

Testimony of
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Hearing on

The Benefits of a Healthy Marriage

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Theodora Ooms, and I am a senior policy analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), where I work on couples and marriage policy, with a special focus on low-income populations. In addition, I have worked as an independent consultant with several state and community healthy marriage initiatives, including the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative.

Today, I am going to describe some of the marriage-related activities going on around the country, describe how policymakers might address legitimate concerns about current marriage proposals, and suggest that some common ground on this contentious issue may be found in a “marriage-plus” perspective.

Until relatively recently, marriage was considered a private issue and not the business of government, especially not the federal government. But marriage is now no longer the “M-Word.” In the past three years, in particular, marriage has become a hot topic, encouraged in large part by the current Administration. In 2001, the federal Administration for Children and Families declared that “healthy marriage” was one of the agency’s top priorities, and it has committed at least \$90 million in existing program funding streams to support demonstration programs and research and evaluation projects since then.¹ This Committee has been debating a proposal in the welfare reauthorization to spend \$1.6 billion over five years to promote marriage. And this month, a number of Senate subcommittees are holding hearings on marriage.

In addition, quite a bit of marriage-related activity is going on around the country. A new report that we just released last week, *Beyond Marriage Licenses: Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families*, shows that every state has undertaken at least one activity or made at least one policy change designed to strengthen marriage and/or two-parent families in the last ten years—although most of these efforts have been modest. Since the mid-1990s, state and community leaders have instituted a range of legal, cultural, educational, and economic

strategies to promote marriage, reduce divorce, and strengthen two-parent families.² For example:

- Thirty-six states have revised their Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) eligibility rules to treat one-parent and two-parent households the same;
- Governors and other senior officials in nine states have declared strengthening marriage to be a public goal;
- Eight states have made significant changes to their marriage and divorce laws;
- In 40 states, government-funded programs provide couples- and marriage-related services in selected communities or counties, usually on a pilot basis; and
- In those 40 states, seven states and several communities have dedicated significant TANF funds to support marriage-related activities.

Unfortunately, very few of these initiatives in states are being carefully documented or evaluated.

Government involvement in promoting marriage remains controversial—both in Washington and in the states. While many researchers and policy experts agree that children raised in two-parent, married families do better on average than children raised in other situations, consensus has not yet emerged on what can or should be done to promote the well-being of children by supporting marriage.

In my view, strengthening marriage and two-parent families has the potential of being a genuinely non-partisan issue—if we can keep the focus on the goal of promoting child well-being and if we keep our minds open about the many causes of non-marital childbearing and marriage break-up in our society. We need to acknowledge that strengthening marriage is a new and controversial policy goal that should be approached cautiously, that there may be a diversity of strategies (including marriage education) that could make a difference, and that we should not seek simplistic solutions or raise expectations too high about the role of government in strengthening marriage.

Building Consensus Through a Marriage-Plus Perspective

Our new report on state activities to strengthen marriage and two-parent families suggests that state policymakers are realizing that this issue of marriage is complicated and that strategies to strengthen families may need to be multi-faceted. The report identifies three trends worth noting:

Increased attention to prevention. The earliest efforts related to marriage promotion concentrated mostly on passing laws to make divorce more difficult and on making declarations that marriage is a public good. Public officials and community leaders are now focusing more on fostering preventive, educational services offered on a voluntary basis to help couples better

choose marriage partners and create healthier, longer-lasting marriages. These latter initiatives have generally provoked less controversy, which may account for their growing popularity. In fact, these educational services are the only marriage strategy receiving any significant funding to date.

Expanded efforts to reach low-income couples in a variety of settings. Couples and marriage education classes have typically been offered to middle-class committed couples (engaged or already married) for a fee in free-standing, private or university-based programs or in faith-based institutions. In some states and communities, policymakers are now integrating preventive, educational services to individuals and couples (both married and unmarried) in ongoing government-funded programs that serve predominantly low-income families from a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, as well as to other special populations. Relationship education programs are now being offered to high school students, disadvantaged expectant and new parents, low-income unwed parents, adoptive and foster parents, parents of juvenile first offenders, incarcerated parents and their partners, refugees, and military couples. This new focus reflects, in part, the influence of flexible TANF monies and new federal government grants.

