research on Families
University of Washington**

“Marriage, Poverty, and Child Well-Being”

**Thursday, December 5, 2002
Husky Union Building
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington**

Forum Proceedings

Summary of Wade Horn’s Presentation

PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY, PROTECTING CHILDREN AND STRENGTHENING MARRIAGE

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Introduced by Richard Brandon

Wade Horn: Summary

Dr. Horn pointed out that eight years ago policy-makers were asking, “Should government have anything at all to do with marriage?” Now they’re asking, “What should government do concerning marriage?” A growing body of empirical evidence indicates that, all other things being equal, kids do best when they grow up in the context of a two-parent married household.

Horn then outlined what the government should and should not do on the marriage-promotion front. On the “should not” list were coercion, matchmaking, encouragement to get into or stay in abusive relationships, withdrawal of support for single-parent households, promotion of marriage as the sole means of eliminating poverty, and equation of marriage with cohabitation. On the other hand, government “should” clarify that it’s interested in *healthy* marriage, not marriage *per se*; proactively try to remove disincentives to marriage; help couples develop conflict negotiation and problem-solving skills; help couples through mentoring or therapy; and help build the foundation for healthy marriage at the “magic moment” when an out-of-wedlock child is born.

The Bush administration has suggested that TANF reauthorization include the redirection of two pots of existing federal money – \$100 million for research and technical assistance innovation, and \$100 million for a voluntary, competitive, state matching-grant program in which states would match, dollar for dollar, the amount they are seeking from the federal government. Some states – those with specific legislative permission to do so – may be able to use federal TANF funds for their state matches.

Horn listed a number of ways this money could be spent. These included integrating premarital services (counseling, therapy, education, development of conflict-negotiation skills) with existing TANF services, providing married couples with access to marriage enrichment programs, and launching public information campaigns to inform people of available services. He emphasized that marriage is not a strategy for dealing with domestic violence and that the marriage initiative is an addition to, not a substitute for the Bush administration’s existing anti-poverty strategy (including Head Start, foster care, abuse-prevention, food

stamps, and child-support enforcement), which is committed to helping kids whether or not their parents are married.

Horn responded to three levels of criticism of the marriage initiative: (1) Refuting the argument that welfare recipients' behavior is not influenced by government policy, he cited an Oklahoma survey in which 63 percent of welfare recipients believed (correctly) that if they married they would lose some or all of their welfare assistance. (2) Challenging criticisms about government getting involved in marriage, he cited both the Oklahoma survey and a recent national survey in which a majority of respondents thought it was a good idea for government to use surplus welfare funds to reduce divorce and encourage marriage. (3) Refuting claims that low-income people were not interested in these services, Horn said that 72 percent of low-income respondents said they would take advantage of workshops if they were available.

Horn concluded that government should strive to strengthen families and that promoting marriage can be part of that effort. He stressed the importance of pairing innovation with evaluation, and of focusing on healthy marriages, voluntary services, and improving the well-being of our most vulnerable children.

Wade Horn: Full-Text

We're here to talk about marriage policy. I served in the first Bush administration and then came back after an eight-year hiatus. In that eight years, the discussion about marriage had changed profoundly, from "Should government have anything at all to do with marriage?" to "What should government do concerning marriage?" There is a growing body of empirical evidence indicating that, all other things being equal, kids do best when they grow up in the context of a two-parent married household.

What Government Should Not Do

There are several things that the government should *not* do:

- Government should not force or coerce anyone to get married. Marriage is an individual decision and should remain outside realm of government intervention.
- Government should not get into the matchmaking business, determining who should marry whom.
- Government should not encourage anyone to get into or stay in an abusive relationship. Abuse is antithetical to a healthy marriage, and we should not intentionally or unintentionally trap anyone in or encourage anyone to get into

this kind of relationship.