Interest in economic and other indirect strategies. Although states have thus far done little either to remove economic barriers to marriage or to provide economic incentives and support to encourage marriage and two-parent family formation, interest in economic strategies is growing. States will likely want to minimize financial and programmatic barriers to marriage in TANF, Medicaid, housing, and other public assistance programs, and in tax policy, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit—especially if this can be done without penalizing single parents. Several government-funded studies are underway to better understand the interactive effects of different program rules on family types. As the discussion about marriage policy broadens, states are likely to seek more information about what kinds of income support, employment programs, and other kinds of economic assistance can help stabilize marriages and couple relationships. More attention may also be paid to reinforcing the positive indirect effects on marriage that have already been identified in such programs as child support enforcement, nurse home-visiting, and teen pregnancy prevention.

These findings from our report suggest that states are amenable to a couples and marriage policy guided by a “Marriage-Plus” perspective. The “plus” in Marriage-Plus signifies a set of broader goals, more flexible and comprehensive strategies, and more diverse actors than proposed by many marriage promotion advocates. Let me describe to you what I mean:

Goals of Marriage-Plus. The primary purpose of any healthy marriage promotion initiative should be to promote the well-being of *all* children. The Marriage-Plus approach has two overarching goals. First, policies and programs should aim to help more children grow up with their two biological, married parents in a healthy, stable relationship. However, for many parents, marriage is not a feasible or desirable option. Thus, the second goal is to help these parents—whether never-married, separated, divorced, or remarried—to be financially capable and responsible and to cooperate, whenever appropriate, in raising their children. These are not competing goals. Children need us to pursue both.

Principles of Marriage-Plus. The Marriage-Plus approach is guided by several principles. “Healthy” marriage, not marriage for its own sake, should be encouraged and supported. Participation in marriage-related programs should be voluntary and tailored to meet the diverse needs of different populations. Strategies should be designed based on the best available research evidence and should be carefully evaluated. Finally, a Marriage-Plus approach focuses on the front end (making marriages better to be in), not the back end (making marriages more difficult to get out of).

Scope of Activities. Social science research has identified a wide range of economic, educational, legal, and cultural factors that affect whether couples marry, as well as the quality and stability of marriages. Therefore, efforts to promote or strengthen marriage should include a variety of strategies. Some may explicitly focus on marriage; others may have other primary goals, yet may indirectly have positive effects on marriage. For example, there is evidence that increasing parental employment and income, reducing work stress, and preventing teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births can all contribute to strengthening marriage and improving co-parenting by unmarried parents.³

The Role of Government. A Marriage-Plus approach is not the responsibility of government alone. Many parts of the community—including the legal, education, health, business, faith, and media sectors—all have important roles to play and need to work in partnership with public officials to pursue these goals.

Addressing Legitimate Areas of Concern

As I mentioned, in the last decade, research has emerged that indicates that, on average, children who grow up in families with both their biological parents who have a low-conflict marriage are better off in a number of ways than children who grow up in single-, step- or cohabiting-parent households.⁴ For instance, children living with single mothers are five times as likely to be poor as those in two-parent families.⁵ Marriage also benefits adults: in general married adults are healthier, live longer, and earn more and accumulate more wealth than single people.⁶ This research consensus is relatively new.

However, we are far from consensus on what policy decisions to make based on this research. Proposals (like the Administration’s) that focus solely or predominantly on marriage education have raised concerns from many, including CLASP. Policymakers should take these concerns into account as they design and implement marriage policies and programs. And they may be able to draw lessons from the experiences of states. I will discuss three of the most important concerns here:

Marriage programs and policies should not force or pressure women, especially young, poor, and vulnerable women, to enter or remain in bad, abusive marriages. The first order of business should be to do no harm. Too often there’s a dark side to marriage and intimate relationships—emotional, physical, and psychological abuse and violence. Abused women should not be further harmed by programs that may require, pressure, or in effect “bribe” women to stay in bad relationships. Low-income women are more likely to be involved in abusive relationships, and women often turn to government assistance to leave abusers.⁷