- Government should not be withdrawing support for single-parent households so that people would have no other choice but to get married. Supporting vulnerable marriages should not mean withdrawing support from vulnerable households.
- Government should not promote marriage as the sole means of eliminating poverty. Marriage support is not the central part of the Bush administration's anti-poverty policy. The healthy marriage initiative is simply a piece of a much larger whole. For example, the government will continue to spend \$16.5 billion a year on TANF block grants, and is not suggesting there be a mandate on states to spend this money on family support or healthy marriage initiatives. The government is spending \$5 billion a year in child care development block grants, and not one penny of that is being diverted to marriage promotion. The administration is suggesting that the federal government set aside \$200 million a year for five years for the healthy marriage initiative. Half of that money is for a competitive state grant program in which states would have to match, dollar for dollar, the amount of federal money they're applying for. So clearly this does not constitute the "major portion" of TANF funding.
- "We should not be afraid to say the word – marriage." I am in favor of healthy relationships, and I have no trouble with states spending parts of their block grants to develop healthy relationships. But when it comes to experimenting around the issue of healthy marriage, we should not be afraid to call it marriage. "Call it what it is." It is important to spur innovation around the development of healthy marriage. We should not promote marriage in such a way that we render it meaningless by equating it with cohabitation. The empirical literature shows they are not the same.

What Government Should Do

Now, what *should* the government do?

- Government should make it clear that their interest is in *healthy* marriages, not in marriage *per se*. "We are not trying to move marriage rates. In fact, we may want to divert some couples *away* from marriage." There is no evidence that getting a dating, violent couple married improves anything. Typically you only get more violence. The government is interested in helping parents build skills so we can increase the proportion of kids growing up in the context of healthy marriage.
- Government should be proactive – not neutral – when it comes to marriage. Many disincentives to marriage exist in the current welfare system. Gene

Steuerle's data from the Urban Institute finds that these disincentives can vary from \$4,000 to \$8,000 per year, with the marriage penalty being greater – both in absolute dollars and as a percentage of total income – for low-income than high-income couples. In low-income communities, there's a sense that you "lose stuff" if you get married. They know that there's some penalty for marriage. There's good reason to try to remove some of these disincentives. For example, the government is neutral when it comes to whether people drink caffeinated or decaffeinated coffee, and wouldn't think of subsidizing one or the other. But the government is not neutral about lots of things – home ownership, for example. Neighborhoods with high levels of ownership have fewer social problems than those with low levels of ownership. So the government has decided it's a social good to have neighborhoods with high levels of ownership and provides tax incentives and programs to help low-income people buy homes. Similarly, the government is not neutral with respect to charitable giving. While the government doesn't say you have to give, it allows tax deductions for charitable contributions. "Healthy marriage is also a social good – good for adults, children, and communities." Rather than striving for neutrality, government should provide some supports.

- Government can help couples develop negotiation skills. We don't know everything about how to promote healthy marriage, but we do know that sustainable marriages are to some extent a function of skills, especially in negotiating conflict in positive and healthy ways. We can teach many of these skills: problem-solving, healthy negotiation, listening. And couples who have mastered these skills express greater marital satisfaction. Data suggest that couples with these skills are less likely to divorce or separate five years down the road, so this is one way of building more sustainable marriages over time. Learning how to negotiate conflict is not the same as avoiding conflict or escalating conflict. Those who escalate are prone to domestic violence, while avoiders are prone to divorce.
- Government may be able to help couples through mentoring or therapy. Assigning mentoring couples to newlywed couples can help in the early years of a marriage. And the literature suggests that marital therapy seems to work. "What separates lower-income and higher-income couples is their ability to access those services." The government is trying to provide greater access to those services for low-income couples.
- The government may be able to help build the foundation for healthy marriage during the "magic moment" – when an out-of-wedlock child is born. The Fragile Families research has found that at the time when a child is born out of wedlock, 80 percent of couples were in an exclusive romantic relationship with each other. About half of those couples were cohabiting. Fifty-two percent said there was a certain or near-certain likelihood that they would get married, and two-thirds said there was a 50/50 chance of marriage. So these

couples are actively contemplating marriage, but the government hasn't been willing to get involved with that choice. The wonder is not that so few people in low-income families get married, but that some actually do, given all the penalties in welfare.

We have a lot to learn, but we should not be paralyzed by incomplete knowledge in this area. As Turgenev said, "If we wait for the moment when everything, absolutely everything is ready, we shall never begin."

Where Do We Start?

President Bush has suggested that in the reauthorization of TANF we should redirect two pots of existing federal money. We're proposing a \$100 million research and technical assistance fund so states, counties, cities, and other local entities can create community-wide healthy-marriage demonstration projects that will include a rigorous evaluation component to make sure we're getting positive results. We're also proposing a \$100 million state matching-grant program that could be used for broad policy initiatives at the state level or for demonstration programs within the state. Participation would be competitive, not mandatory. Some states (those where legislation specifically allows this) may be able to use federal TANF funds for their state match, but no state would be required to apply for the money. Some people thought we should earmark a percentage of TANF block grants for this, but that would be coercive. We want this to be a voluntary, non-coercive, non-mandatory initiative. Overall, we are proposing to spend a total of \$300 million annually over the next five years on healthy marriage promotion and support activities – \$200 million in federal funds and \$100 million in state matching funds.