Many members of the domestic violence community at the national, state, and local levels have been especially articulate about the protections that need to be put in place in any marriage-related programming.⁸ In addition, a number of state marriage activities have worked hard to address these concerns. In Arizona, Florida, and Oklahoma, representatives of the domestic violence community are successfully working in collaboration with the leadership of the new marriage initiatives in these states. In Oklahoma, the training of relationships and marriage educators now includes information about indicators of partner and spousal abuse, as well as information about what services are available. On a few occasions, women shelter residents have attended relationship education workshops offered in shelters in order to learn how to avoid getting into bad relationships in the future.

The Administration has said their intent is to promote *healthy* marriage not marriage *per se*, and that participation in programs funded under the Healthy Marriage initiative will be voluntary. These assurances are welcome—as is the language in the Senate Finance bill that includes important provisions about voluntariness of services and requires consultation with domestic violence advocates. However, these assurances will need to be followed up in the proposal review process, regulations, guidance, and ongoing technical assistance. For example, if the Healthy Marriage initiative passes, grantees need to be encouraged to involve representatives of the domestic violence community in designing plans for any program or initiative. In addition, the government should make clear that grantees should be expected to set aside some of their funds to contract with domestic violence experts for training and technical assistance. Finally, more work needs to be done on clarifying what is meant in public policy terms by “healthy marriages.”

Marriage education may be useful, but it is not enough. If two poor parents are unemployed and have little education and no skills, just getting them to marry will not magically lift them out of poverty. We can all agree that marriage should not be our nation’s central poverty reduction strategy.

At the same time, there is ample data to show that poverty and marital status are strongly linked. But the causal relationship goes both ways. Parents are poor because they are not married, and they are often not married because they are poor. What can we conclude about the causes of the link between poverty and marital status? On the one hand, marriage can improve the economic situation of some low-income couples. When disadvantaged cohabiting couples marry, they often work harder, pool their resources, earn more and save more, and receive more support from their families.⁹ On the other hand, economics may be a key reason for the failure of so many low-income parents to marry or stay married. For instance, several studies suggest that the inability of many poorly educated, low-skilled men, especially urban African Americans, to economically support their families is an important reason why they do not marry the mothers of their children.¹⁰ This suggests that it makes sense to promote and strengthen marriage by improving low-income parents’ financial and educational situation.

There is some research evidence that economic strategies can make a difference for some couples. In the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) demonstration, income supplements to working couples receiving welfare in Minnesota had a positive effect on

stabilizing marriage (and reducing domestic violence).¹¹ In addition, in the Wisconsin W-2 study, passing through child support income to the custodial parents also reduced severe conflict between couples.¹²

Taken together, this suggests we should pursue multiple strategies in order to make any serious positive impact on marriage and co-parenting relationships in low-income populations. This is clearly one of the lessons of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which concluded that while one-third of unmarried new parents in the national survey could benefit from relationships skills training alone, fully one-third of the unmarried parents would need a combination of relationship skills training and employment, mental health, and possibly other services. (The researchers found that efforts to strengthen the relationships of the last third would be not at all appropriate).¹³

Given the lack of research on marriage-related interventions, policymakers should proceed cautiously, try out a variety of strategies, and carefully evaluate the positive and negative consequences of these programs, particularly for low-income families and children. Couples and marriage policy is a new field. Few of the programs and initiatives undertaken so far have been evaluated. And while research has shown that a couple of the most prominent marriage education programs have produced positive effects, these studies have been conducted with mostly middle-class, committed couples. A number of initiatives described in our report have begun adapting marriage education programs for more diverse audiences, including fragile families, and ACF has committed funds to conduct rigorous evaluation of these kinds of programs. I believe we should proceed cautiously until we learn more—especially at a time when federal and state governments are cutting or freezing programs for the poor. As this new field evolves over the next decade, it will be critically important to document both the positive and negative consequences of these programs and to learn whether and how policies and programs can strengthen marriage and two-parent families in different populations—and thereby improve child well-being.

Looking to the future, policymakers should consider carefully several questions as they pursue government-funded marriage activities,¹⁴ including:

- Will public officials, community leaders, and program administrators be able to use grant funds to do the important but time-consuming work of inviting potential critics and skeptics—including the domestic violence community—into their planning processes?
- As states seek to expand marriage programs to new populations, how should existing programs and curricula be successfully adapted to meet the needs of a more economically, racially, and culturally diverse group of participants?¹⁵
- Will policymakers and program administrators make services available to unmarried parents who may not decide to marry but who would like to do a better job co-parenting their children?
- Will funds be available to build capacity to deliver marriage-related services effectively, such as training trainers to deliver the workshops and training program administrators, supervisors, front-line workers, and members of the community to discuss these issues appropriately with clients and refer them to the new services?¹⁶

- Are leaders sufficiently committed to design policies and programs based on the best theory and research available, to carefully document how public funds are being spent, and to invest in research and evaluation?

Toward Common Ground?

A number of lessons from activities in states and local communities suggest that there are some areas on which people can come together across political divisions to strengthen marriage and two-parent families:

Make healthy marriage initiatives broad enough to encompass the goal of promoting better relationships and co-parenting for those whom marriage is no longer feasible or even perhaps desirable. In Louisiana, for example, a marriage and co-parenting curriculum is being piloted to serve unwed parents called, *Exploring Relationships and Marriage in Fragile Families*. And two reader-friendly Guides have been developed and will be widely distributed across the state, one called *Marriage Matters*, which will be given to couples who apply for marriage licenses, and *Raising Your Child Together*, a guide to co-parenting and marriage for unmarried parents.¹⁷ And, as Oklahoma and other states have demonstrated, marriage initiatives should be sure to involve the domestic violence community in planning and implementation.

Don't ignore the economic barriers to marriage in low-income communities. The MFIP demonstration suggests that income supports can make a difference in marriage stability. Fatherhood programs are working to make sure that young men are better able to take care of their financial responsibilities for their families, whether married or unmarried. As the Fragile Families study suggests, many unmarried couples would benefit from job skills, mental health care, and other services.

Base healthy marriage programs and policies on the best data and research available—and require rigorous evaluations. States and local communities have confronted a real lack of data and research knowledge in developing their marriage initiatives. It is my hope that we focus our attention on learning more about marriage and family formation in a variety of populations and about what variety of strategies might strengthen marriage and two-parent families for the benefit of child well-being.

If the important concerns and questions I have outlined are addressed, we'll be more likely to create effective programs, avoid causing harm, and respond to the legitimate concerns of those who are skeptical about marriage-related government activity.

¹ Ooms, T., Bouchet, S., & Parke, M. (April, 2004). *Efforts in States to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families. A State-by-State Snapshot*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Available on-line at www.clasp.org.

² Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004.

³ Testimony of Theodora Ooms before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means hearing on *Welfare and Marriage Issues* held on Tuesday, May 22, 2001.

⁴ Parke, M. (May, 2003). *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being*. Couples and Marriage Series, Brief No. 3. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Annotated version with complete reference citations available on-line at www.clasp.org.

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- ⁶ Waite, L., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The Case for Marriage*. New York: Doubleday.
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- ¹⁴ Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004.
- ¹⁵ Ooms, T., & Wilson, P. (forthcoming). The challenges of offering relationships and marriage education to low-income populations. *Family Relations*, special issue on innovations in marriage education, edited by Jeffrey Larson.
- ¹⁶ This has been one of the major lessons of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. See Myrick, M., & Ooms, T. (2002). *What if a governor decided to address the M-word? The use of research in the design and implementation of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative*. Paper presented at the American Association of Public Policy and Management annual conference in Dallas, November 7, 2002. Available from tooms@clasp.org.
- ¹⁷ Amato, P., Markey, B., Ooms, T., Spaht, K., & Stanley, S. (2004). *Marriage Matters! A Guide for Louisiana Couples*. Baton Rouge, LA: Office of Family Support, Department of Social Services; Ooms, T. (2004). *Raising Your Child Together: A Guide for Unmarried Parents*. Baton Rouge, LA: Office of Family Support, Department of Social Services.