What could be done with this money?

We could integrate premarital educational services with existing services, and increase the access that low-income families have to such services. For example, we currently very coercively enforce a paternal identification program. We tell the moms they don't get welfare unless she identifies her child's father. Now we can put a new arrow in our quiver of services. If we believe the Fragile Families data on the "magic moment," we can say to these families, "There's another option. If this is something you're interested in, we can give you coupons so you can access premarital services or counseling or education."

Another use of this money might be to help married couples access marriage enrichment programs and marital therapy. We are not talking about hiring a whole new army of people doing marital therapy. The problem is that low-income couples don't have same access to these services as middle-income couples.

We could also launch public-information campaigns to inform people about the availability of services to help people if they choose to marry. We're talking about helping couples who choose marriage for themselves access services that focus on skill development so they can form strong and healthy marriages. This would not be a mandate, but rather a non-coercive opportunity to access services that focus on developing skills for conflict negotiation.

We have to be very clear about domestic violence when we get into these issues. It's true that there's a higher probability of domestic violence in cohabiting relationships than in marital relationships. Conservatives sometimes stop there and say the solution is to get them married and the domestic violence will go away. But getting them married is not the solution. The first thing you have to do is make sure people are safe. You have to be on the side of the victim. Getting married is not a strategy for dealing with domestic violence.

We also want to be clear about the fact that marriage promotion is not the Bush administration's anti-poverty strategy. We propose giving \$6.5 billion dollars for Head Start, plus billions in foster care and food stamps and prevention of abuse. We're not getting rid of any of those programs. This is in addition to those programs, not a substitute. We need to be just as concerned about kids living in something other than married households. We're interested in new programs such as providing mentors to kids of incarcerated parents. We have asked for and probably will get the largest increase in the history of the Safe-and-Stable-Families-Act program. We are committed to increasing child support enforcement. Within TANF, we've proposed providing incentives to states to pass more child support directly through to families. This administration has done a lot of things to try to help kids regardless of their circumstances.

Responses to Criticism

Our critics say there's no evidence that welfare recipients' behavior is influenced by government policy. In refutation, we turn to a study in Oklahoma that surveyed the entire population but oversampled in low-income communities. This survey found that 63 percent of welfare recipients believed that if they married they would lose some or all of their welfare assistance. The tragedy is not that they believed this but that they were right. We need to start to remove the real and onerous policy barriers to marriage.

Our critics also say there's no evidence that the government should get involved in this issue. Again in the Oklahoma survey, 85 percent of respondents thought it was a "good" or "very good" idea for the government to support marriage. What about the rest of Americans? A national survey last year reported that 67 percent of Americans thought it was a good idea to use surplus welfare funds to reduce divorce and encourage marriage.

Critics say there's no evidence that *low-income* people are interested in such a plan, but 72 percent of low-income respondents said they would use workshops if they were available to them.

This sounds like the President's marriage initiative.

We're hopeful that Congress will pick this up quickly when the next session convenes next year. President Bush has said that government should be limited, but what it does it should do well. One thing it should do well is strive to strengthen families. These are heroic struggles. While divorce and out-of-wedlock births have always been with us, promoting healthy marriages can be a piece of what we do to strengthen families. It's important to innovate with an eye toward evaluation and research, to focus on healthy marriages, voluntary services, improving the lives of children. Our focus should not be on reducing caseloads or increasing the numbers of people who move into work. This administration has suggested that the overarching purpose of welfare should be improving the well-being of children. Everything else in our welfare program should be seen as strategies in service of that goal. This is the standard we will use in evaluating the healthy marriage initiative. Simply moving marriage rates is not the objective. This is a strategy for helping our most vulnerable children.

Wade Horn: Q & A from the Audience

Comment and Question: I have worked at both Neil Jacobson's and John Gottman's labs here at the UW, and people more knowledgeable than I report that couples' education and marital therapy are not nearly as effective as has been reported. In addition, research samples aren't representative of the general population. I'm concerned about how that research is represented.

My question concerns marital counseling and domestic violence. We know from research that domestic violence is not being looked for in clinical practice or in marital workshops and therapy. Research at the UW found that over half the members of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy didn't screen marital-therapy couples about domestic violence, and those who did screen asked about it when the couple was together. How will you deal with domestic violence and these other issues?

Wade Horn: I agree with everything you said. We're looking to do research on the innovations we stimulate. We will research exactly the kinds of questions you've raised to try to advance the knowledge, to further understand how to do this well. Maybe it will work, maybe not. The idea that marital therapy doesn't work: that depends on the model one uses. There are good and bad models of marital therapy. Some work great. And we do need to do better job of screening for domestic violence, but we are providing money to spur innovation.

Question: My question is about the approach of coming to couples after their child is born. Is it effective to do this when parents are busy with a new baby? How about educating adolescents or offering services through doctors' offices as part of prenatal care?

Wade Horn: Absolutely. Yes. I think that a perfectly fundable activity would be to work on the prevention side with adolescents on skill development, helping them with positive relationship skills training including what kinds of skills are necessary to sustain a healthy marriage. Or we could fund a teen pregnancy-prevention program. We have seen the teen pregnancy rate drop rather dramatically over last ten years as we have communicated clearly about the undesirability of having a baby when you're younger. Then when you're older, how do you establish a good marriage before having kids? We can combine teen pregnancy-prevention messages with the message about getting married before having kids. We look forward to variety of innovative ideas – all with an eye toward evaluation. I'm making some of this up as I go along.

Question: I have two questions. First how do you interpret the link between falling marriage rates and decreases in job opportunities for low-income men? Second, what might marriage policy look like in terms of the earned income tax credit (EITC)?

Wade Horn: Excellent questions. There's definitely a correlation between dropping marriage rates and decreases in job opportunities, but there's no evidence that if you simply expand job opportunities people are more likely to marry. Another approach might be to start with the couple and ask them, "Have you thought of getting married?" If yes, then find out what's keeping them from getting married. If the barrier is that the guy doesn't have job, let's help reduce that barrier. This could include job training and job placement to remove barriers from marriage. This needs to be a piece of the program, along with the marriage stuff. I have not seen any evidence that providing jobs increases marriage, but it does increase marriageability. About the EITC: What would a pro-marriage or marriage-neutral policy look like? The EITC is one of the strongest anti-marriage policies today. A means-tested welfare system supports barriers to marriage, and to get rid of all of them would be extraordinarily expensive. Still, we can minimize penalties and provide supports. But we probably can't get rid of all the penalties. Our TANF proposal says that partner states have to show how they're trying to reduce marriage penalties in their states. We don't want a single welfare mom who marries a Rockefeller to still get the EITC. One barrier we may be able to do something about is that the government says two-parent households have to work 55 hours per week and a single-parent household has to work 30 hours per week (with other activities). We may be able to reduce the difference between the two. Still, it's a very expensive proposition.

Question: These marriage-promotion funds that you're talking about – are they new funds or existing funds?

Wade Horn: There is currently an illegitimacy-reduction bonus for reducing out-of-wedlock births without increasing abortion. Five states get this per year – rewarding demographics and magic. This is currently funded at \$100 million. We’re transferring this money into the new state-matching program. We also currently have a \$200 million high-performance bonus for reduction of caseloads. We’re transferring that money into the experimental, innovative fund. The money for marriage-promotion is not coming out of block grants or childcare.

Question: How is the government thinking about prioritizing the evaluation of this initiative? I work with low-income, unmarried people, and I think it’s worthwhile to look at outcomes, but there are many challenges to getting any data at all. It will undoubtedly be even harder to evaluate marriage promotion efforts, and hard to recruit people for these evaluations. How do we learn how to do this? Promoting innovation is good, but how do we get the large numbers we need for evaluation?

Wade Horn: Yes, we will impose evaluation standards on the states. Last year we gave a contract to Mathematica (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.), which convened a panel (participants included Ron Mincy, Sarah McLanahan, and Irv Garfinkle) that came up with the beginnings of various evaluation designs. They’re looking at issues such as dealing with random assignment. We’re not just telling communities to come up with their own designs. One issue we’re struggling with is recruitment. That’s a real challenge for us. So we’re working with Mathematica and with the Urban Institute to come up with reasonable evaluation designs on how to put this together at the community level.